

Sam and Finn were busy training, using the exercise list that Jennifer gave them a few days before. They were steadily progressing and already seeing some fruits for their effort. Small increases, but they could tell these exercises were more effective and efficient than anything they had done on their own. It helped their morale and mood and pushed both of them to give it their all. They woke up early and went to bed late, exhausted. Often with their entire bodies aching. They had to, they knew what the others had said was true, they did not seem to be the lying kind. And they were not dumb either, they could sense something was amiss. That something was happening that they didn't know of yet. Something bad surely, guessing on the stress both Thomas and Jennifer showed at times. Finn had issues with not knowing what this was, he wanted to ask them. Sam reminded him that it was not their place though, to question their Master. He would tell them once they needed to know. And so they both threw themselves on their exercises. Day after day.

Thomas entered the room quietly, standing to the side and watching over them for a moment. Analyzing judging. Seeing where there was still space for improvement. When they took a pause Thomas walked forward and greeted them.

"Hello, I see you are taking your training seriously, that's good. A bit rough on the edges at times, but I can see your progress."

Sam and Finn greeted their Master with a heavy breath. They listened intently as he explained to them what the rough edges were and how they could improve on them.

"Thank you master," Finn said and bowed his head, Sam followed his example as well.

"You are welcome. It is good that I have found you while taking a break, there is something I need to discuss with you."

Both of them sat up right now, all ears. Curious. Content that he had their attention now, Thomas continued.

"Something has come up, something important. Jennifer and I will need to go and see this. And if Oswald returns in time, he will join us too. This forces me to leave you two unattended. Which I'd rather not do. But such goes the river of life, it turns and twists and we have to follow suit."

"So we stay alone in the keep then?" Finn asked.

"No," Thomas smiled. "The keep is safe, but it is also a target. And if it is properly attacked, you two will not be safe in here. But before we talk about that, it is time I hear your answers. I hope you have made your minds up by now."

"We have," Sam said, her voice soft and heavy with sadness.

Finn nodded along. "Yes, we understand the situation we are in. We know this world is ... different and dangerous. And it would be irresponsible to drag our family along in it with us. We should stand alone in this."

"So," Sam picked up. "We will abandon our families. We don't know how yet, making them believe we are dead seems so cruel. We were hoping there are other alternatives." They both looked up at Thomas with hopeful eyes.

"Well, there have been various ways in which Players disconnected with their families. The most common ones are simply disappearing or feigning death. But there are other ways. But be wary of giving your family too much to go on. If they believe for a moment they can get to

you, and they love you, they will try to do so. They might catch up with you eventually, and that may very well be at the most inopportune of times. The responsibility of this then lies with you still. So keep that in mind.”

They nodded in understanding.

“But,” Thomas continued. “That is talk for later. You will return to your families now. You will be able to spend a bit more time with them, as you keep focussing on your training and wait for us to finish our business and retrieve you.”

“Really?” Sam asked elatedly.

“Yes,” Thomas said with a kind smile.

“For how long?” Finn asked.

“About a month, but it could be a bit less or more than that, depending on what progress Jennifer and I make.”

Now even Finn was smiling wide. “A month? Really?”

“Yes,” Thomas said with a chuckle. “I know this is the last time you will be able to see your family and talk to them, connect with them. So I understand you will want to spend time with them. But please, do your best as well and do not neglect your exercises. There are hard times ahead of us, and I need you as strong as quickly as possible.”

“Yes master,” Finn said, with a sour smile now as he realised this would be the last time he could really see and talk to his family. After that, he would have to abandon them. For their own good, but it did not make it any easier or happier of a prospect.

“Now, you will head home in a few days, Jennifer and I will leave for our destination soon after as well. But before all of that, I need to explain something else to you. As I promised you I have studied the book of Bonds I have. And I have been able to identify your bond in it, and found some information about it. I need to share this with you, to make your journey a bit more guided. Bonds were known to be brittle things, easily derailed, and yours especially is a fickle one. Hard to get good. Sadly, there is little I can do to help or guide you. Most of the hard work will be on your shoulders.” Thomas smiled at both of them. “But I am sure you two are more than up for it.”

They both flushed as they thanked Thomas for the compliment. They then looked at him, urging him to continue. Both of them eager to know more about their bond.

“So, the most important thing for your bond is that you two need to be a team. This goes up for most bonds, but especially for yours. The amount of synergy you two can create between the two of you is amazing. There are many bonds, some of them connecting as much as twenty people together. But you too can become just as strong as them, even stronger. But the key to all of that is the two of you. You need to be as close as one as possible. I know this all sounds vague right now but it will make sense soon enough. But remember this once you are back home and training. Focus on becoming as close to one as you can.”

Both of them nodded in silence.

“Now, there is one thing I can tell you that will help you, especially with this. This is an ancient technique and not many people use it anymore. Few know about it or make the effort to learn it. I guess that is due to the nature of the Player world. The technique is called a Soul melt. I know the technique well and a long time ago I performed it a few times as well. But that was a

lifetime ago, all I can do for you is explain the basics, the rest is up to you two. So sit down and listen well.”

“The first step is that you both need to be able to project your Aurem, this is crucial. So, Sam, you will need to help Finn in perfecting his projecting. He doesn’t need to be as strong as you are although that certainly would be useful in the future, for this it is enough that he can project his soul and move around his self, for a few steps in diameter. Once he can do that you need to guide and teach him so that his control over his Aurem is perfect. He doesn’t need to be able to project far, but his control needs to be perfect. His understanding of his Aurem as well.”

Sam nodded, showing she understood. Finn listened in wonder, all of this was new to him and he barely understood it at all.

“Good, once you have done that you can try to do the melt. There isn’t really a guide or tutorial for it or any material written about it. In fact, I can offer both of you only this: With your soul, reach out. To your friend, to your mate, to your lover. With your soul, reach out. Hug, tightly. Entangle. Entwine. Become one. With your soul, melt together.”

Sam and Finn looked at Thomas, waiting for more to follow. But nothing came.

“Wait,” Sam said. “Is that it?”

“I am afraid so. That is all that is written as advice for your bond. Normally, you two would need to take mentorship with two others that have this bond and have completed it. But we can’t do that. This short piece is all that remains from a book that once existed, a book considered ancient even in the times the book of the Bonds was written. I am bondless myself, so I can not help you further. I can make guesses or assumptions on what the words could mean, but this can only misguide you. This journey is yours, and only you two alone can travel it and complete it. This, I am afraid, is where my aide ends.”

“Wait, what?” Finn said. “That is as good as nothing!”

“Yeah!” Sam jumped in. “I can teach Finn to project and control his Aurem perhaps, but with this information we are nothing. How are we supposed to know what to do with this?”

“I am sorry, but this is all I can do to help you. All that I can say is follow the saying, and that you need to use your Aurem for it. That is all that the book told me, that I can also tell you two. The rest you need to find out on yourself I am afraid.”

Thomas looked apologetically at them while Sam and Finn looked at him in despair, hoping it was a joke or something and he would tell them a bit more. But he did not.

“And with that, I need to leave you. I have to prepare for my own journey now. I have taken the liberty of preparing some items for the both of you though. Here,” Thomas gave them a small satchel, inside of it were two stones, a folded map and a strange-looking device. “The stones, you will find, will be of great service to you. You simply need to reach out to it with your Aurem, it will explain itself further after that.” Thomas said with a cryptic grin. “The map has also a spell on it, it will always show you the best and most safe route back home. I attuned it to both of you. So you simply have to unfold it to use it. And finally,” Thomas said as he picked up the strange device, holding it in front of them. “This will allow you to contact me when in need. But the magic behind it is brittle. You’ll only be able to get a few uses out of it, so use it sparingly. Emergencies only.” Thomas smiled, giving it all back to them.

“Thank you, Master,” They both said, Sam held the bag in her arms. They looked up at Thomas, uncertain of what to do now.

“Now, you two go ahead and pack your things, you will leave in the morn. You have trained enough for today. Once you are done packing, feel free to do as you please. We will say our goodbyes tomorrow.”

They both nodded, thanked Thomas again and then left hurriedly. Already whispering amongst each other before they had properly left the room. Leaving Thomas alone, chuckling as he recognised quite a bit of himself in the both of them.

*Of course, the magic isn't that brittle. I made it after all. But it is best that the two of them don't know that.* Thomas thought to himself. Being able to figure things out on their own would be an important part of their training. They needed to learn to rely on themselves first and only after that on their master.

Jennifer was busy preparing for the journey, making sure she packed all the essentials and prepared the spells she was sure they would be needing. Her mind palace was full, as were her spell gems. She packed lightly on clothes and such, magic could fix or clean what little she owned. She struggled more with her books and scrolls. She was studying many, and there were others that she could use for reference for issues that could arise up North. Deciding on which ones to take and which ones to leave behind was hard and consumed all of her mind. This is why she never noticed the man entering her room.

“Jennifer,” The voice was heavy and broken.

Startled, Jennifer turned around and yelped in surprise. “Oswald!” she screamed and ran up to him, giving him a long and tight hug. “You are back? Why didn’t you send word back? What happened?” Jennifer ended the hug and looked at him, she felt something was off and when she took a proper look at Oswald, she knew for sure. “Oswald, what is the matter?”

“It is all gone Jennifer...”

“Gone? What is gone, Oswald?” She asked.

“Maruza...” Oswald sounded defeated, tired, empty.

“Maruza? The city is gone? But how? Oswald, how can a city be gone?”

“The city is still there, the buildings. But what it was, what it meant, that is gone. Maruza is no more except in name and stone. Its spirit is dead.”

“Oswald...” Jennifer bit on her lips. She wanted to ask, to make him answer. But she knew what he needed right now was a friend. So she grabbed him and held him tight. “It will be alright Oswald...”

“No, no it won’t Jennifer. My life, my dedication. It was all for nought. It was all a lie. I have nothing left now.”

“You still have me,” Jennifer said, then, after a very long pause, she added. “And master Thomas too. You still have us, Oswald.”

Oswald didn’t answer, instead, he grabbed Jennifer and hugged her tightly. Clutching as a babe to his mother. Slowly he shook as he sobbed, without making a sound. Jennifer held him tight., gently caressed the back of his neck and shoulders and whispered softly.

“It will be alright Oswald, you still have us. You’ll never be able to get rid of me.”

The room flickered in the soft, dim light that came from two braziers in opposing corners. The room was small, at most two metres on two metres. In the centre stood a pedestal with a small basin cut into it. The basin was filled with a dark red liquid, smelling sweet and musky. Thomas was holding the pedestal by the sides, leaning on top over the basin. With magical fire, the liquid was heated, and Thomas inhaled deeply. Taking in the vapours. He closed his eyes and when he opened them again, he was standing in a different room altogether. Of course, this was only an illusion, and it was only his consciousness that had transported. His actual body was still in the small room, back in the keep. This 'room' took the form of a cobblestone floor, the kind you would expect to find in the lesser districts of a large city. No walls, the extremities simply vanished into a ubiquitous mass of darkening grey, until it was blackness. The pedestal existed in this room as well but was divided up into different slices as if a pie. Thomas' slice was coloured a dark red, the slices a matt grey. Then, suddenly, four people started to appear. One by one, the slices lighting up as they took form out of swirling fog.

"I welcome you, brothers and sister, it has been too long," Thomas said.

The people, two men and a woman, all nodded. The woman spoke first.

"It is good to see you again brother Thomas. It has been a while indeed. When was the last time we spoke? Ten years?"

"More like fifteen I think, Kael," Thomas said with a smile.

"What have you been up to then, it has been at least half a century since I saw any of you lot." One of the men said. "But I am happy to gift you all my presence."

"Still as cocky as ever I see, Silver." the last person said.

"Still as sparse with the words as ever I see, Nico." They all smiled.

"It truly has been too long," Thomas said again. "But this call is not just to see and hear you again. I am afraid this is far from a friendly get together."

"I assumed as much. Friendly get-togethers ended the day the Circle stopped being an official guild." Kael said with a stern face. "Which is for the best, lest we forget."

They all nodded.

"I know, I have not forgotten our ... arrangements. But such is life that eventually a time comes when one has to bend or break previously uttered vows and promises. Should they live long enough for it to occur."

"And since you gathered us here, I assume we can all claim to have lived long enough for just that then?" Silver said, his face smug.

"You would be correct." Thomas smiled. He really had missed his brothers and sisters.

"Out with it then, we should be quick about this." Nico's voice was soft but clear.

"I assume you all have noticed by now, the things that are happening. Too much, too concentrated, too coincidental. I assume you all have looked into it as I have. And I will also assume you all have noticed that there is forces behind the curtains and shadows."

None spoke but they all nodded.

I assume that none of you has noticed the forces moving behind the shadows though.

This startled the others, they hesitated and Thomas could see their minds racing, even though the flickering shimmers that they existed as in this place.

“What do you mean?” Silver finally asked the first to speak up. He had always been quick of wit. Thomas smiled, it was as he expected. He was the first to notice.

“I mean, my friends, that there is a hand controlling the various puppeteers that you and I have seen working behind the shadows. A puppeteer of puppeteers if you will.”

“What? How? Do you insinuate you have seen something none of us has? And even if what you say is true, who would have that kind of power. This is preposterous!” Silver bellowed.

“Oh cram it old fart,” Kael said as she waved her hand to shut him up. “We are all of the Circle here, we, above all others, know how prone humanity is to failure.”

“Yes, and I don’t know about you, but I have been rather busy lately. Not a lot of time to watch the shadows, even less to study them.” Nico added.

Thomas silently watched them and then nodded.

“Yes, I have had a bit .... more time recently to study these shadows. And that is when I discovered that there was more to it. I have already taken action. I am taking two of my apprentices with me up North. I am going to check on the brotherhood.”

“Two of? So you have more now?” Kael asked curiously.

“I have but don’t focus on that. ”I know Maruza is hit as well and I assume you know of other places too. Don’t tell me about them. I already said too much by letting you all know, but I need to be certain you fully believe me and are aware of the situation. So I will repeat. Both the Nordic brotherhood as Maruza have been hit. And while there are many links between them, their vaults of ancient works is what caused them to be targetted I think.”

The others quietly listened. Measuring and weighing.

“Now, the situation is that we can’t trust anybody. Not even us, so I just took a huge risk. If one of you is a puppet, I might have well just dug my grave. But I need all of you to take this seriously, and to take action as well. As fast as you can.”

“And why,” Silver said. “Should we listen to you, Thomas? The Circle is no more, you command me no more.”

“Because, Silver,” Thomas said softly. “Daphne is back.”

Now they all breathed in sharply in surprise. Kael was the first to speak.

“What! How?”

“I do not know, but this work has her fingerprint on it. I also sensed her. Only faintly, but it was her energy, I am sure.”

“That is not possible! She moved on! She ascended! We all saw it, gods be damned, we all made sure she did!” Silver said as his shimmer smashed its fist on the pedestal. As he did all the shimmers flickered in and out of existence for a moment.

“Calm yourself!” Nico bit. “It is improbable but not unheard of. We all read those ancient texts. They told about failed Ascensions. They told about returning Ascended too. Daphne could be one of those two things.”

“Returning,” Thomas said.

“What?” Kael asked.

“She is returning, not failing.”

“How do you know?” Silver demanded.

“Because all of us know how to perfectly perform an Ascension if we wished to do so, and she is Daphne, and she always has been our better. She did not fail.”

They all went silent for a moment.

“So she is back then.” Kael finally said, her voice a whisper now. Filled with uncertainty and even fear.

“Back and already moving against us,” Nico added.

“Well, I don’t think she is moving against us,” Thomas said. The others looked at him, questioning. “She is moving, and she is doing things she rather had nobody noticed. But not against us, if it was against us, we’d never noticed it before it was too late. No, her mind is focussed on something else, a different goal altogether. And one that has her so engrossed that she dropped enough threads that we were able to catch on.”

“You were able to catch on, not us.” Nico corrected him.

“It is the same, we are the Circle,” Kael said.

“Were.” Silver corrected her this time.

“It matters not, what matters is that we move against this, against her. I don’t know what she plans, but it can not be good. Not for us, not for the Player world. It is up to us to fight this evil and prevent it from taking form.”

“Why though? Why is it up to us?” Nico asked.

“Because,” Silver said with a sigh. “We are the Circle, no matter how much we wish we were not. I understand. I will do what is necessary.” With that Silver clapped his hands and his shimmer was gone. Nico looked from where Silver’s shimmer had been to Kael and then to Thomas.

“I too will do what is needed of me.” And he vanished as well.

“You know I will do the same,” Kael said as she smiled at Thomas. “But before I go, are you okay?”

Thomas hesitated. “I am, thank you.”

“Are you sure? We all know what Daphne was for you, I more than the others.”

Thomas held up his hand to stop her. “I know Kael, but just as then, I can not answer you in kind now. I am sorry. I am glad you will do what is needed, I will do the same. I am sure we will be in contact again soon enough. Until then.”

Thomas clapped and he was gone. Leaving Kael alone in a strange place. She sighed and whispered something, and then she too vanished.

“I understand,” Thomas said with a grim, even sad face. He put a hand on Oswald’s shoulder and squeezed. “We will right this wrong, eventually. But everything in its time Oswald. Now we need to head to the Brotherhood first. But I think it is safe to assume that whatever

moved against the brotherhood also moved against Maruza. In time we will uncover what happened to your holy city, Oswald. I promise you that, as master to apprentice.”

Oswald nodded, he did not trust his voice enough not to break when he spoke and he hated to show weakness in front of his Master. Slowly he turned around and headed for his room. “I will prepare now.” He said, as short and quick as he could, not to betray in his voice how broken he really was.

“He is not well, Master,” Jennifer said.

“I know, but he will push through. His resolve is not broken yet. He is hurt, which is normal. But once the pain fades and numbs, his fighting spirit will still be there. And he will need it more than anything for the fights that are ahead of us.”

Jennifer nodded and then they both resumed their tasks. Their minds were absent, immersed in their own thoughts and fears. And even none of them would admit it, they all felt for Sam and Finn. The youths had left in the morning, as was said. And they knew they would be safe at home. And still, they feared for them. Because they had started to care about them already.