

Prologue

Ash covered the face of the earth, dark and fallen like a sick snow that had been tainted before reaching the souls below. The sounds of choking surrounded him, their lungs gasping, their hands clawing at the ground and their throats as that ash filled their lungs, searing them from the inside. The colorless hand of the ash drawing those to their meeting with the reaper, Todander, who moved without form across the fields covered in his work.

Nauren's eyes shook, his body heavy and seeping out the very elixir that kept him alive. That liquid creating a river behind him as he pushed with his right arm hanging lifeless itself. His feet trudged, stepping over bodies of friend and foe, equal in the eyes of whoever saw them.

He had to live, to live.

There was much he still needed to do, there was much he didn't get to do. Flashes, executions, fire, breakouts. It all needed to change, it all needed to be fixed.

And yet, his body failed him. His legs dropped from under him, his hands gripping at the ground as pain seared through his body and up his spine. Cuts, bruises, broken bones, and torn sinew. He clawed at both earth and life as his form mingled with those who long left this world, whose spark had been snuffed out before him.

It had all gone so well at first everything had been working, and then it had changed. The sky had grown dark, the earth had ruptured from under them with the world being thrown every which way. The fire had dropped from the sky, falling like the cannon balls

of the human's, shattering the ground around its landing and twisting the forms of all without discrimination.

Why had this happened, why had hell been brought upon their earth, with rivers of crimson being drained onto the field under him, the earth soft and the mud beneath him wet with the life of others?

He had to get up and get out, he had to push over the burned and lost souls before him, his body pushing on its three limbs, his face reaching towards the air above him that was filled and tainted with that ash and the smell of flesh seared by the fire that had rained down on them.

His feet dragged him forward a few more meters before his body once more fell to the ground and his legs quit under him, torn too greatly to support the weight that they bared. His hand dizzily reached out, clawing at limbs, torsos, heads, and even the blood-soaked and stained ground under him as the life of this world mixed with that which was at one time inside his own body. Staining his body and clothing as he clawed ever longer.

He soon found the light of the world fading, though, his breath slowing and his hand unable to move anymore. He found the ash covering his form as he laid there now, barely twitching as he tried to cry out in a voice that made no sound. He pleaded for someone to come for him, for this all to have stopped, but his voice made not a squeak. Instead, his vision grew dark as he stared, seeing the light fade from around him and feeling his body finally grow too heavy to move.

He knew what would come next, he knew this was where things ended and yet his mind still tried to claw at a shred of hope while he lay there dying.

He had failed.

He had lost.

And now, he would die without ever saving anyone. He would lose everything he had worked to reclaim and he would be left in the end with this loss, this ending, this tragedy.

Why had he deserved this, why had he been given this chance to simply die? Why was he a weak shell that hadn't even achieved the simplest of his desires?

He stared at that dark world that now greeted him and thought about one name, one word that he had wanted to defend without failure. And yet that was what had happened, he had failed. After everything that had come to happen, he had failed.

So his mind offered one last apology.

'I'm sorry.'

Chapter 1

The dream was there again, that hellscape that he was brought to night after night. He didn't understand why or what he was dreaming about but it was always the same, always the same ending and always the same place.

And now it was time to rise for the day.

He hated the morning light, it was such a pain to him and the flooding of it through an open window was enough to elicit a groan from him. If there was one thing he hated it was that damnable morning light that thought it would simply break through the morning clouds.

His complaints would be silent, though, never forming into verbal words as he simply found himself opening his eyes to the ceiling above and staring at it. Far above him and out of reach, almost like the sky outside and yet much closer and far more tangible.

Its color like the rest of the room, the rest of the palace itself actually. Golden etching in marble columns, reaching up and crawling over that far off ceiling, like vines that finally found the flowers and mosaics above him. They were artistic renditions of the past, glorifying his ancestors and the years that had found their passing over the many centuries.

He hated them.

With another groan, his eyes drew themselves from that inferno ceiling, that tapestry of the past etched in stone and gold. It

was a pain to see every morning, an annoyance that could not simply be put down by ignoring it, and the rest of the room was far from different.

For nearly fifty years he had been in this room, or in the many of others of the palace, he called home. The loss of every other soul had left him to be the only survivor and as far back as he could remember, that was how he had come to live. He hated this place after that night, that night that the golden walls and bright tapestries had caught and burned those alive within the restrictive walls.

He was left alone with only Yusanis to be there for him. The man had become Lord General and Nauren the young elven king, who was no more than a hundred years of age. He was centuries younger than most of the nobles, than Yusanis himself.

That thought vanished as he looked towards the window again, leaning up and pushing his hand behind him to act as a support. He was already groaning about the day and it hadn't even started. The action was something that he had been told to avoid over and over again, and yet it still felt natural.

I just want out of this cell of a palace.

Even now as he began to rise, the familiar voice of his caretaker sounded. The man was a few centuries older, his hair already white though not from color itself and age instead. His ears poked slightly out of the short hair that sat on his head and his eyes stared into Nauren's own.

That was how it had been for the last fifty years, after all, this same way, this same exact morning.

“Are you ready to rise, you are already late Lord Oricion.” His voice sounded, as wizened and experienced as always. It held no haste to it, no hint of worry or urging. Just the simple inquisitive ring it always had.

“Yes yes. I'm sure I've kept him waiting long enough... can you find some way though to get rid of that infernal sunlight problem?” Nauren’s own voice sounding in a groggy, tired, and irritated form.

“Not unless you plan for me to block out the light of the sun myself sire, which might I add would be quite difficult?” The older man looked at Nauren with eyes no different than his voice, though the tone had switched to a bit more condescending in nature.

“And here I thought you could do anything Thuros. Yes, darker blinds would be appreciated.” Nauren simply responded before dragging himself off the bed and towards the washroom.

Thuros was ever the same, as old and as quick as he had been the day he had been left alone in this world. Fifty years passed after that night and he was the closest thing Nauren could compare to as a parent, him and the man that saved him from meeting the same fate as his parents and siblings. After all, when you are left with nothing, you need someone there to provide that support that others cannot.

And that was ever more true for a child who had been thrust into the place of a king.

“Thuros, I also need you to talk to Yusanis for me, I've not heard about the recent results of the campaign against the humans

for several days now.” His hands moved to clean his face while he talked with Thuros who was no doubt cleaning the bed he had been sleeping in.

“Of course sire. Is there anything else you require of me before I head to do so?” He responded.

Nauren had to think for a few moments before shaking his head to himself. “No, that is all.”

With that, he was left to be and his hands worked to clean his features while he thought about the current state of things. Over the last fifty years, his place had gone from a prince with no duties to someone who had to think about the state of their empire every day. Of course, he could delegate all of that to his retainers, advisors, and generals, but that would have ultimately been lazy and left room for power gains like what had put him in this situation in the first place.

With the war against those humans to the south reaching a new resurgence, It threatened the lives of many elves that were near the border and he had to focus his mind on that. Then there were the rebellious acts of those not caught in their attempts at killing those of noble birth, one such punishment being carried out later this day for twelve such assailants including one of their leaders for threatening the life of a rather detestable older noble.

Nauren was sure he had it coming to him but that was not the point. Raising your blade against your betters invited death and if there was one thing different between the lower people and those who were the pinnacle of society, it was their blood. He and the nobles were born into their standing as decided by the gods above,

and the lower rungs of society needed to realize their place or be stamped out.

That was just how it was supposed to be.

His hands worked to push back the hair that hung in his face, keeping it out of the way for a few moments before bringing it back and over his ears. The brown, chestnut colored strands weren't overly long, not like some styles in the elven culture, but it was in no way short either. Stuck in that middle ground, something he preferred when the temperature dropped during the long winters.

Once done he pushed out of the washroom and started towards the door. Thuros should have relayed his message by now and all that was required of Nauren would be his appearance at the execution of those traitors. It left him with plenty of time to go over his own studies that he had taken up, choosing to spend the time he did have as free time by way of book or blade. It was a rather common thing for nobles to verse themselves in both, but unlike those who oversaw so little, he had so much more to worry about that he could not spend so much time around the two practices. But he belonged in this position, and the others belonged in theirs, some forgot that, though.

His head turned as a body collided into his and he found himself staring at a tray that had fallen to the ground and a new spot on his clothing that had been dampened by the cup that had once been on that tray. Wordless was his response to the woman with red hair who had been walking with the tray, only a quick motion to the guards nearby to come deal with her while he walked away, ignoring the sounds that erupted from the scene he was not concerned with anymore.

Sometimes there was a pain of guilt, and sometimes he felt wrongdoing as he had been taught. But he was someone of a higher standing and he had more important things to worry about than the fate of a servant who does not know her place and would impede the progress of his day.

His eyes turned back for a moment as he halted, the sounds vanishing as she was brought away from the hall.

'Hmm...' His thoughts were to himself as he stood there, looking at the place where she had ran into him. He was sure that she would be released after a quick punishment had been given out, lashes most likely considering her crime.

His head shook and he continued on, the parade of the condemned would begin soon, and with it the signal of the execution to come while those set for the rope are moved down the streets of the capital until brought to the courtyard of the palace itself.

But first, he had Yusanis to talk to.

With that thought his body moved through the doors that led into the war room. It wasn't much to look at, mostly adorned with maps of the various regions under their control and a much larger map displayed across a central table, used to give an overarching view of the continent as a whole and to show the current positions of their troops and the suspected ones of their enemies.

And over this larger map was the man that Nauren had been looking for.

Yusanis was a man of middle age, his hair red but with its color fading and some strands turned grey by age and his position. Elves could not rely on their youth forever and this man before him was a shining example of that, what with still half his life before him and yet he seemed to be in his later three hundreds.

Unlike humans, they lived to be five times longer, and that gave them what was a suitable body for far longer. But even they suffered the scars of battle and stress in the same as that inferior race.

“Yusanis, take a break before you die on that table. I swear this has become a cell for you these days. Don’t you have an heir that can take over for you in your old age?” He smiled as he looked at the man who was more or less his own father now. Receiving a quick look that showed a bit of the humor touching the man.

“And do you not have a chair to sit in and look important my lord, or did you come to grace me with your appearance out of curiosity again?” The man may have given a response to match his own, but the humor fell soon after as he returned his eyes to the map with a hand coming to his chin.

Nauren’s eyes dropped to look over the map before him, and to most it was a simple map of the known world. The water that fell for the top of the world, cutting through the singular landmass they called home before leading into the only sea they knew of. It was they only world they knew, a world that stretched out from that singular cradle of life before reaching an endless desert.

And trapped in that cradle of life, was two creatures who never found themselves capable of coexistence. It was a simple

hatred, each wanting more land and the other not wishing to give up what they wanted.

Those that they had captured in the past called it their human nature... to him it was disgusting. He was sickened by those creature's comparing themselves to their superiors. Something felt wrong when they compared themselves to him without malice.

A swift lash or strike from a hammer silenced them without fail, the crimson staining the floor around them or even splattering on him if the vile creatures were too close.

His breath was released in a sigh as he looked towards the older man once more. "You know..." His voice started, casting aside the silent air. "There need be a cleaner way to deal with those captives you keep bringing in front of me. Their vile innards keep staining the floors..."

He left out that he felt disgusted when they died, knowing that he should feel nothing for creatures like this. After all, if he mentioned those things he knew the scolding he would get as he was suppose to be above the station of someone who is weak to the sight of such. If he could he would delay the later festivities in order to avoid seeing more of it, but those on the block we're important state criminals.

"We can discuss this after your schedule has been dealt with and the night has come. Your complaints are a bit childish as the servants clean it of them anyways. Steel your heart or remain silent." His voice was sharp, stern. As always.

His voice was lost in his throat as he heard the words and just turned his eyes down. The man was right, as he always was. He

felt off but in the end the man's words were always council that he could not ignore. It would be useless to argue and with a single bow Nauren found his body leaving the room before closing the door.

Only then had he noticed his breath was being held, had he figured out that he needed to breath and breath he did as he stood there with his back to the door. The day would not be a long one and the most eventful thing would be the sentencing and execution of those state criminals, who were still being marched about outside.

Chapter 2

The day after meeting with Yusanis had been slower than he would have thought, minutes feeling like hours as he moved about the palace complex with his eyes idly moving around to find targets of his focus. It moved from servants to guards, eyes peering down on those around him and he couldn't help but turn his head and focus in on those who he passed.

He was certain that they were drones, following orders without a thought of their own. He had trusted Yusanis to ensure that the guards and that those who worked here did so out of complete and utter loyalty, that those who failed in their purpose understood that but would be allowed to redeem themselves in other ways. It was but a duty of theirs to serve their leaders.

People were after all toys of their will, there were leaders and there were followers. And those drones were nothing more than tools in concern to their abilities to think when not being ordered.

One must shut out the thoughts and concerns of those below them in order to succeed as a leader in this world of theirs. They must look down and lead from a protected location, to stay safe and to be the brain for the mindless mob. They instinctively wanted to bow and follow a leader, it was their nature.

That thought brought him to a stop, looking down out of a window and looking down at one person far below. It was a garden that he looked at and in it a man hunched over a sapphire blue flower, his hand barely touching the petals that softly glowed and Nauren couldn't pull his eyes away.

This man was dark of hair, brown in color but almost looking black due to his place in the shade of a wall, with clothes that seemed otherworldly. His clothing was not anything that he had ever seen, but that shirt was barely visible under a dark brown over shirt that was separated down the middle, a shirt that was not connected and seemed to be slung over his arms and shoulders.

He was someone Nauren had never seen and as he stood there out of interest and curiosity, the man's head began to turn. His head shifting until finally dark sapphire colored eyes looked up at Nauren. No not up at him, into him.

Nauren's spine chilled up his back at the man's stare and he had frozen in his place for a few moments as those dark blue eyes stared into him with what seemed almost like a glare. He couldn't move as the man started to rise, that dark coat of leather around his shoulders, two blades hanging from his left side with glasses hanging on the bridge of his nose. Then a smile rose to that man's lips and it made things all the more chilling.

His body lost its ability to stay standing, his body falling back and his legs dropping out from under him. The man had somehow inspired fear in him, had inspired a fear that otherwise he couldn't understand. That man was not inside the palace, that man had not been inside the walls of his home but on the outside, and yet he was sitting on the ground holding his chest. He could feel his breath trapped in his chest again, he could feel a tightness around his heart and he tried to figure it out. It was like he had been simply consumed in true terror, he had felt like he was about to die yet that was impossible.

Cautiously he tried to stand again, weakly and without anyone around. He pulled at the lip of that open window, rising until

his eyes looked down at the spot again and he was gone. He had vanished and yet that beautiful blue flower, that softly glowing flower was still there, as if left to mark his having been there.

That truly terrified him, that man had been real, that flower that he had never seen before was there. It made him sick and he tried to back up from the opening until he was leaning against the wall. He had remained like that for minutes before finally someone had appeared around the corner.

This was a female guard, a woman with silvered hair that pushed past her shoulder for a foot and equally silvered eyes that looked at Nauren at first with confusion then concern as she saw the hand over his chest. Her own hand reaching back behind herself and tearing off a bow that was almost in equal color to her eyes and hair. He knew what made that color though it was a specific wood that grew in their lands, a wood that took in the moonlight of the night and created a equally silver wood that shone at night with a softness to it.

He watched the guard, who looked outside of the window before looking back at him and finally spoke. It was a silk like voice, soft and kind that was almost no louder than a whisper. It eased him hearing it, like music and he felt his chest start to loosen.

“Sire, are you ok? What is it?” She looked on at him, the woman much older than him without a doubt. A century at the least and yet she looked no older than one of those humans that were twenty or thirty years at most.

Nauren’s voice remained lost at first, mostly because he did not what had happened. Looking back at the man now, he seemed more like a scholar than anything else. He had not used magic, he

had not used a weapon, he had simply looked at him and that was all it had taken. It was one glare that had caused him that backlash, one feeling of absolute dread that had caused him to fall back.

“A man... he had been there. He had been standing by that flower, the blue one.” These words had led the woman to look out once more, searching for the flower until a look of recognition crossed her gaze and she stared at it before nodding.

“There is no need to worry Sire, whatever this man was, he no longer remains. Shall I fetch your attendant? Or the Lord General?” She looked back at him, that same soothing silk-like voice being filtered into his mind as it passed into his ears.

“No. No, I should be fine... would you walk with me to the executions?”

He asked her a question, rather than a command. It was something he was used to doing as compared to harsh and certain commands. He didn't know why but it was out of habit.

She seemed to think for a moment before nodding, her eyes returning to that place outside of the window before walking over to him and slinging the bow back over her shoulder, it's silver color blending into her hair and seemingly vanishing if not for the string that could be seen linking the two ends of the bow.

It was only then that he looked at the armor, which was less armor and more robes. She wore what seemed like robes with inscriptions on the bindings. Vanya, that was what it said. The word meant light and seemed to match the woman in a way that was more than simply her physical appearance. The way she moved, the tone of her voice, everything about her seemed to emphasize this point of light.

With the bow over her shoulder, they started walking. Her eyes continuously moving and watching for anything that might appear from the open windows or other halls while he was still walking with his mind trying to focus itself on the actual execution.

He would be late if he was distracted by anything else and knew that would just cause trouble for him. He knew that Yusanis would be disappointed at the very least and prolonging the wait for the death of those involved was wrong. They would die but they did not deserve being left on the podium with their death right over that ledge, their death being denied because of his lateness.

So he kept walking until he would get to the balcony that would oversee the executions.

The small gathering of people looked up at him, at him and the man who stood at his side. Yusanis still towered over him, the man much larger than him and a commanding presence. It was amazing to Nauren that the man could simply sway people with a look or a few words.

In comparison Nauren was everything one could expect of a young king with a pampered life. While he was still of a tanner skin color, that an oddity among the blue blooded, pale nobles, he was still thinner by a great deal. He looked like someone who had been famished even, lean and average in height. The only remarkable feature of his would be those emerald colored eyes that rested in his face. If not for them he would probably look like some puppet being held up by Yusanis.

That thought made him look downwards and stare at the train of people being led to their death. It was the normal sort. Humans caught during battle, spies of the kingdom that had been paid off. He was staring with a tired look on his face at the train of people, one by one led to the block like cattle to the slaughter.

“How much longer must we be present Yusanis. This seems trivial to have me judge the deaths of each of these traitors and swine.” Nauren’s lips parted, a hint of tiredness in his tone he had not meant to place there.

“It is important that a king carry out judgement on traitors and enemies of the state. These ones are important dissenters or commanders that deserve death from their better.” The man tried to reassure him, that this was important for a king to do. But in the end all it did was bore and quite honestly annoy Nauren. He could be handling far more important things than play judge for these creature’s souls.

And so the face dragged on. Nameless, defiant faces. Some cowardly and begging for mercy, some dignified in their death. And as he continued to deal out the deaths of these creatures, he would find his gaze drifting off to the train of souls.

A woman, with red hair that seemed like it was born from a flame was there. She seemed familiar but in that way where you had seen them once and not paid much attention to them. It was what was on her that suddenly caused Nauren to freeze up, much to the notice of Yusanis and the guard who was still with him and had silently been watching.

Dark blue petals, dark blue petals that grew lighter in color as they seemed to drain down to the center. Casting a soft glow from

the center and as just as vibrant as any other flower. It was chilling, the flower causing him to blink and step back as he felt like he was seeing a ghost again.

That man, that man had the same flowers. He had planted the same flowers.

“Aren’t they beautiful? I call them Eternal Mourners, rather fitting name considering the day?” A voice shot into his ear and the chill ran down his spine as Yusanis and the female guard both turned to look at the man who was standing there.

Before they could react though sparks ignited from the man’s hands, reaching out like serpents and sailing at the two who were there beside him, sending them both over the edge of the balcony. Fire, fire wrapped around him, closed around him and soon her heard the crowd. His eyes turning, the emerald spheres finding the red haired woman once more reaching to the ground and a crack could be heard through the air as ice shot out from her.

Guards were ice blocks in an instant, Yusanis was gone from sight, that female guard was missing too, and he was surrounded by flames. Infernal flames, the weapon of the demons. He hated fire, he was terrified of it, it had claimed them, it claimed everyone that he grew close to.

Worst yet were those sapphire colored eyes, those eyes that were now in front of his face and looking into his being once more. Words leaving the lips of this man in a way that showed no emotion, no caring for what happened around him as the balcony continued to burn.

“My dear king, I do hope that you weren’t waiting too long. It is about time that you were returned to where you belong... try not to struggle too much, would be quite annoying for your guards to interrupt.”

His hand reached out and latched around Nauren’s throat. He squeezed, squeezed without hesitation or without much care as he seemed more preoccupied with what his accomplice was doing. Nauren could not see, he could not turn his head or break from the grasp. Light faded from his sight, the world started to grow more distant. Soon he couldn’t breathe or see, he could barely hear and he felt the grip tighten one last time before his body started to go limp on him. His mind lost to the world and nothing remained soon after.

Only one sentence was last heard by him, one final sentence that caused him to let go of his grip on the world.

“Time to correct your failures young king, do greet Todander if you see him, I certainly miss that old man.”

Chapter 3

Nauren was greeted by a rather barren place, it's surface grey and colorless with no signs of life.

Except for him of course.

He wasn't sure what to really think about his situation. As far as he knew, he had been on the ground after the executions had been interrupted choked by the man who had interrupted them. The guard and Yusanis had been tossed off the balcony.

So that left him wondering about the man who had killed him, the man who had appeared not once but made the effort to be seen before the attack. He had seen the man twice, and the girl who had been helping him was the one he ran into that morning, two people who had made an effort to be seen by him.

His hand twitched finally, breaking him from his thoughts as his body started to finally respond. It was still slow, how long it took to finally start moving was certainly more than a few minutes but soon enough he started to shift and sit up. The first thing he noticed was there was no wind, no smells to detect, no anything. He was in a place where it seemed like life had left the world and with it went those things which made the world spectacular.

Like he was able to tell before, there was little of note, an expanse of grey stretching out around him with little for him to really remark on. One thing he did notice though now with his head and body able to move, was that the sun shone on the land but he could not feel heat coming from it and instead felt more chilled by this.

“Ok, now lets see. We have a place where heat doesn’t seem to exist, a flat plain without any color, and a clear sky with the sun still in sight. I don’t know which way is north, not that it would help anyways because I have no idea where I even am. And to top off the day, I am talking to myself and hearing voices with no source..” He grumbled to himself before blinking and turning his head to the right.

He really hoped he wasn’t going crazy as he heard a small whisper off to his right. He had no idea what the voices were saying, but he was certain that there was no one there. That didn’t deter the whispers though, distant and and muffled but definitely coming from the direction he was staring at.

“I really hope that I’m dead and not going crazy.” Nauren’s feet moved as his voice sounded, bringing him over the colorless ground.

While he walked, he did wonder on that fact if he was dead. In truth, he never thought about what the afterlife was like or even if he would reach such a place. It was simply a thought that had never crossed his mind or piqued his interest. Instead he had wanted to focus on those things which were far more entertaining to him, specifically working on his swordplay.

He loved the dance that was performed before him when he studied the movement of those who taught him. Elegance was of course a trait one could expect by the masters, but hidden in that elegance was a strange spell that was cast by the way the metal caught the sun or even more so when the silver ribbons of light cast down by the moon encircled the blade. Everything about swordplay

was silent, calm and enticing to see for Nauren, compared to those displays of noise that the human's cannons made.

Infernal devices, those cannons.

*They try to mimic our magic with such crude devices,
weapons and items that are a mockery of the very lifeblood of our
people.*

The thoughts made him scoff, he wanted to know where these whispers were coming from and where he even was. Everything around him was still colorless and without feature but he could see the ground dip down, a hole in the ground forming as he got closer to its edge.

The hole was unexpected, mostly because it fell far down but looked to be filled with water at the bottom. Something that the moment he saw became a rather quick focus for his body and mind, having realized it had not had anything to drink for a long while. Thirst was certainly one thing he did not need when it came to this place where there appeared to be nothing for miles, endless expanses of grey, featureless land. This was the one place that seemed to be different and maybe it would give him some escape from this place.

There was but one thing that made him hesitate though. There was no way up, no stones high enough for him to climb back up, no vines or other lines for him to use once he was down there, not that he had anything he could tie it too as it was. If he jumped down, he would be down there without anyone or anything to help him back up to this place and if that water was dangerous he could be tossing away his life.

His breath caught in his throat as his body moved forward, worried that he was making a mistake by letting gravity pull him down to that water below. Was it icy cold or too shallow, what would happen if he simply hit what looked like water but was something that would kill him like a poison or burn him like acid?

What met him was far more surprising than those possibilities.

Warmth greeted him when he broke through the water, like the warmth of the flame surrounding him and throwing away those cold chills that had been around him on that colorless plain. It made his body relax, leaving him floating under the water for a great number of moments before finally being drawn to the surface in need of air. His eyes narrowed when he came up, looking around the area to try and find somewhere to get over to.

It was dark, almost no light around him except for the pillar that came down on the spot he had jumped into. High walls raising all around him, spires pushing up from the water and into the far off ceiling beyond the reach of any mortal. The cave itself was lined with what at first appeared to be a bleak and colorless appearance but soon that light started to shift from him and towards the wall. When it hit the wall a crystal shone brighter, and with it dozens of others started to shine, light dancing around him like stars now and casting enough for him to see a small cave and a dry patch of land.

Nauren stared with his eyes fixated on the crystals now, putting the cave out of his mind before looking towards one that he might be able to touch, swimming to it with a slow, tired effort. He would not take long to reach it but he was starting to get too tired to stay floating. His arms felt like lead and his feet felt like they were being dragged into the depths of the water. But for him the crystal

was more important than his fatigue, it drew him in and he reached out to touch the crystal.

His hand touched it and the feeling was something he could not expect. Its surface was velvet like, soft and almost fluid even if it's shape remained the same. It was no larger than his fist, easily able to be held and it turned from that bright white star into a mass of colors that moved about in his hand now. No one color took over yet, the show switching and twisting as different colors fought for supremacy over the other while Nauren held on and could not remove his hand from the crystal. He was connected to it, his body no longer responding to commands and his eyes unable to move from the gem. Time vanished for him as he continued to watch the colors and his body slowly started to sink as he continued to watch the crystal.

Like a rock he sunk, his neck first, then his mouth, and then his eyes but his hand would continue to hold on, his eyes would continue to stare and he would be oblivious to the water flooding into his body. It started to burn him from the inside out but he could not speak and his vision began to blur and fade, his chest struggling and his mind dulling. He couldn't move and he couldn't let go of the crystal as it gave off a soft red glow, almost like a ruby with a light coming from inside it. It was that sigh he saw before his mind shut down once more.

He remained like this for a long time, his mind picturing the crystal and his body feeling like it was burning inside. He wanted to twist and turn, to finally get to the surface but he couldn't. Finally he would feel something catch him, a weight crashing into his chest and the burning liquid would leave him while he coughed and turned, his body now lying on the ground near the cave he had

seen earlier, the small patch of land damp but safe from the water that had nearly claimed him.

He could still taste the liquid, feel it burning his chest but for now he breathed slowly as he got ahold of the situation. He was still lost, his body felt heavy still and he felt like he wanted to simply fall down and forget this situation. The crystal was still in his hand, but this time he could let go of it if he wanted to, hand twitching a bit as he considered dropping it but instead held on, keeping it clenched tight in his palm while he sat there and looking around once more.

The crystals no longer shone, and the light had vanished from the hole above where he had jumped through. In his hand he could feel the crystal become a bit warmer, he smiled as he continued to hold onto the now dimly lit red crystal, the feeling comfortable and inviting. He could hear something too, a small tapping now coming from the opening in the side of the cavern, drawing his focus to it and he struggled to his feet before looking at it. There was barely any hint of an opening still being there with the lights around him gone, but he used the dim glow of the crystal while he moved, looking for the sound. His own steps were getting in the way of the tapping, even if it lightly echoed through the space around him.

As he continued on through that darkness, the soft red light in his palm barely casting light on the ground in front of him, something caught his mind. He still had no idea where he was, and the last thing he had seen was the man choking him, was he actually dead and this was the hell he had received for his life? Todander, the father of mortality was a god shared by both human and elf, a name that every being feared as his he was a being very real. He determined the eternity that would be granted to one or if that soul

would be given another life. Nauren had no question that he would be given a hell to live in for his actions, the weekly executions alone had bloodied his hands enough for him to be sure of that. That acceptance gave him a grim happiness, that if this was his hell, he had been judged for his actions justly and would suffer for those he consigned to their own fates.

And to answer his questions was a man, sitting in an ebon throne as a pale flame danced nearby him. This man, dark in appearance, with a skeletal face as if he had not eaten in many years looked up at Nauren, staring into him and smiling when he saw the stone in the man's hand. His smile did not end as he waved his hand, the stones before him cracking and reforming into a second throne that would face him, with a stone table separating himself and Nauren.

“Come, sit before the Father and place that crystal upon this table. Your fate was stolen when that crystal was given to you, and your end shall not come yet, but I will not let you return so quickly as to be stolen from me and my judgement.” The man said, his pale flame flickering with his words and the shadows bending around his palm before creating a equally dark set of scales which he placed in front of him, still with that grin upon his grim face.

Who was Nauren to deny the Father?

Chapter 4

Nauren stared at the man, knowing that it was no ruse but unsure if he should move after all of this. He had come to meet the being which gave life and took it back when the time came, the being who control the cycle. It was not unknown that he existed, as with the rest of the pantheon, their works could be seen if one looked hard enough but it was still shaking the acceptance he had in his death. He suddenly felt the dread that came with dying, knowing that you would not continue and his muscles had seized up as he wanted to run but couldn't. The world was Todander's, and he shaped it to fit what he wanted.

And all while Nauren stood unsure and in fright once more, Todander could only watch, having seen this a million times over, having known the fear of meeting him over the years for those who had undone his works. Life was his to reap when he so chose, and to steal the life of others was an act he had found irritating. The only thing he had found more annoying was those who had stolen souls from him and taken them from his domain.

“Sit unworthy soul, I will not ask again. You may have been a king once, but now you are a servant.” Todander spoke with a weak voice, one that befit the grim, tired man who sat in that stone throne.

Nauren swallowed and nodded, his bones feeling like they might crack as he finally moved them, his whole body still stiff. He hated what he was feeling and he wanted to run still but knew the entrance he had come through was no escape and he saw no other option but to obey. The stone felt cold when he touched it with his hand, as if it were a construct of ice and his own hand started to chill

when he left his hand on it. The feeling was uncomfortable to say the least, as if the heat from his body was being drained from him. He didn't hesitate long, forcing his body into the chair and holding onto the crystal with both his hands as it was the only warm thing left around him.

"Calm yourself elf, you will not be claimed this day. The meddling of your benefactor ensured that when she had granted you that annoying stone. I merely wish to test you for myself and weigh your being and your worth before I condemn your existence. See, I give even those like yourself fair judgement, the chance to escape true damnation for your actions if your being shows enough worth. You will not be granted life anew, but perhaps shall be saved suffering." He explained, his hand resting at the middle of the scales, watching Nauren and the crystal in his hands.

"First, I require that stone of yours, as it holds the very thing that I command, stolen from me." He motions for Nauren to release the crystal, to give it to him so that he may weigh it.

He didn't want to, considering it was the only thing still warm but he slowly reached out with one hand, holding it over the slim fingers that had reached out as well. It was hard to let go, his mind and body telling him to keep a hold of it, telling him that it was the most important thing in the world to him at this point, but in the end his hand opened and the crystal fell into Todander's hand.

The man inspected the crystal, holding it close to his face and letting the soft red glow crawl across his features, almost bringing life back into them. His eyes were brighter now, his skin less pale, and his face held more cheer as he looked at the crystal, sighing before placing it on the scales. He waited, giving Nauren the

chance to speak while he watched the scales, watching for movement or a change in them.

“You mentioned that the crystal has something that was stolen, what do you mean?” Nauren’s voice was soft now, by choice this time instead of fear or worry. He felt a bit more comfortable as the air around him started to ease and become a bit more still.

“The stone, or crystal as you have called it, hold your being, what makes you who you are and your mortality. It is that which gives you life and hold you together, this leaves a useless husk that clings barely to the life I granted it and is stolen from my grasp until returned. I dislike the situation but it is a fact I abide by.” He looked up, staring at Nauren and posing his own question.

“You are dead, as I hope was made clear so far, and your life has been ended by the hands of one who is covered in blood just as yours are. Yet, you have greeted death rather calmly considering your life before. You ended the lives of my children, those of elf, human, and more yet I find you accepting your actions. Why are you so calm about your end and so accepting of what you will be condemned to suffer for?”

Nauren paused in his wonderings about the scale or about the crystal, turning his eyes upwards to look at the man who controlled life and death. He was calm, calmer than he should be. He was not begging for forgiveness, he did not delude himself with a self constructed grandeur that should elevate him above others. In truth he had wanted to join those before him in death, to be claimed but he had been scared of it every day since the fires had come to claim his home and those who had lived with him. When he had been claimed finally, he had met it without fear in the first moments.

“I don’t know why I am calm.” Nauren answered, shaking his head and looking anywhere that was not in front of him.

Todander stared for a moment but changed his focus back to the scale as it moved, the crystal bringing the side it sat on low until touching the table. He waited and watched before reaching out to take the crystal in his hand once more, drawing it up and reaching out so that he might return it to Nauren. Once returned, the table and scale vanished, his hand reaching to grab onto the pale flame before it reshaped into a white wooden staff with the flame now in a wooden cage at the top.

“Come Stolen One, I will see you out of my home and back to your form. Do avoid meeting with me until I choose to claim you next time, as I had not plan for the return of your being to me for a while yet. I am sure you would wish to enjoy your life once more for what time you will be given.” He spoke in a weak tone once more, leaning on the staff and walking to a new opening, one that had not been there before.

Nauren moved when told, his body keeping up with the slow moving man and holding the crystal tight to his chest. “Why did you weigh the stone? You said it was my being but what is the point of weighing it?”

“I already told you, it is to help me decide your fate once you are returned to me. A being like you stole the life of others to grow your power in the mortal plane, to create a life that claimed others to enrich yourself. I am disgusted by your disregard for the life I grant others and yet your being tells me something interesting. I will enjoy testing you once more when you return to my home but until then it is time for you to go.” His voice started to further weaken and he stood before a wall now, looking back to Nauren.

Reaching out with his staff he placed the head of it against the wall, the flames reaching out and covering the space before it shone with the same pale light, the flames retreating to the edges and replacing them looked like a pool of milky liquid. The liquid was still, though as Todander reached out to touch it his hand froze just above its surface, sadness touching his features and a wordless curse took form on his lips. The god looked down at Nauren and shook his head before speaking one final time.

“Go Stolen One, she has given you safe passage and has willed I not impede you any longer. We will talk once more when you are returned to me and given the judgement you deserve.” His words ended and he walked past Nauren, disappearing into the shadows and a wall appearing where he had vanished. Nauren was left with nowhere else to go, except for the milky portal before him.

He swallowed and turned his head down, pushing into the portal and holding the crystal to his chest. As he touched the liquid, heat returned to his body and he closed his mouth tight, clenching his jaw tight and falling into the liquid, hoping to see the face of Yusanis or Thuros once more when he found himself in the mortal world once more. Hoping that he had been granted life again like Todander said, even if he did not understand why.

Chapter 5

The light filtered down to his eyes, bringing the world back to him slowly. He felt sore, his throat ragged and hurt with the smallest of breathes, and his right arm in particular felt stiff and locked into place. His left hand clutched onto the familiar shape of the stone that still felt warm in his hand.

Even with his body beyond simply tired, he wouldn't object to the state he was in. The air was still, very warm and clean. The smell of grass told him more than enough that he was not in a home, much less any structure and instead on ground. The light above him seemed to shift and change, letting him know it was likely a forest he was in.

The fact that he was at least alive also served to be a welcoming fact, or at least he assumed he was living. Compared to the last plane he had been on, one belonging to the Father, this felt far more like his home. The air felt different though, it wasn't the forests of his home, the woods far too dead for that. His home felt alive, magic flowing through the ground and through the roots of life, here it felt hollow.

The only worrying part is that he knew he had been dead, or at least thought that he was. The entire events were confusing to him and now he was uncertain if he was still himself. Necromancy was a dark art that he had seen the results of, and while some retained their minds, their bodies or even the lack of such was another thing.

Most times those brought back were nothing more than a shambling corpse, a puppet that has lost its mind and soul. There

were other ways in which to return the Soul to living though, none that Nauren had seen to be very welcoming. Some came in a collection of bones and flesh, deteriorating and only lasting as long as their body stayed together, requiring the constant application of magic to even remain viable. The other option was transferring the soul into a souless form, either that of one who was constructed much like a golem might be, or trapped in some arcane creation that could not hope to be considered human any longer.

As far as Nauren had come to know, there was no other method of returning the soul to life, and yet here he lay, alive. It worried him and using what little strength he could he lifted his left arm and hand, staring at it and the stone still in his hand. Everything looked normal, his clothing matching what he had worn that day that he had died. He could not see his face yet but as far as he could tell he was still within his own mortal bindings.

This fact confused him, but knew such a thing was only possible through the intervention of the one who had taken him from the father, whoever she was. He remembered the father's annoyance, and how he had stated that Nauren was only one of a number that had been taken from him.

"Those like myself..." Nauren thought on the line and dismissed it as his hand lowered back to his side.

For a few more moments nothing seemed to happen, but then soft footsteps greeted him, barely audible but still there and soon the light above him seemed to be blocked out. His eyes reopened and took focus on the obstruction, seeing a face and a pair of eyes staring back down at him.

The eyes were a dark blue, and carried a curiosity that caused them to move from his face to the hand a this side and what he held inside of it. The woman seemed to pause as she looked at it but finally disappeared from his field of vision as she stepped back. He was about to turn his head when a sharp and swift kick landed on his side. One that made him curl up a tad suddenly, admittedly a bit glad he could feel pain, but at the same time regretting that was how he found that out.

Soon enough words accompanied the kick, giving him a bit of a hint on why he had just been struck.

“Get up, you brain dead twit, I believe that you have had enough rest.” The voice was definitely young, and seemed to hold some venom, aided by the choice of words in the first place.