

Prologue

I don't pretend to know how I've lasted this long without breaking. I can't tell you how many times the thought occurred to me to turn myself in, but I haven't, and I won't. When you see something so horribly, disgustingly *wrong*, what kind of person does it make you to stand idly by? If attempting to make a change in this world makes me a criminal, then so be it. A criminal I shall be.

I suppose I should begin by stating, I didn't mean to kill that man. What six year old intends to kill someone? But I killed him, nonetheless. And although I didn't mean to do it, I don't regret it either. Watching a young man age rapidly before my eyes, eventually turning to a mound of dust at my feet, that's what triggered the catastrophe that has become my last thirteen years. And yet, I would do it all over again. Hell, I would kill that man a thousand times over if it meant keeping her safe. Perhaps my exile was for the best as well. It kept me far away from her, which in turn, presumably kept her safe, too. Still, there are many a sleepless night that I stare at the stars, wondering if she is too, wishing I could go home and tell my little sister not to blame herself.

She had her whole life ahead of her, and still does. I, on the other hand, was damned from the moment I was born. And though they don't hear me, I thank the gods regularly that I was born an hour before she was. Because had it been her that was tainted, instead of me, I wholeheartedly believe it would've destroyed her by now. So I'll bare this for you, little sister. I'll tear myself apart and turn this world to stone if it means a better life for you. After all, who would expect a dead man to raise a revolution?

1. Prince of Ice

At the northernmost point of Pentamros lies the frozen kingdom of Aguandi; its capital and royal city, Borealis, wedged on a crystalline peninsula overlooking the sea. Though surrounded in tundra, Borealis has long been encased in a magical sphere of sorts which keeps the city itself livable, if not still bitterly cold. Its residents, however, have more than adapted to such extreme temperatures, and have gone so far as to embrace it by incorporating it into their magic. The children of Borealis are taught the land's frozen magic at approximately the same age as they are taught to read. That age is earlier than most as well, as Aguandi prides itself on the intelligence and sheer academic prowess of its residents. Unfortunately, though, while the reading came easy for me, the ice magic never came at all.

Shortly before I and my twin sister were born, our father was executed by the crown, and King Cryonitus took our mother as his wife. He raised us as his own, and for that, I cannot fault him. However, his favoritism for my sister was always as apparent as the rising of the sun. She could wield ice and water as easily as she could breathe while I, no matter how extensively I studied, could not so much as create a snowflake from a water droplet. In contrast to her magical prowess though, I excelled in all of the weapon training the king demanded his guards teach us. That, at least, gave me an outlet.

You see, it is hard enough to truly connect with people when you are a prince, but it is even more difficult to do so when you are the nearly exact visage of the father you never met, that was publicly executed. My sister, Olivia, on the other hand was nearly a perfect replica of our mother. Both of them sported long, nearly white blonde hair, flawless porcelain skin, and irises of liquid silver. I inherited the eyes, but little else. My wild black hair stood out amidst the snow, and though equally

as pale, where they seemed to glow, I looked as though I'd escaped a crypt. The only claim I had to Queen Masha being my mother was that I shared her unique eye color, but even that seemed less vibrant in me.

Being socially inept as I was, I found myself wandering the labyrinthine shelves of the Sage Library more days than not, soaking up any and all knowledge I could in a vain attempt to awaken the elemental magic my step-father swore I possessed, but was too lazy to properly manifest. Halbazzar, the proprietor of the Sage Library, and a blue skinned man as old as Aguandi itself, however, disagreed. He disagreed so much, in fact, that he appealed to the king to "teach me himself", which is how the Sage Library came to be the closest thing to a home I had ever felt.

"Cryonitus is a fool," he fumed as he led me to an unused corner of the library. "An absolute fool, I swear. By the Dragons, I'd enjoy nothing more than to trip him with my cane."

I merely kept my head low and followed Halbazzar as he tapped a spot on a seemingly sheer wall, and the wall slid away. Inside was a desk, a lantern, and the room was framed with low bookshelves.

"Welcome to your own private study." Halbazzar turned back to me with a kind smile. "Feel free to decorate however you see fit."

I bowed low. "Thank you, Halbazzar, sir."

He chuckled. "Olly, my boy, 'Bazz' works just fine. Grandpa Bazz, even, is perfectly acceptable."

I nodded. "May I ask why I'm being given a private study? I can't even use the most basic magic, so I don't understand."

Bazz ushered me inside the room, and once we were both through the doorway, he snapped his fingers and the wall materialized once more. "Oliver, you aren't without magic, I assure you. Quite the opposite, in fact. It's that you don't possess *ice* magic."

The expression that crossed my face must have been a comical one, because Bazz's chuckle became a fully formed wheezing laugh. "We should start from the basics then, I suppose."

In the following weeks, Bazz attempted to teach me how to manifest magic in a form other than ice. Fire was even more of a failure, lightning yielded no results, and more and more, my frustration grew. From there, we branched into Divination magic, Conjuring, and Healing, all with similar outcomes. That is to say, no outcome. I sat alone in the hidden room, my face buried in my hands, and cried.

At my request, Bazz had conjured a window to the outside within my small sanctuary. Ever the masochist, I would watch the other children of Borealis playing in the streets, my sister among them. She and a boy with silver scales rather than skin were building a barrier of snow, while another pair of children did the same. Once both barriers were satisfactory, the children began taking handfuls of snow, wadding them up in their hands, and throwing them at one another. I watched as they laughed and cheered, as tears continued to trail down my cheeks.

"You know," I startled as Bazz entered. "I'm sure they would let you play with them."

I swiped at my eyes. "I wouldn't want to get in the way of their fun."

Bazz's smile was sad. "Come with me."

He led me outside with him, and motioned the children over. "Would you be so kind as to allow Oliver here to join in your snowball fight?"

My sister beamed. "Of course! I was going to invite him earlier, but I couldn't find him."

I averted my eyes. "Oh! I-I was just studying."

She grabbed my wrist and led me to the fort she shared with the scaled boy. "This is Xartum." She then gestured to the other two children. "And that's Taimi and his brother Brax."

Taimi was tall for his age and in all honesty, rather intimidating. Both he and his brother had bright, nearly golden hair, and a faint blue tint to their skin, which plenty of people in Borealis possessed. The two brothers merely nodded in my direction and returned to their snow barrier. Olivia led me into the barrier which belonged to her and the boy she called Xartum.

With a wave of Olivia's hand, the snow inside the fort swirled and formed into perfect spheres. Xartum simply breathed into his cupped hands to produce his own ball of snow, though a bit rougher in appearance. He handed it to me, and created a new one for himself in the same manner.

The chill was already biting into my fingers when Olivia shouted "Go!"

Immediately, a volley of snowballs arced through the air, the incoming ones, pelting the ground around us, and the outgoing ones landing with a thudding sound a bit further away. I stayed ducked down behind the wall of snow, Xartum's snowball still cupped in my hands. I could see

the smiles across both his and Olivia's faces, as I merely watched. Once Olivia's mound of snowballs was depleted, she swung her hand forward and an entire wall of our fort lifted in the air and flew toward the brothers in the other barrier. My eyes widened as a mound of snow filled their fortress and buried them in it.

"I suppose we should dig them out," Olivia laughed as she stood and began walking toward the pile of snow.

Xartum extended a scaled hand to me. "We should help too."

I dropped the snowball he'd given me and accepted his hand with a nod.

As we approached, the snow began to melt rapidly and steam rose from the mound. As more of the snow melted away, a hand became visible, and from its open palm, a stream of scalding water rushed out, straight at Olivia. She merely twitched her fingers, and the stream arced around her, now on course for my own chest. And I froze. I winced and braced myself, but nothing came. When I opened my eyes, Xartum was in front of me, and steaming.

"Hey! That hurt, you ass!" he exhaled deeply and I could see the chill of his breath counteract the steam, as I stood there motionless. "You could've hit the prince!"

Taimi had fully exited the pile of snow, with Brax trailing behind him.

"What kind of prince can't handle a little hot water?"

I didn't move. Xartum had gotten burned because of me; because I couldn't use magic to defend myself. My heart sank. Just when I thought I'd made a friend.

"It isn't his fault," Olivia all but mumbled.

"Oh, and now his *little sister* is taking up for him too?" Taimi laughed.

"He's expected to take the throne one day, but my dad says he probably won't even live that long if he can't do magic."

I tried to fight it. I tried with everything I had to hold the tears back, but I failed. Taimi was right. His dad was right. I could never be a king. As soon as I sniffled, all eyes were on me, and the two brothers broke into fits of hysterical laughter. Olivia's expression hardened, and in the blink of an eye, her fist rocketed forward into Taimi's nose. I heard it break. The whole city probably heard it break, and a splatter of red disrupted the uniformity of the snow.

And I ran.

2. Dragon War

Children in Aguandi were expected to know the history of Pentamros as naturally as they knew the names of their siblings, and I was no exception. In fact, being the children of the queen, Olivia and I more or less set the precedent. At a mere four years of age, we could recite the names of all five Dragon Gods, their elements, and their role in the Great Dragon War, which took place 1000 odd years prior to our conception. Of course, being Aguandian by birth, Borealith, the Dragon Goddess of the Seas was our main focus, but we learned the rest by heart, nonetheless.

You see, Pentamros was an empire; its five Sectors were divided as such based on the god or goddess which inhabited them, all centered on the Capitall Kingdom of Nexus. For instance, Aguandi had Borealith. Incenra had Ignis, Goddess of Flame. Terranor had Venak, the Poisonous God of the Earth, and Nimbria hosted Zephyr, the God of the Skies. The fifth god, however, was scarcely spoken of, and for good reason. Abraxas, the God of Decay was the center of the Dragon War. Legend states he attempted to overthrow his fellow gods and send Pentamros into ruin and death, and only the combined power of the other Dragons was enough to contain him in the darkened fifth Sector of Pentamros, known only as The Umbra.

Most children learned this story through books and fairy tales, but we had the honor of learning from a man who experienced it himself. Grandpa Bazz painted incredibly descriptive accounts of seeing the Dragons in flight, tearing at Abraxas's barely corporeal form, colliding with the ground below, and creating what are now lakes and valleys in the modern landscape.

"And that, children, is why magics deemed 'dark' are illegal nowadays." He almost seemed bitter, speaking of legality surrounding magic types.

"Control magic, shadow magic, and necromancy, will have you swinging from the gallows if you're caught using any of them." He gave us all a pointed look, and ran his hand down his face. "That's enough for today, you're dismissed."

As the rest of the students filed out of the library, I remained. Glued to my seat, I waited patiently for the sound of the large wooden front doors to clatter closed.

"My dad says only the most evil people can use the dark magics." Taimi had a way of being heard, even through walls. "He says they can't use any other kinds of magic because they're destined for evil things."

And then I heard my sister. "Say what I think you're about to say, and I'll break your nose again."

"I'm just saying, it would make sense!"

Crack.

After the rest of the city's children had left, Bazz turned to me. "You know, I hadn't thought of that."

My eyes found the floor. "Do you think I'm evil?"

Bazz chuckled heartily. "Boy, 'good' and 'evil' are just words that people made up. They don't mean much of anything in the grand scheme of things. People like Taimi's idiot father believe that a magic he himself cannot wield nor understand is evil by default, but that just isn't true. Though, it seems most of the continent thinks similarly. This world is so stuck on Abraxas's power that they fear any and all magic he wielded.

It's childish, if you ask me, but what do I know? I was only *there* to see him wield it." He rolled his eyes dramatically.

"So do you think I could wield it too?"

He smirked. "It is a possibility, Olly Boy."

"But what use is magic that no one can know I can use?"

"Oh, plenty!" He clasped his hands together, and his next words rang from the inside of my skull. *Shall I show you?*

Grandpa Bazz spent the next few weeks attempting to teach me forbidden psychic magic, which I must say, was far more difficult than one would think. It took the better part of two weeks before I was able to transfer a mere single syllable into his mind, even with his psychic protections meticulously taken down to allow me entry, but it was *something*. It was magic and I was using it. That thought alone aided me in pushing through the debilitating headaches and the nosebleeds. It kept my head held high, even when the likes of Taimi attempted to ridicule my lack of magic, because I *knew*.

Bazz had informed me that it would be easier to practice on creatures with far lower intelligence than the average person, but that I shouldn't expect a response back, and I took that advice to heart. While my sister ran and played with her friends, I sat in the snow, attempting to practice my newfound magic on animals. "Start small," I told myself. Animals, however, were not easy to come by in the tundra. Save for the white wolves the Aguandi army used for war and protection, my scarce other

options were limited to caribou and the occasional tern that flew in from the sea.

The caribou were unintelligent enough, I reasoned, that starting with them would be the most logical path. So I attempted. I focused my vision on one of the calves that trotted behind the herd. I breathed in deeply, like Bazz had taught me, and I felt the wispy edges of my own mind reach toward that of the calf. It halted as I felt our minds connect, its eyes wide and breathing a bit irregular. I closed my eyes and focused my thoughts on calming the beast from its panic at my invasion. I whispered to it in slow, unspoken words until it regained its composure, and then I slipped a simple command. *Come.*

And it did. Stiffly at first, the calf broke ranks from the herd and on wobbly, stilted legs, made its way toward me. Remaining in its mind, I stood as it approached, and held out my hand to it. With its neck outstretched, its snout neared my hand, so close that I could feel its breath, when the crack of a whip broke the air. One of the herders bringing the caribou into town for the night had followed the calf to return it, and when it didn't heed his call, he'd resorted to the whip. The calf winced, and recoiled its mind from mine, and I felt the sting of the whip across my own shoulder when I'd not been touched.

"The hell do you think you're doing, kid?"

Still recovering from the aggressive separation from the caribou's mind, I could not speak. I merely balled my fists at my sides and focused on dulling the roaring sound within my skull.

"Hey!" The man stepped forward. "I'm talking to you!"

The commotion had drawn the attention of the rest of the children. My sister and Xartum began to stalk forward to my aid, but not quickly enough.

The man grabbed both my shoulders in an attempt for my attention, and my vision swayed, like peering through a rippling pool. The roaring in my ears overtook everything, and a voice not my own boomed from my mind into his. *Touch me again, and I'll kill you where you stand.*

3. Rot and Ruin

I was six years old when they took me away; a child thrown into a world I'd never been prepared for. I was only a child. And my mother let them take me.

Weeks passed from the "incident", about which I told no one, not even Bazz. He'd warned me that a loss of control was bound to happen, which was why I was instructed to only practice on animals. That had been my intention; I never meant to invade a person's mind. But much like a bad dream, where you wake expecting things to get worse, they didn't. Whether by fear, or some other force, the farmer did not report me, and for that, I was thankful.

Life slowly returned to normal, and my paranoia at being outed became mild at best. I continued to practice my psychic abilities, but from that day, deemed it better to use the sea faring birds as targets instead. I shall neither confirm nor deny that I commanded a few of them to harmlessly attack Taimi a few times.

It was mid-autumn that we made our carriage journey to Torrentia, the port city of Aguandi, as was custom this time of year. The Turtle Festival took place each year after the harvest in the south and the festivities were legendary among Aguandi's children. The festival was meant to honor the sacred island of Testudines, which part of that year's livestock was sacrificed to. It had always been said the island is in fact a massive sea turtle that decided to stay solely for the offerings Aguandi's citizens presented it, but I never believed that story. What kind of living thing does not move for hundreds of years?

As we arrived in Torrentia, the savory aromas of the festival wafted into our wolf-drawn carriage, and had me salivating before we'd even

stopped moving. My sister's excitement was for the festivities and socialization, mine was for the food. As we glided through the bustling streets of Torrentia, Olivia taking the lead and Xartum idling up beside me, I had to consciously keep myself from drooling. Street vendors peddling their delicious wares called out to my sense of smell and resisting them felt treasonous. Steaming pots of stews, cured meats hung from pegs on the stalls, and hard candies of every color and flavor imaginable were being served to anyone that asked for them, and who was I to decline? A walk that should have taken us no longer than fifteen minutes instead took us 45 as I was sure to sample everything the festival had to offer.

Xartum chuckled at me as I stuffed an unidentified strip of dried meat into my mouth. "You do this every year."

I swallowed quickly and beamed. "Of course I do! It would be rude not to!"

"It's just amazing that you don't ever eat yourself sick."

I smiled shyly and made a conscious effort to eat at a more reasonable pace.

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The festivities were in full swing soon after the moon rose into the sky. Music from local bards poured through the streets, their subtle magic lulling most into a wonderfully joyous mood. Even the king's perpetually stoic visage was broken with a toothy grin, which frankly, was a bit unnerving, but fitting, I suppose. A king was expected to interact with his people, and interact he did. By midnight, Cryonitus had consumed truly awe inspiring amounts of mulled wine. It was around the time he

began haphazardly belting out some long forgotten sea shanty, that my sister, Xartum, Taimi, Brax, and I made our getaway to the docks. Being the only children in attendance from our city, the hostility some of us shared was abandoned for the sake of banding together in unknown company.

The docks showed attempts at decoration, strings of magical lights lining the railings, but due to most of the foot traffic residing in the town square, the effort was minimal. It didn't matter to us, though, as we ventured out here for the quiet, and the ocean. As we did every year, we sat in a line along the edge of the pier, our feet dangling over the water, and our gaze set upon the dark blob that was Testudines. Brax sat at the furthest left, Taimi beside him, then Olivia, Xartum, then me. Usually Olivia sat next to me, but this year was different. In fact, more than just our seating arrangement felt different. Some feeling in my chest that I could not begin to explain gave me the impression that a lot of things were different, and would continue to be.

The most obvious difference to me in that moment was that I now had magic, whether I had to hide it or not, I had it, and that knowledge alone brought my spirits to altitudes I did not know they could reach. Short of that, however, the feeling of change in my chest presented no clues, but I lost focus on it when I felt Xartum's fingers brush against my own. I glanced up at him, but his gaze never wavered from the horizon, so I turned my attention back to the seascape as well, the weighing feeling in my chest now intertwining with an equally unfamiliar one. We sat like that well into the night, my sister, Taimi, and Brax leaving us to explore the city a bit while our parents were all sufficiently inebriated.

"It's really beautiful here," Xartum all but whispered. "A whole lot warmer, too."

I leaned back a bit, our fingers brushing again. "I could get used to this warmth. The cold is a bit unbearable for me sometimes."

He huffed with a small laugh and I could see the chill of his breath in the air. "I've never had an issue with it."

I laughed along with him, and without thinking, reached out to touch the shining silver scales under his eyes. "Unlike me, you have these to keep you warm. I have no such luxury."

He looked into my eyes and smiled. His eyes, in contrast to his metallic scales, were a dull gray. He opened his mouth to speak, as my sister's scream echoed through the streets.

In an instant, we were on our feet and bolting toward the sound. In another instant, she came into view. Taimi and Brax's father had a handful of her long braided hair and was holding her off the ground with it as she kicked and flailed.

I knew quite a bit about Castien Klauser. He was a soldier of the Aguandi army before his dishonorable discharge due to his inability to stay away from a bottle long enough to be competent. His wife, who left him shortly afterward, also left their children with him without as much as a second thought. And I was all too acquainted with the cruelty he breathed and indoctrinated his children with, though I'd never actually met the man in person. However, he was hurting my sister who had spent so much of her own time and energy defending me, and that I could not ignore.

"Heard you broke my boy's nose," he wreaked of the mulled wine the festival served, part of it staining the front of his tunic a deep purple. "Couple times, actually. Now what'd you go and do that for?"

He tossed her to the side as Xartum and I approached, his drunken gaze fixed on my face. "You're the reason why! The poor little defenseless prince finally shows his face."

I watched my sister slowly climb to her feet, her eyes darting between me and Castien, a thin streak of red in her blonde hair. She reached a hand to her scalp and when she brought her hand away again, I could see blood and I panicked.

I brought the roaring to my ears far more quickly than I ever had before and I punched into his mind with my own. *Kneel. Now.*

And he did. Castien sank to his knees, his eyes glazed over with white, unseeing gaze never wavering from my own. The roaring consumed my spatial awareness too much to realize that my sister's screams had attracted the attention of guards, as well as Cryonitus himself, and I could not stop myself. As if by some force other than my own, I stalked forward and placed my hands on the sides of Castien's head, and this horrible, wonderful power flowed through me. Seemingly watching myself from far away, my hands glowed red and I watched Castien's face begin to contort in pain, but he did not cry out. Rapidly, he withered; his face wrinkling and caving in as his skin sagged on his body. His eyes rolled back and blood dripped from his ears, and he rotted from the inside out, as if someone had sped up time. What remained of him collapsed in a heap of greenish flesh and freshly exposed bone, as my senses returned.

I recoiled from the pile of gore in front of me to watch it desiccate into dust mere seconds before shackles were clamped on my wrists and I saw the look of horror on my mother's face. "Momma, I-"

I was interrupted by the voice of the king. "Take him to the gallows."

4. Just Like His Father

They paraded me through the streets like some sort of otherworldly spectacle, Olivia and Xartum trailing behind the guards, begging for the king to change his mind. My mother, mute as ever where I was concerned, said nothing as she followed Cryonitus to the gallows. I was to be put to death, and everyone I cared about was to be forced to watch. The similarities to my father's execution did not go unnoticed by me.

Though I knew very little of him, his involvement with the "dark" magics was infamous. Whispered conversations, which abruptly ceased when the speakers noticed my presence, rumored that my father had sold his own soul to Abraxas himself in a reckless grasp for power, and my mother, ever the saint, had been the one to report him. Those rumors seemed to hold far more validity at my own execution, given her refusal to come to the defense of her first and only son, but as any six year old child would, I'd wished she would. Alas, as I marched to my own demise, shackles at my wrists, I came to realize that no one in this world will protect you if it causes any discomfort for them. That thought ground into my chest, seized at my lungs, and tore at my soul.

I was marched up onto the wooden platform of the gallows, overlooking a now sobered gathering of townsfolk. Contrary to what one would expect of a mob executing an evil-doer, there was no angry shouting. There were no torches; no weapons drawn save for those of the guards. The faces of the crowd were somber, sorrowful even, at the prospect of murdering a child so young, but Cryonitus was finally given the opportunity to dispose of the son he never wanted, and it was delusional to believe he could be swayed by their sadness.

As the king gave a speech revolving around "holding to our values", the dreadful feeling in my chest overflowed. My eyes found my mother, face turned away, whispering to one of her personal guards, and any fear I felt was consumed by a black, burning rage.

Look at me, mother.

Nothing.

I said LOOK AT ME!

And she did. Tears and absolute dreadful surprise in her eyes, she looked at me, as if seeing me for the first time. She'd told me before that I was a perfect mirror of my father, a comment I'd grown to loathe given the stories surrounding the man, but now I could sympathize with him. As she betrayed him, she in turn did the same to me.

As Cryonitus concluded his speech, the guards holding me shoved me forward. "Your mother has insisted that I at least grant you final words. Speak, boy."

I stepped forward, willingly slipping my head through the noose. My heart as rigid and as cold as the ice in which I was raised, with a calm, yet seething rage, I spoke. As my voice came out, however, in perfect harmony, a deeper, more ominous voice came out as well. "I will watch your kingdom burn in hellfire, if it is the last thing I do, Cryonitus." From the edges of my vision, I could have sworn to see inky black tendrils rise from the ground at my feet. "You have won nothing."

And I jumped.

5. Rat in a Cage

Suspended in mid-jump, I heard a voice; a booming, panicked, grief-stricken voice belonging to Halbazzer. "You will *not* execute that boy, Cryonitus."

"That is *King* Cryonitus, to you, old man."

Bazz scoffed. "Your title means nothing to me, when it was I who changed your diapers, boy."

I felt the rope burn away from my throat and myself being lowered to the ground, Bazz's outstretched hand guiding my descent. Still shackled, I stood motionless, Bazz entering my mind. *I won't let them kill you, but the alternative is scarcely better. I've sent for the Crown of Pentamros itself to take you into custody and give you a fighting chance.*

Like clockwork, guards dressed in royal purple and gold came through the crowd and grasped the chains of the shackles behind my back. Wordlessly, I was guided away. With little fuss, Cryonitus watched me go, and it was not until I was loaded into a barred, cage-like cell of a wagon, that I dared look back. My sister, being held back by Aguandi guards, had tears streaming down her porcelain face. Snow swirled around her in a vortex of despair, despite the heat of the southern areas of the Sector.

My mother, regal as she ever was, stared on. My mind clawed toward hers, but to no avail. She had learned quickly from the previous time I entered her mind, and she was consciously blocking me out. Realizing this, I sank to my knees in my cell on wheels, and at long last, allowed the tears to escape my eyes. "Momma, please."

And somehow I knew she'd heard me.

The ride into Nexus was not a long one, but as I was still bound in chains, it was a vastly uncomfortable one. The horses pulling the cart panted with the weight of the mobile cell, but trudged onward without breaking pace. Guards marched to either side of my cell, as well as one behind it, with large, ornately patterned glaives drawn and ready to swing at a moment's notice. Thinking of it now, how truly comical it is that they took such precautions with a six year old.

As we entered the gates surrounding Nexus, the shift in atmosphere was palpable. The Gate it's self was seemingly constructed from intricately woven gold, and through the doorway laid a blackness unlike anything I'd ever seen. As we passed through, I experienced a foreign crawling feeling beneath my scalp and in an instant, we were through.

Nexus was beautiful. The city, an island away from the turmoil of the rest of the continent, was home to buildings that could contain the Sage Library multiple times over and still have room to spare. As we made our way inward, toward the High Castle, the architecture became increasingly intricate and eventually, gaudy. No expense was spared, it seemed, for the land surrounding the High Castle.

As we approached the High Castle itself, I felt my stomach plummet somewhere into my colon. Never before had I laid eyes on something so massive and impressive, while also being so aesthetically appalling. Similar to the gates we passed upon entry to Nexus, the High Castle sported etched, stamped, and molded gold traveling vertically along the outer walls. Behind that, was flawless white stone which, as the sun began to rise, I realized was incredibly reflective; a beacon in a city of

glitter. I wanted nothing more than to shield my eyes, but as they were still bound behind me, my retinas suffered instead.

Before we could come to a stop before the front doors of the castle, however, another guard rushed out from behind the shrubbery surrounding the castle, to the left. "She wants him in the south wing," he said as he gestured to the right-hand wing of the castle.

The guard to my left sighed heavily, and turned to me with disheartened eyes. "I'm so sorry, little man."

He unlocked my cell, and with a surprising amount of gentleness, led me to the apparently dreaded south wing.

6. Arachnophobia

The south wing earned its reputation. Encased in sheer stone walls, and lit exclusively by scarce black candles, the room hosted merely a large stone table with odd metallic hooks affixed to its surface. The perimeter of the room held closed cabinets which gave no indication as to what they held. As we entered, the guard directing me noticeably tensed, and I found myself feeling sorry for him. His discomfort at what he was commanded to do was palpable, and my mind drifted to how all the guards of all the royalty must feel. That thought did not sit well with me.

Wordlessly, he directed me up onto the table, where my shackles were connected to each of the hooks. Laid flat on my back, a chain connected to each arm and each leg, in turn fastened to a solid stone table, the severity of my situation set in.

However, I did not struggle. I did not cry. I simply whispered to the guard, "Please don't leave me here."

He did not reply, and with a sniffle and a swipe at his own eyes, he left me.

As the door slammed shut, I closed my eyes; my mind desperately clawing at the confines of this room, trying to find any life outside of here, but it couldn't. It was as if the room itself radiated a quiet, black nothingness, and no matter how valiantly I struggled, I could not break through.

Hours passed, and to fill the time, my mind replayed the murder of Castien Klauser in succession. More noticeable in my recurring flashbacks, was the look of terror on both my sister and Xartum's face. What had I done? The magic I'd used was unlike anything I'd ever read

about. Given the rapid aging and rot, it seemed as though I'd drained the very life from his body; accelerated his aging. How fitting that the man who spoke so lowly of me died at my hand? But what if he was right? The magic I wielded was painful, and demanding. How long could I truly deny giving it what it wanted?

I do not know how much time had passed since my arrival, as I had lost count of the hours sometime after the third day, but just as the solitude was wearing on my sanity, she arrived. Adorned in long white and gold robes, with a radiating aura of grace and power, she came to stand beside me. She appraised my condition quickly, with nearly lifeless blue eyes, before making her way to the cabinets to my right. When she returned, she held a small blade on a long, thin handle.

"Do you know what this is?"

I shook my head slowly.

"This is a scalpel," she mused. "It's used by healers to preform surgeries."

"I don't need surgery," I weakly breathed out.

"Oh, but you do!" Her demeanor changed entirely. The stoicism was gone, replaced by a jarringly chipper tone. "You see, The Unholy One has his clutches in you, and we must remove him like a tumor!"

And so began my torment. Over the next few weeks, Domina, as I found out she was named, continued her attempts to remove the darkness from my body. At first, she sliced open my midsection, shoved her

hands inside of my torso and rooted around for anything she deemed "tainted", and removed it. I felt her fingers tangle in my intestines, glide over my stomach, my bladder- which I lost control of immediately. My medical knowledge was limited, but it seemed anything nonessential was removed from my tiny body. I watched in adrenaline-numbed horror as she held parts of my liver in her hands. My gallbladder came out next, with a sickening squelching sound. My left kidney gave her some trouble, and in my semi-lucid state, I saw beads of sweat on her forehead as she wrenched it from my body, her gloved hands soaked in thick, dark blood. The more I screamed, and the more I begged her to stop, the more cuts she made, and after she was finished, she would wave a glowing hand over the wounds and close them with large purple scars.

Her next idea was to beat the evil out of me. I found myself off of the table, my hands tied to a different metal ring on the wall. Without ceremony or any gentleness to speak of, she ripped my shirt from my back, and due to atrophy, exhaustion, and fear, I sank to my knees. This seemed to please Domina.

"Very good," she said in her singsong tone. "You're finally submitting to my treatments."

I sighed, unable to bring myself to speak and braced for what was to come.

From behind me, the sound of metal clinking and unraveling echoed through the dungeon.

Crack. I felt a stripe across my back tear open and blood begin to run hastily down my back, into my pants.

Crack. Save for the occasional whimper, I did not cry out.

Crack. And I went numb.

Domina left me alone for a few days after that. She seemed disappointed that her "treatments" seemed to be ineffective, and I was thankful for the short reprieve. However, looking back on it, I would have preferred the beatings and the impromptu surgeries to what was to come.

Domina returned with a large glass vial and her trusty scalpel, and my nearly defeated sigh came out more like a wheeze. As she approached, clambering around inside the jar were the oddest looking arachnids I'd ever seen. Spiders of blues and greens and oranges climbed over one another in an attempt to escape their glass prison. Domina sat the jar on the table beside me.

"I just love these little guys," she chirped. "The blue ones' venom freezes the flesh it touches." She tapped the glass with a long, white fingernail. "The orange one's burns, and the green one... the green one is my favorite."

With a flash, she sliced open the skin over my sternum. I winced, but had otherwise grown numb to being carved up.

She then uncorked the jar of spiders and carefully picked out the orange one. My eyes widened as she ripped the skin back from bone as though it were little more than silk, and held the spider to the wound she had created on my chest and the arachnid climbed inside. With a glowing wave, the wound sealed, trapping the spider inside of me.

At first, the sensation of the spider scuttling around under my skin was merely itchy and uncomfortable but just as I resolved myself to it, my insides burst into flames. I felt fire engulf my chest as the spider chewed and seared between my ribs and I howled in pain. I trembled and fought against my restraints, but as with every time I tried, I merely exhausted myself further. The scorching, white hot sensation in my torso, after seemingly hours, subsided and I panted heavily, as if I could breathe out the charred remnants of my own flesh.

Domina smiled. "That was lovely! However, ineffective. Given your nationality, however, I think it wise to skip the blue spider and go straight to my own personal favorite."

As she picked up her scalpel again, I swallowed hard, and as she came closer and closer to my face, I found my voice.

"Borealith! Venak! *Anybody!* PLEASE!" I wailed with all the strength I had left, begging the gods to either help me or kill me.

Domina chuckled humorlessly. "Silly boy, don't you know they can't hear you? And even if they could, what makes you think they care about a weak little boy infected with evil?" And she horrifically slowly carved an incision from beneath my right eye, down my cheek. She twisted the scalpel back and forth, sawing through what tiny bit of sinew and fat I still had, and created a hole where she inserted the green spider, and magically sealed it within me.

I felt the skin of my face pull taught as the spider explored beneath it, and I closed my eyes as tears streaked my blood stained face and waited. My eyes flew open, however, when I felt it begin to burrow beneath the eye it was placed next to, and as it pushed itself into my eye socket, I could hear myself. "Momma, help me."

My skull exploded in pain, agony which I had never dreamed possible, and my mind flew through a vortex of colors and images, which I was standing in the center of. I saw Olivia, unchanged by my abduction. I saw Xartum joining in on the banter with Taimi and Brax. I saw Cryonitus brush a strand of silver hair from my mother's face.

"Worry not, my love, we shall have a new son."

And then I saw Halbazzar. He too stood in the vortex, opposite me. As he approached, I could see his form flicker in and out of sight, and I knew he was projecting himself to me.

"None of this is real, Olly Boy. Do not let them beat you."

"Why're they doing this to me, grandpa?" Tears rolled down my face, and Halbazzar flickered once more.

"Because it was not his own soul that your father sold. It was yours."

As those words hit my ears, I felt the world tremble.

7. Awakening

I felt the spider burn alive inside my skull as my vision cleared and I returned to my grim reality. Except, I felt no fear, I felt no pain, I felt *nothing*. Nothing save for the most tremendous power coursing through my veins, my bones, and my very soul. The shadows along the walls writhed and shifted into long, shadowy tendrils, and in my hands, pooled a pulsating lavender energy.

Domina gasped as the metal restrains at my wrists and ankles rusted, decayed, and shattered. "This is not possible."

With barely a thought from me, one of the shadowy tendrils crept forth, entwined itself around her ankle, and slammed her into the table beside me. Her blood splattered across my cheek, but I did not flinch.

As quickly as I was on shaking feet, Domina was as well, her whip drawn, and her upper lip smeared in blood. Panting, she lashed out at me.

Nearly reflexively, the shadows sprung from the wall and created a kind of dark barrier between myself and that awful whip, and with my mind, I scoured the room. I felt no presence save for my own and Domina's, and yet, in the back of my mind, I did not feel alone.

With a twitch of my fingers, the shadows lurched toward Domina once more, this time formed solid and sharp. Domina side stepped quickly, but I could smell the blood in the air as it grazed her face and I felt my own face smirk.

Not giving her a moment to counter, I shifted my feet, and drew the shadows to me where they encased my arms and extended along my fingers as claws. I surged forwards and slashed at her, but injured as she was, Domina was quick. She stepped out of my way in just enough time, and cracked across the base of my skull with her fist. Small specks of light clouded my vision and I staggered, my knees buckled, and I collapsed.

And the darkness overtook me.

Kill her.

I felt static in my hand. Black crackling energy sparked to life in my palm and as I watched, it grew. Domina, winded and exhausted, could only watch as the ball of dark magic in my hand swelled and crackled.

Now.

The bolt flew from my hand just as a somehow both foreign and familiar voice shouted, "EXILIUM!"

There was no flash. There was no feeling of flying. I merely blinked and the dungeon that had been my home for nearly a month was gone, replaced by barren wasteland. The black bolt, still on its path, slammed into the ground ahead of me with tremendous force and left a crater in the earth large enough for an average sized person to lie down in.

I surveyed my surroundings with a mind clouded in severe confusion and disorientation. The moon burned red in the sky, close enough, it seemed that should someone sprout wings, they could touch it. Howls and screams and shrieks echoed across the desolation, and the whole world seemed shrouded in red.

Somewhere off in the distance, another scream reverberated so loudly that my ribcage trembled and I heard that voice again. "Welcome to Hell, Mr. MerKurie."

8. Blood Moon

The red moon did not waiver as I trekked along on foot. Behind my entry point, a wall of stone and magic sealed me in, and even if I could have summoned more power, I could not have blasted my way through. It seemed, at the time at least, that once someone or something was in this hell world, there was no getting out. So I walked. From my entry point, I marched my way straight forward, and the desolation continued. Occasionally a tree would creep up through the otherwise empty landscape, but even they were dead, and bare, and long since turned to stone.

I felt no breeze, and had issues determining the general temperature. My sense of direction felt warped, and cardinal directions were lost to me, but still I walked. I did not stop walking until a hint of glowing blue caught my eye, and I stopped.

It appeared to be a man; a man so round and fat that I was amazed he could stand upright. Which is when I realized, he was not standing. His feet hovered uselessly mere inches from the ground and his form itself seemed to flow away from his actual body. As I crept closer, giving my best attempt at stealth, I realized that while he was a man, he was not a solid man. Staring at him without blinking allowed me to see through him in certain areas. Not only did his form itself seem to flicker in and out of my line of sight but a hole through his chest remained constantly open, and it dawned on me. This was Hell. He was dead.

As I did my best to stay out of his sight, I heard him mumble. I could not make out any particular words, but it seemed he was mumbling to himself with his eyes downcast. Instinctively, I scoured the ground for anything of interest as well, but nothing caught my attention.

Another scream shook the air.

"I have to find it before they come!" the man shouted, and began frantically gliding, his eyes darting back and forth. As he completed a full scan, his eyes caught me. "Ah! Young man, come assist!"

I stalked forward warily. "What do you need?"

He eyed me quizzically. "I need to find it, before they come."

"What do you need to find? Who is 'they'?"

He shook his head. "I don't have time for that, help me find it!"

"I don't know what you're looking for, though."

"They'll be here any second!"

"Best of luck to you, sir," I muttered as I turned to walk away. Clearly this poor soul was stuck in some sort of infinite, hellish loop.

Nearly as soon as I had turned my back, I heard the man bellow in pain, and when I whipped around, he was being devoured. A shadowy, winged creature, somehow humanoid and also not, was consuming him as someone breathes in smoke. Its claws hooked into his shoulder and its nearly bovine snout inhaled the spectral man, as he wailed. Large,

leathery wings unfurled at the creature's sides, and as it consumed the remainder of the man, the creature took flight with an unholy shriek.

After a mere moment of shock, I ran. I had not survived and escaped Domina's torture to be eaten. I would not allow it. My magic was exhausted, my body even more so, but still I ran.

Too focused on evading the shadow creature, I barely noticed as the ground beneath my feet began to slope rapidly, and I found myself careening into an impressively large crater.

I landed on my back, expecting to see the red moon beaming down upon my face, and yet, when I opened my eyes, a dark mass had blocked the moon. A long, serpentine appendage wrapped around me at the middle and lifted me to eye level with a creature far more fear-inducing than the shadow. She had the torso and head of a woman, with long, flowing black hair, and hollow black eyes, but her lower half was that of a massive snake, which constricted me ever tighter as I struggled for freedom.

I wheezed, and felt her coils squeeze even tighter. I could feel so much pressure behind my eyes that I swore they would burst from my head. My lips went numb, my extremities went numb, and my vision began to cloud around the edges. I was dying. I was being squeezed to death by this creature, and I had no magic left to defend myself.

And just like that, a flash of red cut through my fading vision. I fell to the ground in a heap, coughing and wheezing. A roaring in my ears and my feeble attempts at drawing breath kept my attention until I was grabbed again. This time, however, I was lifted much more gently and slung over what felt to be a shoulder. It was then that my consciousness finally faded.

I awoke in a bed. As my eyes adjusted, I surveyed the room. It was small, stone in construction, and the small window allowed in the faintest strands of silvery moonlight. My bed was surprisingly comfortable, the blankets made of tanned animal furs, all I wanted was to sink into it and never leave. Soft light emanated from a lantern hung above the doorway.

I bolted upright. Where was I? Who had saved me from that monster?

My feet touched the stone floor timidly as I attempted to force myself out of bed, but nearly as soon as they made contact, the door to my current quarters swung open. An alarmingly large man with inhumanely pale skin, black hair and piercing red irises smiled, as gently as I wagered he could, exposing long, sharp canine teeth.

"Oh good, you're awake! The Queen will see you now."

9. Queens of Hell

My knowledge of throne rooms, I'll admit, was limited to that of my step father, but in all fairness, this one more closely resembled an enormous tavern. One huge rectangular table stretched from the stairs to the metal throne, nearly to the door from which I entered. The entire table was covered in meats. Some were carved and prepared beautifully while others were whole carcasses of strange beasts, the likes of which I'd never seen. My stomach growled audibly. Domina's neglect had left me roughly ten pounds lighter and being presented with food, even if I couldn't identify it, caused me to salivate.

Around the table sat people of similar visage to the guard that had escorted me here; pale skin, red eyes, and large fangs where their canine teeth should be. Most of them wore intricately decorated robes of varying colors, while some wore heavy metal armor. The armored ones seemed most interested in the whole carcasses while the more regally dressed took the time to cut and savor their meal. At the head of the table, sat the most regal of them all. Fiery red hair in wild curls fluffed out from her head, her skin more gray than pale, and her eyes shone a brighter red than all the others. She wore a long, black silk dress with shoulder embellishments that curled up next to her ears, and only her fingers were armored. Around her neck, she wore a large stone that seemed to be filled with blood.

The guard beside me cleared his throat and bowed his head. "I am sorry to intrude, my queen, but the boy has finally woken up."

Immediately, all eyes in the room turned to me, and the flame-haired woman disappeared, only to reappear at my side a mere heartbeat later. Wordlessly, she gestured me to the table, and as I approached, she had the seat next to her cleared for me. I sat down hesitantly, and tried my best to avoid staring.

"Welcome to Sanguinaire Manor, love." She smiled. "I am Queen Valerian, but you may call me Victoria."

I bowed my head. "Thank you for having me, Your Highness."

She clapped her hands twice and a short, stout woman rushed to fill my chalice with a dark red wine. "It is okay, child. We are a foreign sight to you, no?"

I took a quick sip of wine and it tasted far more metallic than any wine I'd ever had before. "I'm sorry, but yes. I've never seen people that look like any of you before."

Queen Victoria chuckled softly. "You have your High King to thank for that, darling. He banished us here centuries ago, for similar reasons, I'd wager, that he banished you here."

My eyes fell to stare thoughtfully in my drink. "No place in the world for someone like me, I suppose."

"Griffinshit, love. We do not fit into *their* world, but that does not mean we have no place. We simply *make* a place for ourselves."

I glanced about the hall. The stonework was exquisite, the tapestries were pristine, and all the decorative armor and weapons were beautifully crafted. "It would seem that way."

She smiled again and gestured to the meats on the table. "Eat to your heart's content, love. By the Hells, you've certainly earned it after surviving a run-in with Gorgalith."

"That's what that snake creature is called?"

"Oh, she is far more than a mere creature," Victoria shook her head. "She is a demonic queen, working for the Dark One."

I gnawed on the leg of some presumably avian creature that had been prepared. "So, this really is Hell?"

This elicited a round of laughter from most of the people in the room.

"No, dear," Victoria smiled sweetly at me. "This is the Umbra."

**

In the following months, Victoria had more or less adopted me as her own. Even the guards referred to me as "prince", which was strange considering my initial exile from royalty, but surprisingly comforting at the same time.

I learned far more from the vampires than I ever imagined. Their way of life was surprisingly peaceful, considering the stories that were told about them in the mainland of Pentamros. They were not nearly as barbaric as the legends made them out to be. Victoria herself carried far more grace and benevolence than even my own mother had, frail as she

was. Vampires, I also learned, were not nearly the immortal monsters that they were portrayed as. They did require blood for survival, though contrary to legend, that blood did not have to come from humans. Their immortality was not without limitations, either, as nature has its love of loopholes. They did not age, nor could they be infected with disease, but fire, holy magic, decapitation, heart extraction, and, of course, a wooden stake were the only ways a vampire could truly die. Even a lack of blood would not kill them, but rather, would send their body into a desiccation induced stasis. Being entrusted with this information from the Vampire Queen herself was truly an honor.

Years passed, and as I grew, my power did as well. It was not until twelfth birthday though, that I and the vampires I now called my family became truly aware of what I was capable of. I was finally of age to accompany the hunting parties during the month's Blood Moon to secure enough of the demonically infected animal-like creatures to satiate Sanguinaire Manor and all its residents for the coming month, and while I was nervous, my excitement vastly outweighed any worry I felt.

The Blood Moon was a fearsome time for the Umbra as it was the one night, in a land of eternal night, where the demons were at their most aggressive. However, it was also the one night they were most vulnerable due to the Blood Moon triggering their copulation. Our hunting team planned to weed out the older demons for food, and leave the new generation to grow and continue the cycle. Demons, Victoria had explained to me, were much like reptiles in the way they cared for their young, which is to say, they do not. So, once the eggs were laid, the parent demons were fair game.

As our hunting party was clearing the gates outside of the Manor, the queen rushed out, shouting.

"Wait!" She flew to me with her vampiric speed that my eyes still could not track. "I want you to take this with you."

She presented me with a singular black sai which seemed constructed of some kind of glass, rather than metal. Rather than a rounded blade, as was traditional, this one was flat and razor sharp on both sides, and honed quite finely at the tip. The prongs were twisted and grooved along their lengths, both ending in a deadly point. It was the most beautiful weapon I'd ever seen.

She held my cheeks in her palms. "Be careful. Promise me you will be careful."

I held her gaze. "I promise."

She then turned to the leader of our hunting party, a large vampire named Leonid. "Keep him safe."

Leonid nodded, and we were off.

10. Bone Shaper

We had located a small group of deer-like demons within a few hours of setting off from the Manor. We'd travelled eastward, being careful to circumvent the crater which Gorgalith inhabited, and as we reached the eastern edge of the Umbra, Leonid pointed out what appeared to be a dense forest of impossibly white trees.

"That is the Forest of Teeth," he warned. "No one has ever entered it and returned to speak of it, so be sure to keep your distance."

"Wait," I was shocked. "Those are *teeth*?"

Leonid chuckled. "Teeth, and bones, from some long forgotten monsters, yes."

"Wow," I muttered.

"They say that's where the Dark One is contained, as well."

My eyes shot up to meet his. "You're joking."

He shook his head. "I'm not, and it would make a great deal of sense given that even the demons avoid treading there."

"You don't think he'd give my soul back, do you?"

Leonid shook his head sadly. "I'd say not, but you still have your soul. He wouldn't take it until you died."

That was the first time I considered the thought; the awful, selfish, miserable thought that if I could not die, Abraxas could not have me.

The deer-like demons were coal black, with two sets of red eyes on either side of their faces. Their antlers were long, gnarled, and white, some of which were bloodstained. The creatures seemed to follow each other around in a traditional herd mentality, as was standard for normal deer, which is not what I expected from demons. Unlike regular deer, however, the does all gathered around the same area briefly, and deposited large, sickly green eggs with relative ease. Each egg stood at approximately knee height, and there were hundreds of them. It was actually quite a startling phenomenon to behold.

Once the eggs were deposited and the does began walking away, Leonid grunted, and our small hunting party of six vampires, plus myself, surged forward. The vampires were quick and precise. Swords barely had time to gleam in the moon light before the demonic deer collapsed with their throats cut. Black, viscous blood stained the otherwise barren landscape, and the remainder of the deer-like creatures fled.

The commotion, however, had drawn the attention of one of the flying boar demons that I'd encountered when I'd first entered the Umbra. Victoria had informed me on that first night that they were referred to as Draks, and that the Blood Moon was the only time of the month when they were not entirely dormant. Given this, their hunger for souls was without limit.

"Coming in hot," I heard Leonid shout, but I did not possess the speed that vampires did, and before I could react, it sank its claws into my shoulder.

I winced, but held my composure and attempted to invade its mind. What I found was swirling pain, and hatred, and starvation, and I felt blood drip from my own nose from the struggle. Its mind wasn't coherent enough for me to overtake, and as I recoiled from my attempt, the world stood still for a moment. The vampires were not coming to my rescue. They seemed frozen in time save for light trembling, and their eyes never left me. The Drak screamed quickly before beginning its soul-siphoning inhalation, but no sooner had the wispy edges of what I assumed to be a physical representation of my own soul hit its snout, that the Drak let out yet another awful scream, pushed itself away from me, and attempted to take flight. Instead, its body seemed to seize, and spasm violently, and its nostrils sizzled and smoked. Starting at its snout, it decayed. Quickly, its shadowy skin rotted and fell to the ground, exposing the bone of its skull. It continued to writhe on the ground until only a skeleton remained.

"My prince, you need to run," Leonid managed through gritted teeth. I immediately remembered my own bloody nose.

"Shit," I took a cautionary step back, but quickly realized that I could not outrun them. My eyes darted frantically around for any means to shield myself. Victoria's sai weighed heavily on my back, but I refused to use the gift of a vampire to harm another, even if it was defensively. I swiped at the blood beneath my nostril, and attempted to cover it so as to contain the smell, but it was too late. One of the younger vampires, a woman with braided brown hair, charged forward.

Immediately, I felt that familiar lavender energy creep down my arms, and as if by muscle memory, my upturned hand pointed at the Drak skeleton. The energy swirled around it, between each bone, and it stood; its hollow eyes glowing the same eerie purple color.

As the vampire lunged at me, the skeletal Drak blocked her path, swatting her back with relative ease. Her boots left skids across the earth from the sheer force of the skeleton's blow. She shook her head, and with bared fangs, pounced again. This time, however, she anticipated my skeletal construct, and with a broad swing of her sword, she severed the spine and the whole thing collapsed.

I took another step back, still channeling the purple magic in my right hand, and with my left, sent forth a black, shadowy shock wave as a means to keep some distance between us. My right hand reached toward the collapsed skeleton, and my mind flew to the last time I'd needed to defend myself with this power. The crack of Domina's whip still echoed through my skull like a school bell, and as I watched the bones take form once again, I twitched my fingers to change their shape.

I pulled the vertebral column toward me and using this purple magic as a type of flexible adhesive, formed a whip comprised of spine. It had no more than shaped in my hand when I swung it backhanded, and lashed across the chest of my assailant. It tore a deep, red gash across her collar bone and she gasped.

"I'm sorry!" I shouted over my shoulder, and with my spinal whip in hand, sprinted back toward the Manor.

11. Blood Pact

By the time they carried her into the Manor, I'd managed to race to my quarters, clean the blood from myself entirely, and rush to find Victoria. My gut clenched painfully as I watched Victoria examine the vampire I'd wounded. I cowered just around the corner of the main corridor as Victoria, with her sharp finger armor, cut her own wrist and dripped blood into the injured vampire's mouth. The wound healed seamlessly, and quickly, and I heard Victoria ask Leonid for an explanation. I could hear my own heart pounding, racing in my ears as Victoria and Leonid entered the throne room alone.

The remainder of the hunting party split in two groups. One group handled the demonic deer carcasses, and the other carried their still-unconscious comrade to her quarters to rest. I was sure to duck out of sight. After the corridor was clear, I crept to the doors of the throne room and waited.

"It's dangerous, Your Highness!" I heard Leonid clearly. "You and I both know it."

"Then we shall condition them to show restraint!"

"With all due respect, my queen, can one teach a dragon not to fly? Their reactions to human blood were *natural* but if you-"

"NO!" I heard a slam, and the unmistakable sound of wood splintering. "I will not permit that choice to be taken from him. I forbid it!"

"I understand your affections, Your Highness." Leonid seemed to be choosing his words with great care. "Given his resemblance to Alexei, I am not the only one to notice it, but if you wish to protect him, a decision must be made."

"Do you think I am not aware of that, Leonid?" The queen's tongue held razors, and her tone dared Leonid to say the wrong thing. "He is a just *child*, and he deserves safety."

"You've gone soft, Victoria."

Another crash echoed down the corridor and I violently flinched.

"We are not monsters." Her voice seethed with calm, murderous rage. "But if you question whether my maternal instincts cloud my judgment and ability to rule this Manor, I *implore* you to challenge me for the throne. I am the *original*, little boy, and I would sooner tear your heart from your chest and *eat it* than entertain your blatant insubordination. Do I make myself clear?"

"Perfectly, Your Highness," Leonid's voice trembled as he spoke. "My sincerest apologies."

"Leave," she said decisively. "And send him in as you do so."

Wordlessly, Leonid exited, and held the door open for me to enter.

The massive wooden table, at which the majority of the Manor's occupants could sit at in unison, was split long ways, in half. Victoria rubbed the knuckles of her right hand gingerly, and turned to me as the door behind me slammed shut and I jumped.

"Calm yourself, love." She sat less than gracefully in her iron throne, her exhaustion apparent.

Like a waterfall, the words poured from my lips. "I'm so sorry, Your Highness. I don't know what happened! I've never done anything like that before and I didn't mean to! Will she be okay? I didn't mean to hurt anyone!"

"Come here, love."

I carefully walked to her, sank to my knees, and bowed my head. "I will accept any punishment that you see fit."

"Sit here." She gestured to the space between her feet, and I did as instructed. "Turn around."

With my back to her, I gulped. As I felt her fingers begin to sift through my hair, which was now at a length which brushed against my shoulders, I felt my heart in my throat. "Are you going to turn me?"

Her fingers hesitated for barely a moment in my hair before they resumed movement. She separated my hair into sections and I could feel her weaving tight braids down the right side of my head. "Do you want that?"

"I don't actually know," I admitted. "I've only considered the possibility in passing."

"Then I shall not." She continued braiding. "You must be entirely certain before I would be willing to bestow our curse on you."

"Does it hurt?"

"Oh, immensely," her voice seemed to have regained its usual calmness.

"How does it work?"

She chuckled lightly. "I knew you would ask one day, love. It is a bit of a process. As you know, our blood, when drunk, has miraculous healing properties, as well as magic amplifying properties. However, when fed to a person soon before their death, it resurrects them as a vampire."

"So I would have to die."

"Yes, my love." She sighed. "Which, given the situation of your soul, is an endeavor with quite a large risk, I'm afraid."

"But vampires have souls, right?"

"Of course we do," I could hear the smile in her voice. "But your case is uncharted territory. In nearly two thousand years, I have not known a person to evade Abraxas. Though, I must say, vampirism would be quite the loophole, if you did not have to die first."

She continued to braid my hair until three tight braids lined the right side of my head. I then felt her bunch the rest of my hair at the back of my head and tie it with a thin strip of leather.

"Who's Alexei?" I flinched reflexively as she hesitated.

"He was my son," the sadness in her voice weighed on my shoulders heavily. "My actual son, not a vampire that I turned."

"I'm sorry. I didn't mean to upset you."

She didn't even seem to hear me anymore. "He was about the same age you were when you found yourself here, when Abraxas cursed me to be what I am now. I woke up in a field in Nimbia, and Alexei was running to me, having seen me fall. As he approached me, he seemed afraid of me, given the change in my appearance, and his fear, his blood, was all I could smell. Before I knew what I was doing, the hunger won out."

"Victoria, I'm so sorry."

"He looked a lot like you, actually, especially his hair. I always used to braid his hair like this," and I heard her voice break.

Immediately, I turned around and wrapped my arms around her; a gesture I'd seen before, but never experienced for myself. She did the same, and I felt a strange warmth in my chest. Black tears fell down her cheeks and she stroked the back of my head as we held each other.

12. The First to Leave

Five more years went by like they were nothing, except, they were everything. They were both the happiest, and most difficult years of my life by that point. I spent hours, even days in the Manor's library, attempting to study pacts with the gods. I researched powers similar to those I possessed, and powers beyond what I was capable of at the time. I learned spells that both terrified and enthralled me, and Victoria had cheered enthusiastically when, at dinner one evening, I had raised the corpses of all the demons we were being served. I could bend the shadows of the world to my will with minimal effort, and invading minds had become child's play for me.

It was as I was studying a teleportation spell in the early hours of the morning that Victoria found me. "You are trying to leave?"

I sat my tome on my work table, still open to the teleportation circle. "I'm trying to get all of us out of here."

"That has been tried in the past, love." She sighed. "With few results, I am afraid. Whatever force contains us here is well beyond physical."

"So we can be thrown in, but not leave?"

"It would seem that way. The Three were thorough in their containment of this place."

"The Three?" I'd never heard that term before.

"The Three were powerful mages back in the days of the Dragon War," she began. "The Light Mother, the Ice King, and the Maiden of Darkness, were instrumental in sealing this place after the other Dragon Gods bound Abraxas here. Many considered The Three as gods in their own right, as no other mage could compare to their power. Add to that their assumed immortality, and honorary gods they became.

However, as nothing in this world can truly be immortal, their magical seal on this place found a loophole, and the remainder of their souls were forged into keys. Legend states that these keys can break the seals upon this place and return those of us trapped here to the rest of the world. I had given up on a dream of returning, until you were brought to my doorstep. Not in centuries had I seen such raw power, my love, and I firmly believe that if anyone can break down the walls of this cursed land, it is to be you."

"How can I find these keys if I can't get out of here either?"

"I may have an answer for that." She stood quickly and headed for the door. "Come with me, and bring that book."

I found myself on the back of a skeletal horse-like creature after I was instructed by Queen Valerian to construct two of them from a mound of bones she presented me with. It seemed the bones of the demons we devoured were disposed of by merely taking them outside of the Manor

walls and piling them up. I did not question her instructions until after both skeletons pawed at the ground with a sense of urgency.

"What is this for, my queen?"

"At the southern edge of the Umbra, there is coven of... let us call them 'witches', that have been here nearly as long as we vampires have."

Victoria explained as we mounted our skeletal steeds and headed south. With my mind, I directed them south, and the instincts they possessed in life seemed to handle the rest. "If anyone in this wretched land knows of a way to get you through the Three's barrier, it is them."

We rode through the morning, well into the day, though the sky hardly changed. There was no sun in this place, though the too-close moon shone much brighter around what we could only assume was midday. By the end of that day, on the horizon, a cluster of somehow still living trees became visible. Evergreen trees, with trunks thicker than I could encompass with my arms, brushed the sky, and smoke billowed from somewhere in the midst of them.

Victoria dismounted and I followed suit. "We shall have to continue the rest of our journey on foot. I am not certain how these witches will respond to your magic."

I nodded and waved my hand. With a brief flash of purple light, the skeletons collapsed, bones disconnected, and splayed behind us in a disorderly mess.

We ventured into the forest. Victoria kept her hand on the pommel of her sword at all times, and I kept my eye on the shadows surrounding us. We were both prepared to defend our lives and flee if the situation turned sour.

However, after merely a few minutes of trekking into the forest, the source of the smoke became apparent, as the warm glow of a large bonfire seeped around the thick trees.

In a clearing, around the flames, danced humanoid shapes of varying sizes. As we approached, though, the dancing stopped, and a low hum vibrated into my ears. Their attention turned toward us and my pace slowed ever so slightly.

A rough, feminine voice called out to us. "Vampires or not, we outnumber you, Victoria. I pray you come in peace."

Victoria responded by showing both her hands, a display that her sword remained sheathed. I, in turn, did the same. "We have come for guidance and assistance, High Priestess, not for violence."

We stepped into the clearing and the largest of the figured approached. Her hood covered most of her features, but through the firelight, I could make out leathery purple skin, jagged, saw-like teeth, and glowing yellow feline eyes. "Oh! Only one vampire. And," she stepped closer to me and sniffed. "Something else."

"He is human, High Priestess." Victoria looked nearly as uncomfortable as I felt. "The first to be seen in this land in centuries."

"Hm," the purple woman turned back toward the fire, and we followed. "If you say so."

"Ma'am, we've come to-"

"I know why you've come, child." Her voice displayed not the slightest hint of emotion. "And I cannot help you. It is not within my power to break the barrier, or I would have done so by now."

I sighed, and dejectedly toed the soil with my boot.

"Do not look so glum," she mused without looking back. "I did not say it could not be done."

"What do you propose?" Victoria stepped forward again.

"If he is to slip through the cracks and escape, it must be of his own power, not mine."

"But I don't know how to do that," I heard the desperation in my own voice and did not like the way it sounded in my ears. "That's why we're here."

"Come to me, child." I saw the gleam of her teeth from beneath her hood. "*That*, I may be able to assist with."

She placed her hands on either side of my head, and my knees buckled slightly as a spinning cloud of darkness filled my vision.

"Can you hear me, child?"

"Yes."

"Good," I no longer felt as though I was standing in that forest. "What I need you to do, is to locate the flow of your own magic."

I breathed deeply and willed my eyes to focus. Slowly, I could see my own magic take shape. A murky mixture of black and lavender swirled around me, from me, and through me. "I found it."

"Well done," this time, her voice betrayed her and I could tell she was impressed. "Now, you need to see where it flows from."

I watched the cloud around me carefully, attempting to determine direction. As the thought, or maybe command, crossed my mind, it split. A tendril leaped eastward, which I could sense was emanating from somewhere in the heart of the Forest of Teeth, and another launched itself west, seemingly beyond the walls of the Umbra and I relayed that to the witch.

"Perfect," She was smiling, I could sense it. "Absolutely perfect."

She released me and albeit hazy at first, my vision returned to my view of the bonfire. Victoria was immediately at my side, holding me upright as I swayed. The high priestess held the spell tome I'd brought, though I had no recollection of handing it over to her.

"Victoria, you are going to need to feed him blood," She examined the page I'd been reading carefully. "He will need the power boost, but I do think he can make it through."

"May I have a moment with him first?"

The high priestess grunted an affirmative and Victoria and I stepped back a bit.

"Are you sure you do not wish to stay here?" I could see black liquid pooling in her eyes. "We can be a family. We can find a way out of your pact."

I sniffled, willing the tears away with all my strength. "We are a family already. That's why I need to find a way out of here for the rest of you, as well."

"I do not mind to stay here, if it means you have a home, love."

The tears began to fall from both our eyes. "I have to make sure my sister is okay, and I have to find a way to free you of this place; to free *all* of you. I will return, I promise, and when I do, it will be to shatter the walls that have kept you prisoner for all these centuries."

"I do not doubt you, my son."

After Victoria had gone, the high priestess held my head in her hands again. The taste of Victoria's blood still covering my tongue, I nodded.

"The circle is cast, child. Find the western flow of your power, grasp it, and do not let go." She sighed. "This is probably going to hurt."

13. Salt and Sand

The entire world melted. At least, that is what it felt like. All color drained from my vision, save for purple, and I held onto that strand of color with all of my might. Heat swelled in the pit of my stomach and I felt as though I would vomit and the magical flow would spew me out, but I held fast. My knuckles went white and moisture streamed from my eyes as the taste of salt water flooded my mouth, and I had to force myself not to stop and drown. Flames flashed over my skin for a brief moment and sweat oozed from every pore of my body. I felt as though I was being torn apart. My muscles, even my bones, screamed in agony, and my mind could not focus on anything but the pain.

Until all at once, it all ended in a crash. I broke the surface of the water like a boulder, and I felt myself sinking. Finally, I opened my eyes, and they burned. Salt water flooded into my tear ducts and reflexively, I gasped a mouthful of brine. I could see light piercing the surface of the water, though, and that was all the hope I needed. With all my remaining strength. I kicked my way to the surface, and crawled my way onto the sand. I panted heavily for a moment before a torrent of salt water and blood bubbled out of my mouth, staining the purple sand.

***Purple?* I thought, as the world went dark.**

I could feel a sharp, poking sensation in my fingers. My mind was still dark, and my body was still feeling the effects of exhaustion, but the poking persisted. Slowly, painfully, I opened my eyes. I laid on my stomach, face in the sand, and large black birds were pecking at my fingers. I wiggled my fingers to try and shoo them away, but I had no physical strength left, so they continued. Ignoring them to the best of my ability, I surveyed my surroundings. Beyond the blood stain originating from my mouth, stretched a seemingly endless purple beach. Further down the beach, though, stood massive black pillars which jutted out of the sand like the spikes on the back of a dragon. And I realized.

My eyes flew open wider and as I rolled to right myself, an intense stabbing pain shot through my stomach, but I brought myself to a sitting position. The birds, which I now recognized as crows, ceased their attack on my fingers, but did not flee. The sea stretched as far as I could see, and well beyond, I guessed, and above me, far into the sky, a ring of black hovered above the beach. As painful as it was, I twisted myself a bit, and from my current location, it seemed to encompass the entire island. Beyond the beach, peaking over the dunes, I could see jagged black shapes, and I stood. The crows, save for one, took flight, and I watched them disappear into the black ring in the sky. The one that stayed behind eyed me warily, and as I began to walk, it hopped along behind me.

I crested the purple dunes and found myself staring into a field of black stone, occasionally sprinkled with shards of white. On the distance, I could see another of the large black spires, though this one was far

larger than the rest. With a sigh, I began making my way toward it, the crow on my heels.

14. Island of Monsters

The crow never left me, which I found quite strange. Even as I climbed over jagged rocks, and stumbled over bones, the crow marched on. It never made a sound, save for its claws scraping against the reflective, black stones. Though the terrain was rough, it never took flight either. It was not until I found myself careening into a pile of bones, that I heard it croak.

With a clatter, the toe of my boot caught between a couple of rocks, and I sailed headfirst into a heap of bone that rivaled the one outside of the Sanguinaire Manor. Bones cracked and splintered beneath me, and scraped against my skin as I attempted to right myself. The crow's croaking sounded a lot like laughter.

"You're terrible company," I spat at it.

After crawling out of the bone pile, I took to the beach. The sand was much easier to navigate. The black spires that jutted from the sand were much larger than they appeared from my previous distance, and I found myself drawing nearer to them than I thought was safe. Something within them called to me and it was as if my body could not refuse it. They were curious creations. As I approached, I could feel something

else as well, they felt like me. They smelled like my own magic and I could not explain why. I reached my hand out toward it.

"DO NOT!" I heard a shout from behind me, which broke my trance-like state.

I whirled around and saw only the crow. I turned back to the spire.

"ARE YOU DEAF?"

I turned again, to see the crow hopping in place rapidly as he shouted.

"My gods, it's like you're *trying* to get killed." His beak opened, but did not move with the words he spoke.

"You can speak?"

"Of course I can fucking speak, human," I swear his eyes rolled. "And I'm telling you not to touch that!"

"There's something inside it though," I hesitated. "Something familiar."

He hopped up and pecked my leg. "This whole island should feel familiar to you, stupid. You're a necromancer. What do you think this island *is*?"

"I don't know," I kicked at him, but he hopped out of reach. "I just followed a magical trail here."

He sighed. "Yes, from the Umbra, I figured."

"How do you know that?"

He looked at me with such seriousness, such, dare I say, regret, that my stomach churned. "Because I watched them take you there."

"I don't understand, bird."

"Look at them all up there," his head turned skyward and I followed suit. The ring of corvids above us was as dark and infinite as ever. "They're all souls that died on this island, Oliver, and I am no exception."

"So none of you are actually birds, but souls?" This was magic unlike anything I'd ever read about. "How?"

"I don't know. This is more your magical expertise than mine. But by what I've seen, this island collects the souls of whoever it kills."

"If you're from Aguandi, how did you end up dying here?" I looked back down to the crow. "Where even is *here*?"

He chuckled, like a human rather than a crow. "You've missed a lot, prince. What's it been, eleven years?"

"That doesn't answer my questions."

"Sorry," the crow shook his head. "You're right. *Here* is an island off the western coast of Pentamros called the Isle of Salt. It's an island where they throw war criminals, like me, and a lot of the other birds, to die slowly and painfully. As for how I got here, you missed an entire civil war, Olly."

"Don't call me that." I snapped reflexively, before the realization hit me. "A civil war? Between who?"

"Oh, everyone," the bird hopped around a bit as he spoke. "Aguandi and Terranor defending themselves from attacks from Incenra and Nimbria, mostly. The Incenrans definitely started it, but nobody really knows why."

"Olivia, is she okay?" My mind went into a frenzy. A war broke out in my absence and I wasn't there to protect my sister.

"The last I saw of her, she was more than okay," the crow hopped closer to me, I suppose sensing my distress. "She's grown into quite an impressive mage, though, I suppose you both have."

"Who were you?"

"Hey," he jested. "I'm still me, I just have a different body now."

"You know what I meant."

"I do," he backed away again. "But let's not ruin the moment. You'll want to make it to that biggest black salt spire before sundown. Otherwise, this island gets a lot less tranquil. Although, how tranquil can an island of necromancy really be, you know?"

"By the Hells, stop talking."

**

We reached the largest of the spires just as the sun was beginning to set. It was less a salt pillar though, and more a mountain of black salt, however, given the layers of bones on top of the salt, hardy plants sprouted up from the crevices and covered the eastern surface in

greenery. The western side of the mountain, which faced the ocean, was sheer, sharp, and daunting.

"There should be a cave along here somewhere." The crow bounced around the edge of the spire, looking intently. "Ah, here." And he disappeared inside.

I followed him, but kept my hands up, ready to defend myself if necessary. In the Umbra, caves usually were not empty.

Inside, there was a lit fire, a small stone table, and little else, but the fire being lit sent a chill down my spine. Something was not right about this.

I sat beside the fire, the crow beside me, and sighed. My head still swam from my journey here, and my muscles ached. The energy of this place made my skin crawl, and yet, also seemed so eerily familiar that I felt I was meant to be here. I leaned back and my spine popped all the way from my hips to the base of my skull.

Just as I'd gotten comfortable, I heard footsteps. A woman, if you could call her that, emerged into the mouth of the cave and eyed me angrily. Her hair was a sickly green, her eyes seemed far too big for her skull, and her skin was so pale, her veins were visible in bright blue. She pointed her finger at me and let out the most head splitting screech I'd ever heard.

"I'm sorry," I began to ramble. "I was just trying to find shelter. I didn't mean to invade your home, please-"

And a blast of purple energy collided with my chest. My body shuddered, my joints seemed to freeze, my lungs suddenly felt like they were full of sand. As she stepped closer, presumably to finish me off,

the light from the fire dancing along the walls came into focus. Where there was light, there was darkness. And I vanished.

I pulled the shadows to me so quickly that they cloaked me in nothingness and I stood. My body slowly returning to normal, I lashed out with my right hand and the darkness encasing me followed. I slammed firmly into her chest and she toppled out of the cave. I released the shadow and followed her out.

Still sprawled on the ground, she slapped the earth, and from it rose a skeletal figure, cloaked in old warrior's armor, the nationality of which I could not determine. With a frantic wave of her arm, it raced toward me, sword drawn.

The muscle memory from my royal combat training kicked in and I ducked beneath the blade, while still striding forward, grabbed the spine of the skeleton soldier, and jerked. The whole thing collapsed in a dry, sandy heap, and the woman that created it gasped.

She scrambled to her feet, and began moving her hands around each other, causing a void-like black sphere to grow. I knew that spell. As she released it, I threw my body to the left, out of its trail, and the impact of the spell hitting the sand, vibrated through my entire body.

And then I felt it. Some long dead serpent resided below the surface of the sand and I could feel its bones with my mind. My hands sprung to life with the same purple energy, a purple which matched the color of the sand here, I realized, and I pulled them to me. I pulled the shadows to me a second time, to act as a shield while the bones worked their way to the surface, and from behind it, I could feel her spells bouncing off. The crow flew to me, nodded briefly, and dove toward her face. This bought me enough time.

The largest of the vertebrae cleared the surface of the sand and I grabbed it. I dropped the shadow barrier around me and with a heavy tug and an echoing *crack*, I pulled the spine free.

"Crow," my voice was calm, deeper than usual, and admittedly, a bit terrifying to hear come from my own throat. "Move."

He had scarcely more than let go of the skin of her face with his talons before I swung the bone whip. With another *crack* and the sound of bubbling blood, it wrapped around her neck, the spines of each individual vertebrae digging into her skin.

Still holding the whip taught, I approached her, and her eyes grew even wider, though I to this day do not know how that was possible. *Bow*.

She did. She fell to her hands and knees, with her forehead touching the sand. I gave her no slack with the whip and I could see her inhumanly dark blood begin to trail toward the water. I approached her from the side and pressed my foot into her back. "Why did you attack me?"

She snarled, and spoke in a language I could not understand.

I shoved into her mind once more. *Answer me*.

I heard her reply, in the same language as before, but this time I could understand it. "Forgive me, my lord."

I jerked the whip with a sickening *pop*.

15. King of Nothing

The cave proved to be far more expansive than it seemed from the entrance. At the back of the initial chamber, there was a hidden door carved into the stone, and once I found the trigger, - which was a small red stone in the middle of the fire- it opened into a sloping hallway. A few hundred feet down, the passageway split. Left took a person to a type of armory room, which I assumed the witch I'd killed collected from people that died on the island. The right corridor held a few more novelties. Firstly, the wall to the left on this tunnel was open, and lined with steel prison-style bars. Beyond that, was an open chamber filled with more bones and a sickly green glow emanating from both nowhere and everywhere. The back wall of that chamber also held a hidden door, which, admittedly, was significantly more difficult to find the trigger to. After vain attempts to simply blast my way through, a thought occurred to me.

I breathed deeply, and let the purple glow rise in my chest. As I exhaled, a thin lavender smog seeped from my mouth and into the bones in the chamber. Without my guidance, they shifted, assembling themselves

into a huge monstrosity of a skeleton. It had the head and legs of a bull, and the torso and arms of the largest man I had ever laid eyes on. In its hands, it wielded a massive two-sided axe. Its eyes glowed the familiar purple as it stalked toward me, passed me, and swung its mighty axe at the door.

The stones around the doorway clicked into place with ease, and the door slid down into the floor. The room was surprisingly beautiful. Deep red carpets covered the floors, bookshelves lined the walls, a large, albeit old, bed was pushed into one corner, lined with deep red sheets. A chest was shoved against the far wall, and once I managed to break the lock with my bone whip, I found it contained a long, green, hooded cloak. With minimal hesitation, I threw it over my shoulders and tied it at my collarbone.

I found myself skimming over the spines of all the books on the massive driftwood shelves, realizing quite quickly that the collection was equal parts journals and spell tomes. The scholarly Aguandian in me shuddered with glee. My fingers found their way to one of the books that seemed most worn, and as I pulled it off the shelf, an ear splitting feline roar echoed down the tunnels.

"Sweet Hells, what now?" I sat the book on the bed and went to the doorway. The guttural, angry sound continued, and I turned to my bovine creation. "Go."

It stalked off, axe at the ready, with no hesitation.

I ushered the crow into the room with me, and channeled my purple magic into the door again. It slid back up and into place with ease.

"What're we going to do now?"

"We're going to wait here until the sun comes up, I suppose." I responded to the crow. "There's no sense in getting into a second fight tonight."

"Yeah," he hopped onto the bed and sat. "A fight with the Salt Creep isn't really one I'd like to witness."

"The what?"

"Oh," he turned his head toward me. "That's what the other souls call it. It's this big monster that stalks this island at night."

"Sounds pleasant."

"Between the Salt Creep and that lady you decapitated, they make up the majority of the cause of death among the souls."

"That's a *lot* of souls, though." It seemed a bit odd to me that two creatures could wreak so much havoc.

"Well, yeah," the crow preened himself as he talked. "The Salt Creep has apparently been here forever, though. The woman was a bit more recent."

"Did they work together or was it more competitive?"

"It kind of seemed like she controlled it, honestly." He shook and ruffled his feathers up. "Since it's not technically *alive*, I suppose she could've just used necromancy to control it."

"Why not use it to put the thing down?"

The crow shrugged his wings and curled up. I climbed into the bed next to it and did the same.

Weeks went by, and then months, as I grew accustomed to my new life of silent solitude. The crow and I scavenged the island during the day, searching for any way to escape, and by nightfall, we would hunker down in the deepest chamber of the cave and wait for the Salt Creep to rest around daybreak.

During the time we were under lock down, I consumed the words on every page of every book in that room, given, of course, that they were written in languages that I could read. The one that struck me as the most interesting, though, was the journal I had laid out on that first night. It was written by someone with a heavy knowledge of the dark magics, and from what I could decipher of the scrawling handwriting, it documented how a person could control the Salt Creep. It also went into more detail about what the Salt Creep truly was, and that information scared me a bit.

"It says here that the Maiden of Darkness herself made it," I told the crow without looking up from the page. "It says she constructed it as an eternal guardian for this island, and that this island used to be considered a sacred place for those that wield the dark arts."

"That makes sense, I suppose." He groomed his own feathers from atop one of the bookshelves. "I guess that witch being so ready to blast you into the void makes sense too if she thought you were invading a holy site."

"Yeah," I sighed, thinking back on killing her. "Plus being tainted by Abraxas as I am, and given that the Maiden sacrificed her power to contain him, I can only imagine how she must have felt sensing him from me."

"Doesn't really matter how she felt now that she's dead."

"Thanks." I rolled my eyes. "That was truly comforting."

The crow merely lifted his wings in a shrug and continued grooming himself.

As I continued reading, I found a section which gave me a headache to decipher, but it seemed that the magic keeping the Salt Creep alive, was bound inside it, somehow, in a physical form, and fed the island its power as well. Quietly, I closed the journal and returned it to the shelf.

As we left our small stone fortress for the morning and passed the metal bars in the wall as we did every day, the crow spoke again. "I wonder if this was meant to contain it."

"The Salt Creep?"

"No, Oliver," the crow's tone set my teeth on edge. "The fucking High King."

"What's stopping me from eating you, again?"

He flew on ahead, and I heard him call back to me, "You secretly enjoy my company."

And suddenly, it hit me like an avalanche. His voice, his mannerisms, his laugh.

"Taimi."

16. Dead Men Tell No Tales

Weeks passed. Months quickly followed, and eventually turned into a year. A year I had been stranded on the Isle of Salt. A year since I'd managed to teleport my way out of the Umbra, spent with the son of the first person I ever killed.

We spent nearly every morning at the water's edge, my shadowy tendrils scouring the shallows for fish, but a year into this solitude, and we'd fished the shallows barren. I sank into the sand.

"This is hopeless, Taimi. We're going to starve to death."

Taimi squawked. "If you want to get technical, I'm already dead. *You* are going to starve."

"Thank you for the encouragement."

We sat in silence, in the lavender sand for what felt like hours. "Thank you, Oliver."

"For?"

"For killing him." He sighed. "He never should've been a father, to tell you the truth."

"You're aware it's a bit jarring for you to thank me for killing your father, right?"

"After my mother left," he scratched at the sand while avoiding my eyes. "No other women in Borealis would have him."

"I can understand why they wouldn't."

"He took that out on me and Brax, sometimes, you know?"

I felt like I'd been stabbed in the stomach. I choked on my own breath and tears pooled in my eyes.

"Brax is dead too, you know? I found him the day after they cremated our father, hanging in the tree you always sat under. I guess he just couldn't take it anymore. Even with our father dead, that shit haunted him. I guess I just handled it better."

"Taimi I-"

"Don't." He shook his head and his feathers shimmered. "Don't apologize. None of it was your fault. None of it was ever your fault. I used to hate you for that, actually. Because nothing was ever your fault, but I wanted it to be. I needed someone to blame and Innocent Olly was

the perfect scapegoat in my immature little mind, and I'm sorry. I'm so fucking sorry Oliver."

"Don't be." I sobbed.

We stayed on the beach until sunset. Taimi spotted it well before I did.

"Ship!" he flew circles over my head. "It's a ship!"

I grinned at his excitement, but as the ship drew nearer, the black flag waving high over the deck caught my attention and I darted for the rocks beyond the beach. "Taimi, they're pirates. Not only that, but this island is infamous, they'll never dock here."

"We have to make them!"

"Why in the Hells would we do that?"

"Ships float on water, Oliver. You can leave!"

The bird had a point, and I chuckled to myself at the sheer recklessness of what I intended to do. The sun set further behind the horizon, and the world sprung to life with shadows. I breathed deeply and closed my eyes. I could feel the dark like an itching across my skin, and I let it swallow me.

When I opened my eyes, my vision was shaded in purple, and the shadows around me rippled with magic. I focused on the shadows around the ship, and with tremendous force, I wrapped them around the helm, turning the ship directly toward the shore. Even from this

distance, I could hear the crew shouting orders at each other, attempting to correct their course. Their panic and their fear coursed through my veins and strengthened my grip on their ship.

With a final pull, the ship crashed onto the beach, and I stalked forward.

"You there," a man in leather armor and long orange hair tied up into a knot yelled from the deck. "This is your doing?"

I kept my hands behind my back, fingers grazing gently against the spinal whip. "How would one boy manage to cause a ship this large to crash?"

A ladder dropped off the side of the ship, and the man climbed down, followed by the rest of the crew. Nine men in total, all clad in leather armor, cutlasses and daggers at their hips met my advance on the beach. "Stranger things have happened, child."

In truth, the man did not appear much older than me. I estimated him to be in his mid-twenties. "I suppose you've seen plenty of oddities sailing the high seas, eh?"

He grunted and ordered his crew to inspect the ship and prepare it for departure. Which caught my attention. "Can you take me with you? Please, yours is the first sign of life I've seen in a year, and I've fished the waters empty."

He gave me an appraising gaze. "Sorry, truly, but I have no space for you on my ship. I can barely feed the crew I already have."

As I opened my mouth to reply, suddenly I was strapped to that table in Nexus all over again, pleading to that solider. "Please don't leave me here."

"You were put on this island for a reason. I can't take that risk. You're intended to die here, and so you shall."

The hope I felt shattered, and I swore I could hear the breaking of glass somewhere in the distance. Lightning crackled up my spine, into my mind and the purple tint crossed my vision again. "Then so shall all of you."

17.Desperate Measures

Shadows rose from the water, and without hesitation, impaled four of the pirates. The remaining five drew their swords.

"It was you!" The captain leveled his sword with my face.

I smirked, and felt a dark crawling sensation across my face. "Of course I did. I need your ship." I twitched my fingers, and the pirates skewered on my spikes of darkness plunged beneath the surface of the water, plumes of red staining the sea. "If you'll recall, I tried to do this peacefully."

He swung his sword, and it collided with an echoing *clang*. Without even a thought from me, inky tendrils seeped from my skin, and wrapped

around the blade of his cutlass. Nearly instantaneously, I watched it rust, crack, and then shatter. With a yelp, he threw the hilt on the sand and leaped backward. "You aren't human."

"I've heard that before, actually."

In the distance, a gurgling howl echoed across the island, and I let out a short laugh.

"What the Hells was that?"

"It sounds like he's hungry too." I chuckled dryly. "Not even the Dragons can help you now."

"What is he?"

I shrugged, and turned to walk away. "Some monstrosity that owns this island. Best of luck to you. I'll return for your ship once he's eaten his fill."

"Wait!" The fear in his voice was delicious. "Don't leave me here!"

I turned back to him briefly, giving him an appraising look similar to the one he'd given me. "Leave your crew for the Salt Creep and come with me."

By the time we reached my cave, the screams from the beach vibrated my eardrums.

"What's happening to them?"

I pointed up, to the ring of corvids encircling the island from the sky.
"They're becoming those. Anyone that dies here becomes part of it."

"But this creature, it's eating them?"

"Oh," I dismantled my glamour spell on the cave entrance. "Slowly, and while they're still alive, yes."

Through the screams, I heard the faint sound of metal scraping against metal. "Then why haven't you been eaten yet?"

The crawling sensation that had become familiar to me by now, darted across my skin again, and I snorted with amusement. "Because I can do this." I turned quickly, and on the last word, I slammed my mind into his so hard that blood dripped from his nose upon my entry. *Put the knife down.*

It clattered to the stone floor without hesitation. Purple hazed over my vision yet again, and I watched him attempt to regain control over himself. His inability to do so only added to the stench of fear that radiated from him. "Why can't I move?"

"Because I haven't decided to let you." I stepped closer to him and my mind flashed to Taimi, then Brax, then finally, to Castien. What I did to him, the feeling of it, settled into the pit of my stomach, and it growled in response. "What's your name?"

"C-Colin." His voice trembled as I closed the distance between us, my hands already glowing red.

"I'm very sorry, Colin," I caressed his cheek with the back of my hand.
"But I'm starving."

His response never came, as my hand clamped onto his throat, and I quickly absorbed his vitality. Exactly like Castien, Colin aged, and shriveled, and desiccated into dust at my feet. The empty feeling in my stomach subsided, and I felt energy crackle around my ears.

The screaming from the beach had ceased, and an eerie silence settled across the Isle of Salt. I made my way through the tunnels, down into the magically guarded sanctuary, and as the door scraped open, deep, satisfied laughter boomed inside my mind.

When the morning sun rose from the sea, I tossed a small leather bag up onto the deck of the ship. A couple books from the shelves of the sanctuary, my spine whip, and a skin pouch of water, was all I cared to bring with me, but I could not contain my excitement. After a year, I was about to be free.

On the beach below laid the bodies, or what remained of them, of the pirate crew. With a wave of my hand, they creaked to the closest semblance of life I could give them, and I gave them the silent command to push the ship from the shore.

Taimi landed on the railing beside me. "You know I can't go with you."

"I was thinking about that." I avoided his eyes on purpose. "What if you could?"

"This sounds reckless, already." He hopped closer. "How?"

"It was a thought I had after I more or less 'ate' Colin." I fidgeted with my fingers. "What if I could absorb you in a slightly different way? You're

effectively a ghost, right? And ghosts are energy. So if I absorbed you, you'd become a part of me similarly to how you're a part of the island."

"Oliver, this is the most hair-brained shit I've ever heard," he chuckled. "How do you know tying me to you won't bind you to the island too?"

"I don't," I sighed. "But I can't leave you here."

He shook his little bird head. "So I'd be like your familiar."

"I suppose so, yeah."

"Fine." He hopped up next to me. "Do it. If it means that much to you, do it."

I nodded and placed my hand gently between his wings. The red glow surged out of me, and I watched Taimi flicker, and slowly vanish.

Somehow, though, I could hear his laughter in my head. "By the Dragons, you did it!"

I smiled to myself and gave the final command to the animated corpses to shove the ship off. They crumpled to the sand in a heap once more, and the ship drifted slowly away from the island. The further from shore I made it, the more my heart swelled. Until it stopped.

As if it had collided with something, the ship stopped, and shook. I glanced around frantically for anything I could be stuck on, and saw nothing.

I glanced back to the shore. Nothing had changed. The corpses still lay in their heap. The birds above maintained their circle, though at that moment, I was directly beneath them. That was when the fire started.

Black, void-like flames licked the wood of the ship, and spread at an alarming rate. Within seconds, my ship was sinking, and though the water lapped against them, the flames did not falter.

I sank to my knees on the deck of the burning ship. "No." My voice came out as a cracked whisper. I slammed my fists on the weathered wood, and a torrent of liquid shadow burst forward. It slammed into some unseen fixture, and curved up, cresting like a wave, and the realization sank into my guts. I was trapped within a barrier of hellfire, and I'd just absorbed my only friend. "NO!"

18. The Undying

Slash after slash, and blast after blast, I assaulted the barrier while the ship burned. Tears streamed down my cheeks, and the crawling feeling on my skin vibrated with rage and desperation. From the corner of my eyes, I could have sworn to see black veins creeping up my arms, but I never shifted my attention. A wailing sound, muffled by the roaring of my dark magic and burning wood, shot through my ear drums, and it was not until that magic faltered and blood dribbled down my chin, that I realized it was coming from me.

Through my exhaustion, I crawled forward. The black flames licked my hands and knees as I crawled, but I barely registered the pain. My hands began emanating the now familiar red glow, and with trembling hands, I touched the barrier.

White hot pain shot through my entire body and caused my body to seize, but I maintained contact. I felt the energy of the barrier, the magic that constructed it. Between flashes of pain, I saw her. A woman in a black cloak, walking away from me, refusing to look back.

"Please," I heard my own voice as a squeak.

She did not look back.

Slowly, painfully, I felt the magic in the barrier crawl into me, and immediately began coughing up even more blood. I wiped my mouth with my free hand, and looked down. The black veins crept from my fingers, all the way up my arm, and began cresting my shoulder. Everywhere they touched, my muscles seemed to tighten and ache. As they began to sprawl across my chest, my heart trembled, and deep laughter echoed within my mind.

It was in that moment that I saw him. A skeletonized snout radiating with wisps of shadow gave way to glowing, red eyes devoid of pupils.

"You make this quite easy, boy."

My rib cage vibrated with the deepness of his voice. I could not speak. I could not look away. His gaze held me captive. His skeletal, clawed hand reached out to me, and I closed my eyes. I knew what was coming. I knew who he was.

And then suddenly, I saw Olivia. She was standing in the center of Borealis, a pack of white wolves around her, happily waiting for her command. My siphoning ended immediately, and without opening my eyes, I lashed out with the sai Victoria had gifted me. I felt it connect, but I did not look to see if he had recoiled.

"I do not belong to you, Abraxas."

He chuckled. My eyes remained closed. "In time, you will come to realize just how incorrect you are."

And he was gone.

The ship had long since sunk and I bobbed in the water, aimlessly. Exhausted, I laid back and floated as the sun set and the Salt Creep screamed its awakening for the night.

By morning, I had washed ashore. My entire body ached, my skull felt like it would burst at any moment, but still I checked myself over. The black veins had left no trace, and my arm seemed clear of any visible evil. Stiffly, I made my way to my feet.

The island seemed even more barren than usual. Taimi's energetic, albeit at times obnoxious, voice no longer carried across the purple dunes, and that thought caused a heaviness in my chest that I could not explain. The birds in the sky above me seemed almost mocking, though they never deviated from their circular course around the island. Even in my state of exhaustion, it was not difficult to deduce that they were connected to the barrier around the island somehow. It was unclear, however, if they acted as a binding agent for the spell, or merely a physical representation of it.

After what seemed like hours, the stone door of my little sanctuary slid open and I collapsed onto the bed without any ceremony or grace to speak of.

The screaming growls of the Salt Creep shook me awake, yet again, and I sighed. The events of the last two days had warped my emotions considerably and I did not even bother to put my boots on as I stomped back out of the cave.

No sooner had I stepped onto the sand, did I spot the monstrosity. It, in turn, spotted me, and came barreling toward me, venomous fangs bared.

"Alright, you murderous asshole. I'm over this." I sidestepped as it ran at me, and in the same movement, conjured a spike of shadow from the ground.

Impaled, with all four of its half-decayed legs dangling uselessly, it let out a blood-choked gurgling noise.

Like sentient black ink, the shadows crept into its open mouth and down its throat. "Shut the hell up. You don't get to cry to me about being in pain. You're a mindless, immortal, construct. What pain have you felt? What have you lost? Even if I kill you right now, you'll simply reanimate tomorrow. So tell me why your pain should matter to me."

I forced the darkness further down its esophagus, my mind racing.
Immortal.

I snapped my fingers, and with a nauseating tearing sound, the shadows pulled it apart at the middle.

19. Visitors

After unceremoniously stuffing the two pieces of the Salt Creep into the prison-like chamber of the cave system below the island, I slid down the wall and found myself sitting slumped on the ground. The amount of magic I'd burned through in such a short time should have killed me, and yet, there I sat.

Taimi's face, his human face, danced in and out of my mind, and it felt like a cold spear through my chest. My only friend in this solitude, gone so easily, and by my own doing. I hugged my knees to chest, and my breath trembled, but the tears did not come. Instead, I found my mind drifting in a far different direction. An icy feeling crept down my spine and the pit of my stomach burned. I wanted revenge. I wanted revenge on my father, for damning me as he had. I wanted revenge on Cryonitus for banishing me and abusing us. I wanted revenge on Domina for her torture. However, revenge of that magnitude required power, and as

siphoning the barrier had shown me, I could not take in that much power without Abraxas coming to collect my soul. So how?

In the following months, day in and day out, I ripped the Salt Creep apart. Each time, I waited and watched as it reconstructed itself, only for me to dismember it again. I desperately needed to understand how it was able to defy death, but no matter how many times I killed it, its secret seemed to elude me.

To the Salt Creep's credit, no matter how many times I destroyed it, its demeanor never changed. It showed not an ounce of fear toward me, and immediately following reassembly, like clockwork, it attempted to devour me. The thought occurred to me, some months in, to let it, but not only would that rob me of my revenge, but that would have been the equivalent of handing my soul to Abraxas personally, garnished with a bow.

"This is getting monotonous," I sighed as the monster resurrected for nearly its thousandth time. "I've removed every limb, even your head and tail, and nothing changes."

It stood on newly attached legs, claws digging into the stone beneath our feet. Its acidic green venom dripped from its jaws and I rolled my eyes as it launched itself toward me yet again.

With an unenthusiastic sidestep, I avoided its fangs. I sighed deeply as I lifted my leg and dropped my heel on its spine. The crack echoed through the tunnels, and the beast wailed loudly, as it always did. Even with its back legs now useless, it continued to pursue me, dragging its mostly broken body along with it.

An inky black tentacle lashed out from the shadows along the wall and wrapped itself around the monster's throat, choking off its screams.

"Have I ever told you how much of a headache you give me?"

As though the tentacle was an extension of myself, which I suppose, in a way, it was, I could feel the monster's attempts at fighting its restraints. Sparks flashed in the darkness as its claws scrambled desperately to find traction on the stone floor.

With a quick wave of my hand, the tentacle retracted, dragging the Salt Creep along with it. As it collided with the stone wall, two more tentacles emerged and constricted its front legs, exposing its underside. The back legs still remained useless due to the broken spine. Slowly, I stepped toward it, shadows pooling in my hands as I walked.

"I've torn you in half. I've broken every bone you have. I've literally skinned you alive, and yet, I still don't understand you." I tightened the tendril around its throat and slammed my mind into it. *Tell me!*

A blinding purple light seemed to singe my retinas as I peered into the Salt Creep's mind, if you could call it that. The projection of myself within its mindscape squinted against the harshness of the glow and the source of such a light slowly came into focus. Small and round and constantly rotating, the glow seemed to emanate from somewhere within the monster, though through all of my slaughters, I had never seen it in a physical form.

It was at that precise moment that two things happened. The first was a *violently* sudden presence appeared on the island as though dropped from the sky; multiple presences, to be exact.

The second was a realization. The blatantly obvious connection I should have made ages ago was simple. The Salt Creep was the only life on the Isle of Salt. The only beating heart. *It was its heart.*

Quickly, and as painfully as I could make it, I repaired the monster's spine, opened the gate in the iron bars that contained this room, and gave it only one command.

"Go."

20. At a Distance

I stalked quietly behind the Salt Creep as it ascended the sloping tunnel, out into the night air. It too had caught the scent of the intruders, and it was much more equipped to traverse the island speedily. I kept up quite well, though.

As we crested the purple dunes, I gazed out over the beach. Not much had changed since my own arrival nearly two years prior, and yet, so much had. The boy that had been thrown into a hell dimension to die seemed centuries away. The boy who was adopted by the vampire queen, raised as a vampire, and treated like royalty, seemed to no longer exist. And worst of all, my sister's brother felt dead to the world. As the humid, salty breeze peppered my face, I felt a physical pain in my chest at that thought.

There were six of them. Six moving, humanoid figures bounced across the landscape, nearly a mile up the beach. I noticed them as the sun began to rise, and found myself carefully creeping forward, avoiding detection. With a howl, the Salt Creep broke apart with the rays of the sun, and their heads all turned toward me. Instinctively, I darted behind one of the salt spikes and prayed I had not been seen.

After a few minutes, I peered around the spire again, to what appeared to be a squabble between some members of the group. I took this time to creep ever closer and began to let my mind glide across the sands, to try and identify the party.

One *reeked* of fire and smoke and volatile magic. The next smelled of sulfur and filth, and through their mind, I could hear the snapping of a bow string. The next one smelled of a pine forest, and magic that bubbled deep from beneath the earth. A second one smelled of smoke and flame, but unlike the first, this one also felt like the Umbra somehow. The fifth intruder's scent was tainted with the metallic odor of blood, and slight tangles of magic beneath the surface of the mind swirled like small white threads. The sixth hit my mind so hard that I doubled over. The smell, the feelings; they took my mind back to Agaundi so quickly that I nearly vomited. The familiar cold feeling of my childhood exploded over my skin, and I reeled my mind back to me faster than I ever had before.

I saw no ships, no portal, nothing that could have dropped them on the island, and yet, there they were, bickering over what they should do about their situation. I watched them well into the night, their campfire on the beach acting as a beacon to the horrors of the island, and as a beacon to me. I kept my distance, though, only watching. Nothing about their arrival made sense to me, and in my mind, I had decided that if I

watched them long enough, they would leave by the same means which they had come, and I would be able to hitchhike off the island.

Hours crept by, with little progression. The Salt Creep reconstructed and had come to devour the group, but without turning my attention from the visitors, I waved my hand and sent it back to the cage within the cave, a purple flash being the only trace it left.

By morning, the group had become mobile. Their exploration of the island was concerning, as it seemed they had no idea where they were and therefore felt no urgency to find shelter before nightfall. Taimi had made it seem as though most people on the main continent knew of the Isle of Salt, at least in legend, but this group seemed entirely oblivious. I found their lack of concern interesting, though, because from the distance I kept myself at, they all seemed to be armed to the teeth, prepared for war.

The group trekked in circles throughout most of the day. They seemed to be gradually increasing the diameter they explored with each passing patrol, but their progress was slow and I was growing incredibly bored. As the sun began to set, I sighed and reached out with the darkness to the salt spire closest to them. From within it, I could feel death and with a twitch of my fingers, the bodies began to writhe.

Slowly, the salt and sand began to shift and skeletal hands crept from the spire as it collapsed. In mere seconds, the group was on guard, and the largest of them swung a massive double-sided axe and cleaved one of the skeletons in two. Just as quickly, the smallest of them fired two arrows simultaneously, from a long bow, and severed the spine of the second skeleton. Both of my puppets collapsed on the sand, and I retracted my magic from them.

Smirking to myself, I walked back to my cave. These visitors could turn out to be quite useful.

I remained in my cave for two long days and two longer nights. Twice, I released the Salt Creep, and twice I'd summoned it back to me after it drew the attention of the group of visitors. I intended to lure them to me, and the Salt Creep was the least exhausting way to do that.

I spent the days sleeping, in preparation of the night, and as the moon rose, as did I. Eyes clouded over and white, my mind snaked its way along the island until it found the group. I shared this location with the Salt Creep's mind, and sent it off. My plan worked beautifully. By the end of those two days, I could hear them outside the stone door.

"Finally," I chuckled as the door slid open. Their faces came into view in far more detail. The one closest to the door had blueish skin and vibrant pink hair. I waved them all inside. "Introductions are in order, I'm Oliver."

"I'm Margo," the cotton candy girl spoke up. Her voice was quite high pitched, and a little grating, but she seemed nice enough.

A small, filthy, elven girl with long, matted white hair waved to me. "I'm Naivara, and this is Herman." She held out a hermit crab from the beach, and I chuckled.

"Terra," a girl with tanned skin and vibrant green eyes held out her hand to me, which I ignored.

I turned to a man with flames dancing across his head, and deep red skin. "You?"

"Mikael," he huffed.

The next person I turned my attention toward had gray skin, bushy brown hair, and seemingly demonic horns protruding from her head. "The name's Zeal."

I nodded quickly and turned my attention to the last member of their party, and I felt my heart drop into my stomach. His silver scales had grown to cover much more of his body now, but those soft gray eyes remained the same. I felt my knees shake, and was immensely thankful that my cloak covered them. Emotions bubbled within me that were nearly impossible to decipher. I felt relief that he was still alive, disgust that he had been marooned here, sadness that his eyes showed no recognition of me at all. He opened his mouth to speak at the same time I did, and we both spoke in unison.

"Xartum."

21. Loopholes pt1

"So," I spoke slowly, choosing my words very carefully. "Why exactly have you been sent here?"

Mikael's fiery hair flashed a bit brighter. "We don't actually know. None of us can remember anything prior to waking up on the beach."

"Well I hate to break it to you, but this island is usually a death sentence for criminals." I shrugged.

"Is that why you're here?" Xartum's voice sent physical pain through my chest. How could he not remember?

"Something like that."

"What'd you do?"

I shook my head, turned away, and slid open the stone door. "Does it really matter now? Come with me."

"Where?"

"If we're getting off this island, there's something we have to tend to first."

The Salt Creep was dormant, still in the cage I had trapped it in, as I opened the gate. My mind was made up. I had found the loophole, but I needed this merry band of misfits to feel as though they accomplished something in order to sway them to aid me. So as I led them into the cage, I steeled my heart to the possibility that this could end horribly.

"The monster you saw while you were out on the surface lives in here." It was not a total lie. It did dwell in this cage. I just failed to mention that it was I who had contained it. "You'll have to kill it. Its heart is what keeps the barrier around this island solid." I had no proof of that, but I would have told them anything if it meant leaving my prison.

"Why haven't you killed it yourself then?"

I smirked at Mikael. "This island is full of necromancy. Why wouldn't it be impervious?"

The group nodded, and I gestured for them to enter. I remained in the doorway, and focused on raising the beast ahead of schedule. I could feel its immortal presence pulsing through the ground as I reached out

with my magic in shadowy tentacles below the floor. I sighed deeply, and twitched my fingers, and I felt it begin to stir.

"Prepare yourselves."

In mere seconds, the Salt Creep stood, its venom soaked fangs dripping onto the stone below its feet.

Without hesitation, Naivara notched and released an arrow that pierced into the beast's right eye, and while it howled in pain, it did not waiver. It launched its self at the nearest warm body, which happened to be Terra.

She ducked, and between her and the Salt Creep, a large slab of stone jutted from the floor and disoriented the feline monster momentarily.

In that half-heartbeat of time, Xartum swung downward with his ax, and the wet crunching sound of his blade in the creature's hide reverberated along the walls. Nearly simultaneously, the Salt Creep's tail lashed out at him, catching him in the chest and sent him careening backward. The monster pounced.

The fear on Xartum's face sent my mind into a frenzy. He may not have remembered me, but I remembered all too vividly, the boy who was my friend when nobody else would be. I remembered him coming to my defense, even at the final moments of my time in Aguandi. I remembered that night on the pier, and I remembered how it felt.

"No," my voice sounded foreign to me, but the power did not. I shifted my feet, and with a cracking sound similar to my whip, a tentacle of darkness slashed its self from the ground and constricted the Salt Creep. I carefully moved my fingers, and the darkness followed, rotating the monster until its underbelly was exposed. I then pulled my fist

downward, and the creature's back slammed onto the stone. I kept my fist clenched, and the tendril held it in place. "Disembowel it."

After collecting his composure, Xartum stood, ax in hand, and quickly carved the creature down the middle.

There it was. I could see its soft purple glow as plain as the rising sun. The heart of the monster, and the heart of the island. It felt as though it was taunting me, heckling me for not figuring it out sooner.

"That's its heart?" Xartum eyed the glow cautiously.

I nodded and held out my hand.

With movements far gentler than I expected his large frame to allow, he scooped up the stone heart and brought it to my outstretched hand.

"You're sure this will help?"

"Far more than you can even imagine." And I grabbed it.

Searing pain burst through my entire body, and I barely registered my feet leaving the ground. Purple light flooded every bit of my vision. I could hear that same deep voice in my head, and it was angrier than I'd ever heard it.

What have you done?!

I chuckled to myself despite the overwhelming pain. I focused on the task I'd given myself. My heart pounded in my ears as I forcibly ripped myself apart. "You can only have me when I die, Abraxas." I felt a thick, hot liquid leak from my eyes. "And now I never will. Neither of us can have my soul."

22. Loopholes pt2

Oliver's body was lifted from the ground by a force beyond the realms of imagination, purple and black mist swirling around him in a type of dark cyclone. Black liquid leaked from his eyes, his nose, and his mouth, which remained wide open in a painful, silent scream. The air in the chamber grew frigid, and nearly electrifyingly heavy, and the party on the ground held their breath.

Slowly, and with a horrendous ripping sound, a tendril of black smoke tore its self from Oliver's chest, and into the purple stone Xartum had freed from the monster, which now lay in a pile of ash at his feet. The pain on Oliver's face could be seen clearly through the mists, as those mists flooded into his open mouth, and all at once, the forces suspending him in the air dropped him.

Nearly by pure instinct, Xartum lunged forward as Oliver fell. The weight of the boy in his arms sent him careening forward and with a less than graceful roll, he found himself sitting on the cave floor, the unconscious necromancer cradled in his arms.

"C'mon," he whispered. "Wake up."

As Oliver's fluttered open, though, it became very apparent that something had altered the poor boy. His once silver eyes had mutated into a bright, glowing lavender, and as his vision began to focus and the glow faded away, the piercing purple remained.

"It's done," Oliver whispered, as a trickle of abnormally dark blood ran from the corner of his mouth.

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I quickly rolled myself from Xartum's arms, and stood on shaking legs. The presence within my head felt lighter, like I was no longer at risk of being taken over at any given moment, and I braced myself for what I knew was to happen.

"Hold onto something." I had barely gotten the words out when the earth beneath our feet trembled violently, dust and small bits of rock falling from the ceiling of the cave. "We have to go."

We made great haste in exiting the cave, as its walls began crumbling around us.

"What's happening?" Terra finally piped up once we were on the beach.

"The island is collapsing." I held the stone as far away from me as possible. "This is all that held it together, and without it, this will all sink into the sea."

"A little purple stone held that much power?" Xartum seemed skeptical.

I nodded. "Now it holds far more. Catch." I tossed it to him and he caught it with ease.

Without questioning it, he shoved the stone in his pocket and trudged onward.

From a vantage point atop the hill above my cave, it became clear that the eastern side of the island had already begun sinking, and I cracked my knuckles as I prepared a spell I hadn't used since my arrival.

First, I held out both my hands to the circle of corvids overhead, and sighed. "I'm so sorry."

Red light pooled in my hands as the entirety of the flock began to glow equally as red. This red glow flowed like shining blood from each and every crow in the sky and into my body, as the birds themselves faded from existence.

Before the red light had fully subsided, I slammed both palms onto the ground and watched as the patterns and lines of the teleportation circle formed on the ground from the blood of each soul I'd absorbed. Once the circle was complete, I gestured the rest of the group within its boundaries.

"Whatever happens, do not let me die until we touch land."

Margo opened her mouth to speak as I clapped both hands together and the feeling of my heart dropping into my stomach overtook everything else.

We sailed across the sea for what felt like centuries, my consciousness fading in and out as we went. I distinctly recall my knees buckling at one point but I was quickly caught and held up by two presences. One felt hot and volatile. The other felt cold and familiar. From the colder presence, at the edge of my mind, I could also sense myself, afraid, desperate, and clawing fiercely to return to me. I sighed to myself. How could I tell someone that did not remember me that I'd tasked him with keeping my soul?

23. Shatter

Much like the first time Oliver used the teleportation spell, the landing was less than graceful. The impact into the earth sent flocks of birds fleeing from their roosts into the night, and the forest fell silent. As the dust cleared, the members of the group began checking on each other; calling to one another in a mental list.

"Oliver?" Xartum managed between fits of coughing up soil. "You okay?"

A violent, wet-sounding cough was his reply as Oliver, who was sprawled out on his back began coughing up blood.

Xartum and Terra both rushed to his aid, sitting him upright as to avoid him from drowning in his own hemorrhaging, as the coughing continued. Terra rubbed her palms together, a soft white glow forming between them, and placed her hands on the necromancer's chest.

There was the briefest moment of sentience, where Oliver's eyes fluttered open, looked directly into Xartum's face, he smiled with blood stained teeth, and his eyes rolled back in his head. The convulsion hit so hard that Xartum nearly lost his grip on Oliver, but after fumbling for only a moment, the scaled boy kept his grip.

"He's absolutely soaked in sweat, and he's freezing," Terra assessed. "Mikael! Make yourself useful!"

He jogged over, the flames atop his head not wavering with his movement. "What do you need me to do?"

While Xartum held him up, Terra hastily tugged off Oliver's damp clothes. "You're going to have to warm him. He'll die if he stays this cold."

Xartum merely watched her work, until a horrified gasp broke his trance. "What's wrong?"

"Look," Terra pointed as she peeled off Oliver's tunic. In the center of his chest, seemingly just beneath the surface of the skin was a shapeless smudge of black. The longer they stared at it, the more the smudge seemed to writhe as if it had its own sentience. Terra shook her head. "It can wait. Keeping him alive is more important."

While Terra carefully wrapped Oliver in his own cloak, which was the only dry garment on his person, and sat him in Mikael's lap, Naivara and

Zeal returned with as many dry branches as they could find. In merely a few minutes, their small campfire was alight, and silence fell over the group.

"Anyone know where we are?" Margo finally broke the silence.

Naivara nodded. "Actually, yes. From the looks of it, we crashed somewhere in Terranor."

After that, the group fell into a quiet chatter about the experience of leaving the island, the fear they felt, and how nice it was to finally stand on ground that was not cursed. As the night droned on and the flames from the camp fire burned lower and lower, one by one, the group fell asleep.

I stood in an empty gray space, the sound of my own breathing reverberating off of walls I could not see. Slowly, painfully slowly, a dark shape began to take form. My heart pounded in my chest as the shape grew until it towered over me multiple times over.

"Did you think yourself clever, boy?" I knew that voice all too well.

I laughed dryly. "Actually I did. You can't take my soul until I die, and now I can't."

The amusement in Abraxas's voice unnerved me. "Immortality comes at a cost, boy. Did you learn nothing from that parasitic wench?"

"This is temporary until I find a better way out of a contract that I didn't sign."

"So you think," his deep chuckle echoed long after his form had dissipated.

With a gasp, my body lurched forward, and I detached myself from the uncomfortably warm limbs that held me. I shivered as I stood and tried to shake the astral meeting with Abraxas from my head. I needed to get away. I needed to plan my next move. I was still a fugitive, though it seemed no one recognized me. Terranor was as safe a place as any, I figured, and if the legends were to be believed, the goddess of my homeland was on civil terms with the god that resided here. And that is when the realization hit me. The gods.

As I dressed myself, I glanced around the camp and grinned softly when my gaze landed on Xartum, curled up like a house cat, soft snores shaking his hulking frame. Silently, I traced the purple thread of a spell in the air and spoke into it. I then gently touched his temple with my index finger and sent my psychic message.

"Come find me."

24. Blood in the Streets

Though they slept on the ground like they had consecutively since arriving on the Isle of Salt, this time, the group awoke far better rested and with a much higher level of morale. Sleeping was easier, it seemed, when one did not have to constantly be looking over one's shoulder for a ravenous, venomous, undead, feline, reptilian creature. Even the sounds of the creatures in the forests of Terranor did not stir the group from their sleep.

Xartum was the first to wake, Oliver's psychic message ringing inside his mind like a rooster at sunrise. Instinctively, he clutched his head and groaned. "Why can't people just leave notes?"

"What's wrong?" Naivara did not bother to rub the crust from her eyes.

"Oliver's voice was in my head telling me to find him."

Naivara turned her attention to Mikael, where she had last seen the necromancer. "He's gone."

"His clothes are gone too," Xartum gestured. "I suppose he really does mean for us to find him."

"Why though?"

The scaled man shrugged. "How should I know?"

Naivara began packing up her share of the campsite. "You're the one he left the message for, so I figured he might have given you a clue."

He shook his head. "Nope. Just 'come find me'."

"Interesting."

It took them nearly an hour to pack up the camp, but mere minutes to reach the road from their campsite. In reality, calling it a road may have been a stretch, as it was more of a dirt path, worn and beaten by foot traffic, and the wheels of carts. In both directions, the scenery was the same; a dirt road intersecting a seemingly endless expanse of greenery.

Naivara squatted and picked at the ground with a long, dirt-caked fingernail, scooped a bit of soil up, and sniffed it. "That way," she pointed to the right, "leads to the capital city."

"How did you-? You know what, never mind." Xartum shook his head.
"How does Oliver expect us to find him if he's using an entire country as a map for his game of Hide and Seek?"

Naivara shrugged and turned to the rest of the group. "Any ideas?"

"Hey!" A voice echoed through the forest. "Hey, I need help!"

Quickly, the group glanced between each other, and with a nod, Xartum trotted in the direction of the voice. While the rest of the group was hot on his heels, Naivara took to the trees, leaping effortlessly from branch to branch like some kind of arboreal acrobat. Mid-jump, she pulled her bow off her shoulder and nocked an arrow, seemingly entirely on muscle memory.

She watched her companions carefully from above, and as they stopped, she kicked off the trunk of the tree she was in, allowed herself to drop slightly, and hooked her legs around a branch. Upside down, with her bow drawn, she surveyed the scene. A horseless cart on its side lay on the side of the road with a trembling gentleman standing before it. A spatter of blood coated the front of his robes, and he clutched his midsection gingerly. Muddy handprints covered the fabric covering over the cart, and a few yards to the side, at the edge of the forest, lay the horse- disemboweled and horrifically caked in mud.

"My family," the man wheezed. "My wife and daughter. They took my family."

Margo strode forward, the hand behind her back gently brushing the handle of her axe. "Who took them?"

"They rose out of the mud, attacked our cart, and took my family away!"

"Do you know who they were?" Her usually chipper voice, though still high pitched, radiated a seriousness her small frame seemed incapable of.

The man shook his head. "They weren't human. They were mud!"

Xartum sighed and stepped shoulder to shoulder with Margo. "Which way did they take your family?"

Shaking, the man pointed a bloodied hand toward the woods, beyond his dead horse.

"We'll find them."

**

"Why did we agree to do this, again?" Mikael frantically swiped some unknown web off his shoulder as the group trailed behind Xartum deeper into the forest. "Don't we have a mystery man to find?"

"Because it's the right thing to do." Xartum huffed out an icy cloud. "You saw him, what was that man supposed to do for his family in his state?"

"I fail to see how that's *our* problem." Mikael pooled a small flame in his hands absentmindedly. "And I repeat, we're supposed to be finding Oliver."

"And we will," Margo chimed in. "But first, what's the harm in finding that man's family for him?"

Mikael blinked a few times before answering. "They eviscerated a horse. What makes you think they won't do the same to us?"

"We don't even know what *they* are."

**"And that's somehow better?" Mikael's voice rose nearly a full octave.
"I'm appalled at your lack of self-preservation!"**

"Would you shut up?" Xartum's harsh whisper caused a halt in everyone's movement.

Merely a few yards ahead, inhuman laughter and canine yips and growls echoed from a stone outcropping in one of the foothills of the surrounding mountains. From nearly all directions, bipedal, mud-coated creatures trailed into the caved like ants into an anthill.

"I think we found them," Naivara whispered from the trees. "And we're very outnumbered."

25. Too Little Too Late

I stood in the center of Terranor's capital city, the buildings closing me in from every side. The white marble castle, constructed amongst the roots of the Life Tree, glaring and glittering in the sun. I sighed deeply as people bustled along the streets, into their homes, into shops, back and forth. I felt as though I had been turned to stone. Being around so many people- living people- after all these years, was far more overwhelming than I ever could have anticipated.

I felt a strange prickling behind my eyes as I watched a small group of children kick their ball back and forth in front of one of the houses, and my mind swam. Memories of throwing snowballs at my sister and Xartum slammed into my mind's eye and I nearly doubled over from the emotional weight.

"Now isn't the time, Oliver," I mumbled to myself. "You're here for a reason."

That reason, in truth, was quite hard to miss. Beyond the castle, a sickly green glow radiated like an acidic backdrop to the otherwise beautiful city. I ducked my head and headed toward it.

Dragons bless them, the people of Terranor were nice enough, although far too trusting. I received not even a second glance as I crossed the exquisite gardens of the castle, and circled around behind it. Given my history with magical barriers, I approached slowly, with black hellfire pooled in my right palm. Once entirely out of view, I casually lobbed the fire ball at the barrier. It passed through with ease, and sputtered out as it landed on the ground a few yards out.

I sat down on the ground and stared at the barrier. Everything about it screamed familiarity. I picked up a nearby rock and tossed it through. Nothing. A mild ringing in my ears sounded as I pulled the rock back to me. It lifted off the ground and hurtled back toward my hand but as it collided with the barrier, it bubbled, hissed, and melted.

"Ah," I chuckled. "There's the catch."

I stood and reached a hand toward the barrier just as I heard a hoarse, tired voice inside my skull. "You are not welcome here, Child of Death."

I felt a crawling sensation up the back of my neck and I smirked. "That's not very hospitable of you, Venak."

"These are hallowed grounds." His voice boomed in agitation. "The Forest of Souls shall remain untainted."

I heard myself chuckle. "Shall it?"

And then suddenly, my mind was soaring over the forest, making contact with other minds-one in the forest, and several somewhere off the coast.

Naivara notched three arrows from her vantage point in the tree, and peered down at the rest of her team as they slowly, silently, drew their weapons. With a silent nod, she released the three arrows in rapid succession, piercing the skulls of three creatures. As they fell, the rest of the group surged forward.

Margo and Xartum fought back to back, both swinging axes wide to cleave through the waves of muddy creatures. From Terra's outstretched hands grew long, animated vines lined in hooked thorns that snaked their way around the creatures before constricting like pythons. Streams of blood soaked into the ground as the thorns drank their fill.

Flames sparked to life in the hands of Mikael and Zeal. From Mikael, they flowed as though liquid, drenching the inhuman assailants in flame, while Zeal manifested her flames as needles that pierced and burned their targets. The odor of burning hair bloomed into a cloud of smoke that bled between the trees.

In scarcely a minute, a heap of corpses lay in front of the cave, some charred, some with blood dripping from their vaguely canine snouts, some in pieces, and some filled with holes. Upon closer inspection, the creatures resembled hyenas, though bipedal, and some even carried crude weapons in their mutated paws.

"What in the *hells* are these things?" Mikael cringed as he poked one with the butt of his spear.

Terra shrugged.

"They're gnolls," Naivara stated as she dropped gracefully from her tree. "Hyena-like creatures, twisted by demonic magic, driven by hunger and the need to serve their demonic master."

The group turned as a unit to stare at Naivara quizzically.

"How do you know that?"

Naivara furrowed her eyebrows. "I don't actually know. I just... knew that."

Xartum sighed. "We aren't going to find that man's family from out here. Shall we?"

With a round of reluctant nods, they made their way into the cave.

**

After hours of dead ended tunnels, the group found their way into a larger chamber of the cave. Firelight danced along the walls, and the shadows of gnolls rose and fell as they circled the perimeter of the cavern. The group backed into the tunnel they'd come from.

"We need a plan. We can't just go into this blindly." Xartum whispered to the group.

No sooner had the words left his lips, did a snarl echo down the tunnel behind them.

"That's not good." Naivara eyes flashed like a cat's in the light of a torch as she peered down the passageway. "He's a *big* one."

"We're trapped." Xartum shifted his grip on his axe.

"Maybe not," Terra murmured. "But we're going to have to do this *fast*."

"Do what-?"

With a slight snapping sound, a vine leapt from her hand and wrapped around the larger gnoll's throat. Its growl was, quite literally, drowned out by the sound of blood flooding its throat, as Terra yanked it forward. It stumbled, fell, and slid to their feet where the group wasted no time stabbing and hacking it to death. It died silently, the glaive it had been carrying falling to the rubble being the only sound out of the whole ordeal.

Mikael picked it up. "This looks fun."

"I'm surprised you can even lift it, Flame Boy." Xartum huffed. "That's useless in your hands. Give it to me."

"Hey," Margo chimed in. "I could use that too!"

"You have your axe."

"As do you!"

"I was who got him to us, I should take it." Terra pouted.

"Guys?" Naivara's voice barely registered to them as they bickered. She pulled an arrow from her quiver. "GUYS!"

As they turned their heads to her, she let her arrow fly. With a sickening plunk, it lodged into the eye socket of an approaching gnoll. As it fell, she launched herself forward, stepped on its shoulder and pushed off, shoving its corpse to the ground. While airborne, she released a hail of arrows onto the remaining gnolls in the cavern. As she landed, crouched on the ground, they fell.

While the rest of the group stared in awe, Naivara began pulling her arrows out of the bodies. "I need those back, thanks."

As the rest of the group surveyed the room, Margo gasped. "Oh no."

"What's wrong?" Xartum stepped toward her.

She pointed to a dimly lit section of cave. In a small heap laid two female bodies. A few yards to the left laid their heads.

26. Consequences

Terra slid with her back to the wall, onto the ground. "This is bad. This is so bad."

Xartum merely shook his head slowly. "If we'd been here just a minute sooner, they'd be alive."

Terra looked up to him with tears pooled in her eyes. "What do we tell that poor man? Do we take their bodies back to him? What do we do?"

"What about just their heads? That's the important part, right?" Mikael spoke up as he reached toward the hair of one of the women.

"Don't you fucking dare," Margo leapt between Mikael and the corpses. "That is *not* an option. We take their bodies, *and their heads*, back to him so he can give them a proper funeral."

Xartum nodded. "Agreed. That's not up for debate. We can't just leave him to wonder what happened to them."

The trek back through the woods was a precarious one. Margo and Xartum carried the bodies while Naivara lead from the trees. Mikael, Terra and Zeal trailed behind, with Mikael mumbling under his breath. Too soon, it seemed, they found themselves back at the road.

Xartum's apologies and sympathies came flowing out before the man was even within hearing distance, but as he approached, he saw the grisly scene in both Xartum and Margo's arms, and he stopped. He sank to his knees as tears streaked down his cheeks.

"No," he whispered at first, but with each slam of his fist into the earth, his cries grew louder until they felt to shake the silence of the forest and echo through the trees. After a few minutes, he collected himself slightly. "Please, if you could just lay them on what's left of the cart?"

Wordlessly, Margo and Xartum followed his instruction, setting the women down as gently as possible. Margo took a few steps back, and sniffled. "I'm so sorry, sir."

He nodded and placed one hand on her shoulder while the other rummaged inside his coat. He looked to her, gave a half-hearted smile, and with a hand too fast to track, pulled a small knife from his coat and slashed it across his own throat.

A collective gasp rose from the group and Margo lunged forward, clamping her hands over the wound on the man's throat. Blood spewed across her chest and bubbled between her fingers as she attempted to staunch the bleeding. "Somebody help!"

Terra ran forward, soft white glow emanating from her palms, as the man collapsed to his knees. All color had drained from his face, and his eyes rolled back, and Terra stopped. "I can't. It's too late."

Margo did not release the man. "You have to! This isn't right! Save him!"

Xartum placed a hand on her shoulder, his voice low and as soft as he could muster. "Margo, let him go. He's gone."

Hours passed as Terra opened a hole in the earth, and Xartum gently placed the family inside. Once she'd closed the small crater, she grew vines over it and whispered one final "I'm sorry" to the shallow grave beside the road.

"What do we do now?" Margo sighed shakily. "I feel like there's more we should do."

"Nothing," Xartum sat down beside her. "There isn't anything else we can do for them."

"This is all our fault."

It was Xartum's turn to sigh. "It is." He offered her a torn bit of canvas from the overturned cart. "If you want to clean the blood off-"

"Leave it." She ignored the cloth. "Let it remind me of my failure."

Xartum nodded. "I understand."

As silence settled around the group, a chill ran down Xartum's spine at the exact moment a booming whisper seemed to reverberate from every direction around them.

"Come find me."

**

I sank unceremoniously onto a stool at the tavern. I'd spent the majority of the day at the edge of the acid barrier, trying to find a way through, but Venak was a god –not an honorary one like the Maiden of Darkness- and his barrier proved far too powerful for even me to break. It was on my last attempt at overpowering the force field that the pain set in. A crawling, burning, seizure-inducing pain spread across my chest, and I watched as the shapeless black mark beneath the skin of my chest begin to writhe and spread.

That same dark chuckle shook my mind, and it sounded far too satisfied for my tastes. After I'd picked myself up off the ground, I stumbled my way to the tavern. "I'll have your strongest."

The barkeep, a round woman with shoulder length red hair, nodded and handed me a mug of some questionable tan liquid. I took a hearty swig, and did not register the burn as I swallowed. In seconds, my mug was empty. "Need another one?"

I nodded. "Please."

As she refilled my cup, she rested her elbows on the bar. "You drinking to stop feeling, or to feel something?"

"Honestly," I managed between gulps. "A little of both."

"It's truly a shame someone so young has been put through the ringer as badly as you seem to have been."

I snorted, with genuine laughter. "If you only knew the half of it."

She sat the bottle down on the counter and grinned. "I've got time. The name's Darla."

I knocked another mug back. "Oliver, but unfortunately I can't really get into much of it."

I was nine mugs in, and felt nothing.

"For as young as you are, you sure can drink!" Darla marveled. "Usually even the most rowdy of the guys around here can only handle three or four mugs of that stuff."

"I need something stronger than this, apparently."

"Careful what you wish for."

"You have something stronger than this and you've been holding out on me?" I chuckled lightly.

"Actually," she glanced around nervously. "Yes, but if anyone found out I had it, I'd be hanged for it."

I leaned forward across the counter, and my vision distorted a bit. Maybe I felt a tiny bit more than nothing. "I'm listening."

She sighed. "Have you ever heard of Moon Dust?"

I shook my head.

"It's a relatively new substance that's been making its way around some of the less desirable magic circles. Apparently, in addition to the intoxication that lasts for hours, it also majorly enhances magic power."

"That sounds perfect."

"It is, however, astronomically expensive, and insanely addicting. It's definitely going to cost you, in more ways than one."

I smirked, and felt the trail of her mind in the air. Or you could just give it to me.

27. Tree of Life

Naivara leading them, the team trekked their way along the winding road to the south. Multiple times, she'd been asked how she knew where she was going and multiple times, she'd given the same answer. She simply shrugged and kept walking. The closer to civilization they got, the more her brained seemed to itch, and the more she felt they were on the right track.

Terra slowed her pace as the beginnings of a city came into view. She could place neither how nor why, but she felt a heaviness in her chest the more the city came into view; as though she once knew this place, and no longer belonged.

As the trees parted, and the horizon unfolded, the group stopped. Audible gasps wafted from their small gathering and disappeared into the tree line like smoke from a blown-out candle. The city sprawled out below them in irregular rows of houses and shops and otherwise unidentifiable buildings, and at the southernmost point, a castle of shimmering white stone, constructed beneath and into the exposed roots of a towering tree.

"The Life Tree," Terra whispered to no one but the forest. "Welcome to Crann Bethadh."

"Bless you," Mikael quipped.

"It roughly translates to 'tree of life', in the native tongue of this place, long before Pentamros was settled." Terra's gaze did not leave that tree.

Naivara nodded. "Legend has it, it's stood here longer than people have stood on this continent."

Xartum glanced frantically between the two of them. "How do you guys know that?"

Terra spoke as though her tongue was made of stone while a tear rolled down her left cheek. "It just... came back to me."

"As in your memories came back?!" Xartum's eyes went wide.

Terra shook her head. "No, just that one."

He nodded with a grunt. "Shall we then?"

The cobblestone streets felt familiar beneath Terra's feet, and she put her hood up as a reflex. Every nerve in her body was on high alert, chanting a constant mantra not to be recognized. Deep in her chest, she had the sinking feeling of being home, but no longer able to recognize it, and her heart ached to remember. But she didn't.

"Now, if I was a fugitive necromancer, where would I go?" Mikael said none-too-quietly. "The inn maybe? You know, to sleep in an actual bed for once?"

"First, quieter, idiot." Naivara covered his mouth with her hand leaving a smear of mud and greases on his face. "That's not something you

should just go screaming for the world to hear. Second, have you seen that guy? That's a 'man on a mission' if I've ever seen one; I severely doubt he's resting."

"Tavern, maybe?" Xartum offered, eyeing a quaint establishment called The Stone Mug.

"We asked where Oliver would go, not where you would." Zeal slapped her hand over her mouth as the words left it.

"I think I know where he is," Terra pointed to the sickly green veil that seemed to cover the entire world behind the castle. "Has a bit of a history with barriers, doesn't he?"

"He's had almost two days as a head start," Margo's shrill voice cut through the conversation like her axe through the gnolls. "Why would it still be standing if that were the case?"

"Maybe he's still trying?" Zeal shrugged.

"Follow up point, what's behind that barrier that would motivate him to tear it down, anyway?"

"Power," Terra whispered.

"He doesn't have enough?" Mikael rolled his eyes. "The man sank an entire island into the fucking ocean."

Xartum smirked. "That was the most impressive thing I've ever seen; I have to admit."

"Yes," Mikael scoffed. "With your whole four days' worth of memories."

"Could *you* sink an island, asshole?"

Mikael kicked at one of the loose cobblestones. "Probably with the right motivation."

"Oh? Escaping an island with a giant undead cat thing that wanted to eat us wasn't enough motivation for you?" Xartum laughed. "Listen man, I've seen the magic that comes out of your fingers also come out of a tinderbox, so I don't think comparing yourself to Oliver is fair to either of you."

"When you two are done comparing dick sizes with Oliver, we should probably get a move on." Margo rolled her eyes and made for the tavern.

"I thought you said no to the tavern," Xartum huffed.

"Nobody said no to it," Margo did not turn around. "Zeal just took a jab at you about it, is all."

The rush that overtook my senses was like nothing I had ever felt. The inside of my skull felt icy, as though I had inhaled snow that could not melt. As the edges of my vision blurred, I glanced down at my clothes that felt two sizes too tight, and that is when I noticed the black, moving mass beneath my skin. I had seen it before, more than once, but before the teleportation spell that brought us to the main continent, it had never stayed visible after I stopped dipping into more power than I should have been. Though I did also notice, the more frozen my sinuses felt, the

more the edges of the black mass seemed to fade and shrink and contort. It retracted from the rest of my chest and came to rest as a mere coin-sized speck at the center of my sternum- the exact place my soul had left my body.

I sighed and exited the back room of The Stone Mug just as the people I had left behind in the woods entered.

"Excuse me, ma'am," I heard Xartum ask Darla. "Have you happened to see a boy about this high, with black hair, and pretty purp- I mean purple eyes?"

I released my hold on Darla's mind as she opened her mouth to respond. "A-actually yes, I have. He damn near drank my kegs dry."

"And where did he go after he left here?" Xartums silver scales were tinted pink across his cheeks.

"He didn't leave." She gestured to me.

I waved. "Grab a table, we have a lot to discuss."

28. Forest of Souls

"I'm sure you've seen the barrier behind the castle by now so I won't waste time by telling you it's there," I sat down at a table in the corner of the tavern across from Xartum, and the rest of the group situated around me. "I have good and bad news regarding that. Second, do any of you know what the Grand Trials are?"

Terra's hand shot up quickly, hesitated, and lowered. "It rings a bell, and it's like it's on the tip of my tongue, but I just can't force the words out."

I nodded. "I'm not surprised. They're kind of a huge deal. Legend has it, after the Dragon War, the gods divided themselves into different corners of Pentamros to rest and recover from their battles with Abraxas. It's said what remains of their power is bound within these specific areas of the continent, lying in wait to rise again should the need arise."

"And this means precisely what for us?" Mikael eyed me warily.

"That means that power is just sitting out there, able to be collected."

"Why in the seven hells do we need god power?"

I sighed. "Given that you've all had your memories stolen from you, I doubt you can recall, but Pentamros is in disarray. It has been for a very

long time. Take you lot for example. You found yourself marooned on an island intended to drive you mad, kill you, and siphon what was left of you to fuel that misery for the next group. Do any of you know why that is?"

The group glanced back and forth between each other. Until Xartum shrugged. "We don't."

"And with you having no memories of the how or the why, has the thought occurred to any of you that you were put there without a trial- or even with anyone knowing what happened to you?"

Xartum opened his mouth to speak and quickly closed it again.

"Then there's me. I didn't get a trial. I got an execution. And when that didn't stick..." I trailed off. "The point is, from what I've seen, there isn't a corner of this Dragon forsaken continent that hasn't been twisted and corrupted, and you can't start a revolution without power."

"You- that's your goal here?" Naivara sat slack-jawed. "A coup?!"

"You can't be serious." Mikael laughed humorlessly. "Do you have any idea how insane that is?"

"I know how it sounds. Deposing one monarch seems like an impossible feat, and Pentamros has five."

"It's a suicide mission." Mikael rolled his eyes. "This sounds like the daydream of a child that reads too many stories of heroes."

My fist hit the hardwood table, black hellfire licking the surface, leaving jagged scorch marks in their wake. "What happened to me should *never* happen to another child. Maybe this world needs more heroes and less complacent cowards."

Mikael swallowed hard, eyes not leaving my right hand even after the dark flames had sputtered out. "What actually happened to you?"

"All you need to know for now is that the failed execution was the pleasant part," I breathed as I stood to leave.

Xartum hurried to his feet and caught my wrist. "Hey, wait."

His scales felt cold against my skin- much colder than they'd been that night on the docks all those years ago. Despite that, lightning crackled through my stomach with such a familiarity that I could not decipher if it was because of the drugs, or the overwhelming sense of home. I watched my vision blur and it was not until Xartum's grey eyes softened did I notice the tear running down my cheek.

"Hey," he said, much softer. "You're okay. Everything is okay. Whatever happened, it's in the past, yeah?"

Without thinking, I stood on my toes and patted his cheek, my thumb tracing the scales below his eye, just like I had the last time I saw him. "If only that were true."

His eyes widened ever so slightly, and his pupils narrowed for a fraction of a second, like his mind was trying, begging to remember. Instead, he stepped back from me and scratched at the back of his neck.

I cleared my throat and gestured to the door. "Right. Shall we?"

**

The barrier behind the castle had not changed in the slightest in the hours I'd spent away from it. Should the legends be believed, that barrier had remained unchanged for centuries. I intended to change that. Its sickly green glow stood as a monument to the emptiness I'd felt from Venak, and I wanted nothing more than to watch it shatter as my innocence had when the gods had abandoned me on that stone table.

"So," Naivara eyed the forest beyond the dome. "Does anyone know what inhabits that forest?"

"Some people say the souls of the people who died in the Dragon War reside within the trees in there. That's why it's called the Forest of Souls." Terra furrowed her brow as the words spilled out of her mouth seemingly on their own. She cleared her throat. "Not the most creative name in the world, but it gets the point across."

"With the castle sitting so close to the barrier, I wonder if the royals would know more." Zeal's tail pointed toward the castle for her. "We could always request an aud-"

"NO!" Terra cut her off. "No. Absolutely not. I don't know why, but everything in me feels like that is a horrible idea."

"So, the good news I mentioned earlier is that should you collect the piece of Venak within that forest, the barrier should come down, and you'll be able to leave."

"Wait," Margo turned her attention toward me. "What if we don't?"

"Once you're in, there's no coming out without that piece of Him."

"Lovely."

"I noticed you're saying 'you' and not 'we', as well." Mikael raised an eyebrow.

"I can't go with you. Like I physically can't. Venak won't let me. I tried before you guys got into town."

"That's convenient." He rolled his eyes.

**"This barrier has existed since right after the Dragon War, right?"
Xartum asked.**

I nodded.

**"So, the fact that it's still up means nobody in over a thousand years
has ever successfully completed it."**

I nodded again.

"That does not bode well for us."

**"My body can't enter, but my mind can." I sat down on the grass. "I
can do quite a bit with that. I'll cover you as best I can, but it's called a
Grand Trial for a reason. They're meant to test you, so even with my
help, nothing about this will be easy."**

**As they stepped through the barrier, static hung heavily in the air and
my stomach churned. It became painfully clear to me at that moment
that I had very possibly sent these people to their deaths.**

**Once all of them were through, I heard myself whisper, "don't you die
on me."**

**I watched them silently survey their surroundings on the other side of
that acid green glow before Naivara turned around to me again. I
watched her remove her hermit crab from her pocket and send it back
toward me, and before I realized what she intended, it touched the inside
of the barrier.**

**Naivara's eyes widened in horror as the fist-sized crustacean melted
into a puddle of green goo, and the look on the entire group's face was
unmistakable. Realization had clearly set in for them that there was no
longer an option to turn back.**

29. (WIP)

The forest swallowed them.

Mere feet from the barrier, the untouched woods engulfed their small party in trees that were centuries thick, dense vines that hung down from the canopy and grazed their shoulders roughly as they passed underneath. Dark, fertile soil squashed beneath their boots and sunk more than a few inches with their body weights and sprouted small plants and flowers the likes of which Pentamros had not seen in a millennia.

Most notably, though, was the deafening wall of sound that washed over them. Frogs, cicadas, birds, and other animals they could not identify sang in an ear splitting symphony; either unaware, or unbothered by their home being invaded by the group of adventurers.

Naivara held her hands over her long pointed ears. “What a welcoming party.”

Margo shrugged. “They haven’t had visitors since the Dragon War. I doubt they know how to be afraid of us.”

Both Naivara and Terra’s eyes lit up at the statement.

Hours later, as the sun peaked in the sky, they stopped to catch their breath.

“This is stupid,” Mikael groaned, rubbing his aching feet. “How are we supposed to find this shard of Venak in a forest this big when we have nothing to go on? No direction. No landmarks. Nothing.”

Xartum plopped down, fiddling with the small purple stone in his pocket. "There has to be something we're missing, some clue we aren't seeing. What do we know so far?"

Terra kept a list. "We know that Venak's power supposedly fell here and created this acid bubble thing we're all stuck in. We know that the only way out is by finding said power and using it to bring the barrier down. And we know that if we touch the inside of the bubble, we melt. Rest in Peace, Hermann."

Naivara folded her hands as if in prayer.

"Okay, and in terms of domes, we know about the one on the Isle of Salt, right?" Zeal spoke up. "The one that was being maintained by that giant rotten cat thing?"

Xartum nodded. "And killing the cat exposed the power source."

Margo hefted her battleaxe onto her shoulder. "So do we need to kill something?"

"Easy, Killer," Xartum held his hand up. "No. I'm saying that it's possible, in fact, it's highly probable that the shard of Venak is hidden pretty damn well. Otherwise someone would have already found it by now. Plus, I'm also saying that it could mean the barrier is not centered around the shard, either. It could be mobile. We don't even have a clue how big or small the thing is."

"Needle in a haystack." Mikael groaned again. "Just lovely."

"I wish Oliver was with us," Terra mumbled.

Mikael scoffed. "Why would that matter? He doesn't have any more of a clue than we do. Hells, if we don't find this damn shard, the asshole basically just sent us here to die!"

“That’s not fair,” Margo chimed in. “It was pretty clear he wouldn’t have even enlisted us if he didn’t have to. He physically can’t cross the barrier. There isn’t much he can do about that.”

Xartum nodded, “and he didn’t leave us totally alone.” He pulled out the purple stone. “Clearly some part of him now resides inside of this thing. Maybe it's useful.”

The black wisp of smoke trapped within the stone writhed like a serpent as it pressed itself against the confines of its prison. As they watched, the wisp only pressed against one side of the stone. Rotating it, the wisp would move, and press itself in the same direction it had been previously facing- behind them.

“It’s trying to get back to him.” It was Terra who spoke so quietly she may as well have thought it. “May I?” She held out her hand to it.

The second her fingers grazed it, her mind plunged into darkness. Screams of agony echoed inside of her skull, as fragmented pictures flashed before her unseeing eyes. Blood, smooth stone walls, pleas for mercy, rapidly morphed into dry, cracked earth bathed in red light. She withdrew her hand with a gasp.

“What happened?” Xartum pulled the amethyst further from her reach.

”I just,” she stammered. “I thought I saw... I don’t know. It was too broken to really decipher, but I think it’s a safe assumption that our friend the necromancer has been through some pretty horrific stuff.”

“You don’t say?” Mikael rolled his eyes. “Even without memories, I think all of us are aware of how illegal necromancy is. It’s amazing he’s alive at all since it’s usually straight to execution, as far as I know.”

Margo shook her head. “You saw how powerful he is. He outright told you the gallows couldn’t hold him. An entire prison island couldn’t hold him.”

“It held him for a year before we arrived.”

“Sure,” Xartum reasoned, “But what did we even actually do? The killing blow on that cat was his, fusing with this rock was all him, even the blood magic to bring the barrier down as the island sank was all his doing. We just held him upright until he finished transporting us here.”

“Excuse you, was it you that cuddled him all night to keep him from going hypothermic?” Mikael stood. “No, that’s right, that was me. And if not for Terra, he’d have choked to death on his own vomit and mouth-foam. The way I see it, he needs us, sure, but we don’t need him.”

Zeal held up a finger. “Actually, aside from him figuring out a way, I don’t see another option for getting our memories back. Also, isn’t it a little late to be having this argument? We’re already in this barrier and the only way out is to finish the job.”

Mikael jumped onto a large fallen log, “a job we have no idea how to finish! The only thing we have are legends, and a rock that is just a glorified compass to a necromancer. A necromancer! Terra, I don’t know what kind of sob story you saw, but how do you know he didn’t plant it to garner your sympathy? And *you*,” he turned to Xartum. “You may think he’s pretty, but you’re clearly dragon-born, albeit distantly. You should know better than *anyone* how dangerous dark magic is.”

Terra said “you can’t fake pain like that,” at the same time Xartum shouted “there’s no way it’s that black-and-white!”

Naivara tilted her head. “Even using you as an example, your fire magic could easily immolate someone. Terra can poison them with her plants, or crush them in stone. Any magic could be used to kill or torture or grievously harm people.”

“You’re right, it’s not totally black and white.” Mikael conceded. “Magic doesn’t have its own morality. But magic comes from the Dragons and

the magic that Oliver wields is Abraxas's domain. An entire war was fought between them all to keep him from becoming too powerful, and he corrupted and influenced the users of said magic, so what makes you all naive enough to believe that he isn't doing the same to Oliver?"

As Mikael's rant died down, so did the rest of the Forest of Souls. The insects and amphibians stopped singing. The birds stopped fluttering between branches. Even the wet sounds of mud beneath boots seemed to become muted. Margo and Xartum drew their axes. Naivara notched two arrows.

Xartum silently signaled Naivara to gain high ground, and with the slightest nod of her head- and exactly zero sound- ran up the trunk of a tree and perched herself in a branch. The rest of the group fanned out quietly, as heavy, ground-shaking footfalls approached them slowly.

Naivara, from her vantage point, saw them first. House-sized quadrupedal lizards, moving on legs as thick as tree trunks, with horns protruding from their heads advanced toward their position in the forest. Each footfall of the reptiles sent up flurries of tiny blue-white spheres from the surrounding trees and lower vegetation. Massive clouds of steam rose from the creatures' nostrils and encased the glowing spheres in shimmering clouds as they danced along the unnatural breeze. The reptiles' herd was eight in total, some adults and some much smaller- the size of large dire wolves- but the clouds of orbs had numbers in the hundreds.

Naivara peered down at her group with wide eyes and shook her head hurriedly.

Xartum, being the tallest of the ground, saw them next. His eyes widened, the scales along his eyebrows stretched taut, and he took a step backward as he slightly lowered his axe. This was not a fight they wanted to engage in, because it was a fight they had no hope of winning. His eyes darted back and forth, desperately seeking a safe route around

and away from the giant lizards, as they came into view of the rest of the group.

“Fuuuuuck,” Mikael breathed.

“They’re stirring up the souls,” Terra whispered as she pointed at the dancing lights. “But they’re rooting through the underbrush, not sniffing us out. Could they be herbivores?”

“With as big as they are, I don’t think it matters. They can just smash us.” Margo’s axe did not waiver, still prepared to defend even if it was futile.

Xartum nodded toward the herd, “and they have young. Even otherwise peaceful animals can become violent when they’re defending their young- like the caribou in Aguandi.”

“Remind me later to ask you about that when we’re not this close to freaking dinosaurs!” Terra whispered. “I just can’t believe they’ve been here all this time. I thought they went extinct ages ago.”

“Everywhere else, maybe,” Zeal mumbled. “But all the legends say this forest hasn’t been touched by time at all in at least a thousand years.”

“That’s all well, and good, and awe-inspiring, and all, but can we please focus on the more pressing issue of our own survival?” Mikael retorted. “We need to move. South seems smartest to me, but that requires passing beside those things. Going around puts us in a swamp full of Dragons-only-know-what in terms of creatures, and parasites, and diseases. If dinosaurs still exist within this dome, the possibilities are endless.”

And yet, none of them moved- transfixed by the once-in-a-lifetime sight before them. Only when one of the smallest dinosaurs nudged Xartum’s pocket with its snout did any of them move a muscle. Seemingly of its own accord, Xartum’s hand found its way into the pocket and pulled out the small, smooth amethyst.

The tiny triceratops nosed the stone and the air popped like a balloon for the briefest of moments. The floating, dancing souls parted and the reptile's eyes flashed purple. In fact, the entire herd's eyes glowed, and without a second's hesitation, they all turned in unison and lumbered back the way they had come. The smallest one turned back after a few heavy steps and held eye contact with Xartum before following the rest of the herd back through the forest.

"And now we're following dinosaurs that a necromancer is remotely possessing," Mikael scoffed at regular volume. "Totally not alarming at all."

Miles and hours, the herd of lizards led them through the forest. Thick green snakes hung from vines in the trees and watched them curiously, but nothing - save for the occasional tripping vine underfoot- impeded their journey. As the sun sank low and the sky bled orange, the dinosaurs stopped in a large clearing, blinked the purple haze from their eyes, and began grazing idly on the crisp green grasses of the clearing.

Terra sat on a log and Naivara joined her.

"I think we're pretty much at the southern tip of Terranor now," Naivara said, eyes closed and ears twitching. "I can hear the ocean."

"I can see the ocean." Xartum, who had ventured a little further toward the southern edge of the clearing pointed out between the now-sparse tree line.

As they watched, a wave that should have crested the cliff side, instead slammed into a mostly-transparent, green tinted wall on the horizon.

“If we’ve hit the southernmost point of Terranor,” Naivara said as she and Mikael started a campfire. “We’ve covered more than 20 miles, which seems like a lot for one day.”

“Time flows differently here.” Terra’s eyes drifted along the treetops, into the key. “I can feel it. Whatever this magic is, it doesn’t obey the temporal laws we do everywhere else. I wonder if all the trials feel like this.”

Mikael scoffed. “I have a feeling we’re going to find out. If we manage to survive this one, I mean.”

“We will.” Xartum said over his shoulder from his position closer to the cliff’s edge.

“It pains me, truly, to admit envy,” Mikael sighed. “But I am jealous of your confidence.”

“It isn’t in myself,” Xartum shrugged.

“Ah, of course. It’s Oliver you’re putting all your faith in.” He shook his head. “Isn’t there a saying about not putting all your eggs in one basket?”

“We’re a bit scarce on other options, but I understand your apprehension. Someone that is already that powerful trying to amass even more power to apparently overthrow an empire, makes you wonder what kind of change that coup would cause- good or bad.”

“And how many people will die in the crossfire?” Zeal hung her head, exhausted from their hiking.

Mikael nodded. “None of the Sector rulers will just roll over and allow an insurrection, and that says nothing of the High King. There will be war, and war has casualties.”

“The coup isn’t the hard part,” Terra didn’t meet any of their gazes. “That part is easy. Keeping everything from falling into chaos and ruin afterward is the hard part.”

“Terranor seemed to do okay.” Naivara said absentmindedly.

Terra’s head turned toward Naivara so fast that the vertebrae in her neck popped. “What did you say?”

Naivara tilted her head, trying to remember details. “Oh, I just mean that I remembered, like just now, that Terranor had its own coup not too long ago. I don’t remember too much, but I think the princess conspired with Slate Ironmoor, her uncle, to kill the rest of the royal family so Slate could usurp the throne.”

“Wouldn’t the princess be the sole heir, if she survived?” Mikael was enlarging and reducing their campfire with flexes of his hand.

Naivara nodded. “She should have been, but I don’t remember what happened to her.”

Terra felt bile rise in her throat. “She was on the run- wanted for treason.”
