

Elderhearth is burning.

Words I'd felt were impossible to come to mind. And yet, here I am.

I look down and see the City spreading below me, crawling across the mountainside, and spilling over the plains below. Plumes of smoke twist into the blue summer sky, like signal fires sending a message of failure. Fires creep over the Cities of Common First and Second as Sredinah artillery pummels the walls.

Dread double-headed eagles of gold woven into violet flags surround my city. A moment I never thought would come.

Utterly broken. That is what you've made me, Cassius. In your greed, your ambition, you've taken away what I valued most. Usurper, I name you!

But is this City truly mine? A place cannot be owned. Not by anyone. It can be a home, never a possession. Perhaps this is why men's hearts are blinded; they cannot see beyond their greed. Their covetous souls crave to own, to possess, they desire to have – and so they take.

The screams from below drift on the wind, like shrill cries of crows. As if to let me know that I am to be carrion. Machines of war spit their hatred and obliterate my walls. Elderhearth's walls. I have nothing. I had nothing, except my brothers. Now I stand here alone, unable to move. My legs bolted to the ground. Another artillery salvo of guns bellows its wrath like a hundred dragons belching their flames. Each wound on your hallowed stone is like a wound upon my own skin.

Forgive me, my Elderhearth. You are more than a city, are you not? You are a titan of white marble, living and breathing. This is your greatest miracle. Your stone has remained untouched for centuries.

But today, you bleed.

*Why aren't you down there, Uther?* He would ask me.

I'm losing, Jack. I've lost. I've hidden the Band of Command, put it out of the Usurper's reach. I've sent the Golden Knights away to keep our people safe. To find you and Ephraim.

I will do what is right. What an utter failure I've allowed myself. How does one burdened with a crown, in good conscience, consign twenty million souls to oblivion? How can one who claims honor and justice, then, punish his people for his negligence? I am not a god of death; it is not mine to deliver unto my people their last rites. I am to bleed for them and keep them safe.

Where was I when my army needed me on the Eastern Border? I was here, yelling at Ash. Oh my dearest brother, I've wronged you. I've chased you away. Our last moments together, though we did not know it then. We parted as strangers. Oh, how my heart aches for one more gaze upon the faces of my brothers.

I fall alone.

Maybe I am fated to fall alone. My hubris – this insistence that my grasp is wide enough to encompass a city such as you, Elderhearth – follies of arrogance that were born of youthful confidence. But now, I see.

This was never *my* city. It was my home, its people, my lifeblood. The din and clamor of merchants and artisans, and the clanging of industry – music for my ears. Its streets were my veins. The pain of its people, my pain.

I shall take on your pain, O Wounded City.

O, White Citadel. What a glorious jewel you are, coveted by all men.

You, Elderhearth, were everything to me – except mine. For no one can truly own you.

Emperor Cassius, who named himself Dawnbringer Returned, is a foolish boy who drank from the wellspring of power and authority. Only few can do so. Those who wear the crown are lured towards the waters of the well. The tragedy is that we don't realize we're choking on our drink until it's too late.

My throat is full. I cannot swallow. I cannot breathe.

Yet, my duty remains. Even when the night is darkest and the path ends, one must see his duty done. To the end. For only in death does it end.

Elderhearth survived worse than either Cassius or I. It is an ancient, marvelous thing. If I know anything, I know that in all this time, it has been home to good, honest

people. People who will take care of it, regardless of the head with the crown. People who'd take care of me, even as I fail them. Elderhearthians took care of their own.

Cursed be this mortal soul of mine if I do not punish those who would see you burn for their transgression. Cursed be mine hand if I do not exact just vengeance upon those who would break you. I shall not let them, upon my life.

I shall bring to them fire and fury, and soak thine stones, O Elderhearth, with the blood of those who would see your splendor ruined. Your people, slain. Your soul, taken. All under my care.

My hands grip the balcony's railing, knuckles white.

I have one last act as I wear this crown upon my brow. Perhaps my only true act as king since I sat upon the Throne of Seven Stars.

I turned to the only other person in the room. A stubborn friend, she was.

"Anissa, sound the retreat. Signal Marshal Davenport. He is to circle around and establish an evacuation corridor. Pull back to Elderport."

"Your Majesty, what about-"

"Retreat, Anissa. They came for me. It's about time I gave them what they wanted." I said, securing my vambraces. I grip the hilt wrapped in azure cloth of my Dawnbringer, a sword longer than Anissa is tall. The Captain-General of my Royal Kingsguard looked powerful, even out of her golden armor, dressed in plain clothes. Nothing but a belt with a sword hanging off it. The sword I gave her when I promoted her to Captain-General. Her back straight as an arrow, broad shoulders defiant and refusing to hunch even in the face of this perverse defeat.

It is my fault.

"Do this, and take the remaining Knights South of the City. High Captain Aetherus and Lord Fangier await for you with my final order." I laid my hand over her shoulder. My fist was larger than her head. She looked up, tears welling up in her bronze irises. Without asking, she dove into my midriff and wrapped her arms around me. A single snuffle escaping her.

"It was an honor, Sir," she managed.

I patted the top of her head. "The honor was mine, Anissa."

I towered over her, nearly double her height, yet her embrace threatened to shatter me. Anissa pulled back and wiped the corner of her eye with her sleeve.

"Give 'em hell, my King," she blurted out, pounded her chest with her fist and turned sharply, leaving the balcony.

At that, I turned my gaze back to the city below me. The White Citadel was piercing the clouds, being built on top of Elderhearth's Seventh Level, near the peak of Mt. Stonespike. I'll miss climbing to the top and having a drink on top of the world.

Seven Levels below me, the red sea of humanity that was the Holy Imperial Armies of Sredinah, spread out almost as far as the eye could see. Their titanic artillery machines I know they built off blueprints their spies stole from Siewerski Weaponsmiths were bellowing wrath upon Elderhearth's titanic walls. To the East, Marshal Davenport was leading a mass of people escaping this horror my carelessness has brought to their homes. Librarian Mages, those who still had some loyalty to their people and not to their Order, were shielding the retreat.

Emperor Cassius wasn't attacking the refugees. At least he was decent enough, and for that, I commend him. But for the first time in a long time, I can finally let go. Let go of it all - there is nothing else but the enemy. And I am the hammer.

I felt a surge of energy rush into my whole body. I felt my muscles growing, my back widening. There was steel in my bones and iron in my skin. I breathed in the scent of Elderhearth's pain, and I let it fuel my anger.

I leap over the railing. The wind tears at my hair. The city rushes up to meet me. My legs sink deep into the pavement of the Sixth, the Noble City. The force of my landing depressing the ground, rippling stone, and erupting into a geyser of debris as I leap forward once again.

Then down. Land. Fifth Level, Artisan City.

Again. Fourth Level. Merchant City.

I jump. Fall. Crash. Common Third. Smoke choked my lungs and obscured my vision. But the enemy was forward.

With all the strength I could muster, I ejected myself upward with a mighty leap. In a heartbeat, I was soaring above the smoke, the fires, the roofs, the Commons. My golden armor glinted in the warm sunlight. I sailed across the sky and landed on a bell tower. Then, launched again, the tower exploding into a shower of debris, pebbles, and dust from the force of my lunge.

Tower. Roof. Tower. Bridge. Wall. Faster and faster and stronger – my bounding rampage wounding the city I call home. I want to apologize, but Elderhearth whispers to me. *Fly now, O King. My strength is yours.*

I streak like golden lightning toward the red tide.

And suddenly, the City is no more. Hundreds of thousands of soldiers clad in Sredinah crimson underneath me fill my vision. I fly over the Walls of the Common First, now a shattered, smoking ruin. Their beautiful marble stones, wrought by ancient Librarian hands working in concert with good, hardworking Elderhearthians, enclosing this marvel of architecture and engineering. A haven for all souls who needed a place to call home.

Heads tilt up, following my arc above them. I start to fall; the Dawnbringer Sword in my hand – the golden jewel embedded in the middle of its crossguard lighting up. It was drinking in the light of the sun, its polished steel shining like a beacon, heralding my arrival.

“I am!” I bellow. The jewel starts to glow with an intense, white light as I fall among the red-clad Imperials who were scrambling in all directions, scurrying over one another, hoping to evade my landing.

“UTHER!” My voice thundered. Those unlucky enough not to escape are crushed into a mass of gore under my feet as I land, the force of impact sending shockwaves through the ground and knocking soldiers down as the earth explodes in seven concentric circles around me. Debris erupts skyward, rending torso and limb alike. It is as if cannons shot projectiles from the ground. Screams. Curses. A crack of a rifle. The acrid stink of powder and smoke. The stench of feces and blood.

The smell of battle.

The shock on the faces of the Sredinans is utter and complete. I see his aquila – imposing itself upon me, propped up on two long metal poles, the golden eagle hanging

above us like a monument. Its eyes were blue jewels the size of fists, gleaming with imperial opulence. The usurper, Cassius, was hidden behind a wall of Imperial Guardsmen and his elite Sons of Artorias, clad in golden armor much like my own. But I will find my way to him, the only way I know how.

I close my eyes, feeling the violence threatening to erupt around me. A nudge inside the pit of my stomach pulls me to the left. My battle instinct, telling me where to strike. I launch myself leftward, blade cutting a wide sideways arc. Steel meets plate and flesh and bone. Every strike, a judgment. Every cut, a conviction.

See me, Cassius. Gaze upon your adversary, and tremble beneath your crown.

I swing and cleave. Soldiers fall, dead where they stand. This is a time for fury, for justice. A time for blood and thunder. I do not bother with their numbers, their weapons, or their armor. I become a red whirlwind, moving like a force of nature. Hoping I am not too late. I am become war; Elderhearth's fury made manifest.

All around me, soldiers lay scattered like broken, dead things. Cut in halves, limbs and heads cleaved from bodies. Blood and shit and mud clinging to my armored legs; the golden patina of my plate now hidden beneath the filth. The fields in front of Elderhearth's shattered walls were chaos. Golden aquilas and golden eagles painted on banners of violet and azure were torn and trampled and soaked in grime, cast down from their high places. Symbols of empire cleaved in twain by the rampage of a mad titan. That is what the historians will name me after this day is done. *Mad*.

Never has a word been more fitting for me. I look down, Dawnbringer in my hand. Its blue wraps are now dark. Almost black. The sword of legend, belonging to a conqueror of old, now mine. By bloodline, they said. It was only a sword. Old, wrought with ancient magicks, but just a sword. A curse of legacy, which I am not strong enough to carry.

My vambrace and most of my chestplate were torn and missing. Taken off by a direct shot from one of their cannons. The faces of Sredinan invaders twisted in utter disbelief when an artillery shell meant to tear down forts collided with me, and I walked it off. I loved this armor; a gift from Ashley. My dearest brother, wherever you are right now, be safe. I love you.

A droning buzz fills my right ear, and I take a step back. It's Ruhanaan, the air around me alive with the arcane power. A rock the size of my head whistles through the air where I stood. I turn, my eyes locking with the eyes of a woman. Her blonde hair tied back tightly. Her red uniform with white stripes running down her sleeves was caked in

dirt and black soot. The eight-pronged star on a badge shaped like a gear pinned to her chest marked her as a Mage artilleryist. I let the second rock hit me square on the face, exploding into pieces.

The pain I feel is distant, nestled somewhere in the back of my head. Two more rocks hovered above her outstretched palm, her eyes wide. I felt her fear washing over me in waves. This is good, this fear. They all hate me; see me as some objective to be overcome. Another flying rock breaks apart as it hits my shoulder. They do not see the grief that has gripped my heart with its razor-sharp talons, bleeding it into my chest. They do not see a man who cannot allow himself to let his tears fall. Tears for his beloved City, a mother that has watched over me since I was but a babe. She watched me grow and rise.

Her honor placed upon my brow, she now watches me bleed onto her verdant greens. As I stand tall, with the weight of that responsibility she has given me.

I tilt my head to the side, two more rocks whizzing past my ear. In a heartbeat, I close the distance between us. Her hands fly up in front of her terrified face, as if that would protect her. A rifle spits a bullet at me somewhere from behind. It pelts off my skin. I feel the lead flatten and clink to the ground. The blonde Mage dares a rictus snarl, one last act of defiance in the face of coming death. Brave. Foolish.

With a backhanded swing, I cleave her hip to shoulder. She falls apart in a spray of blood, her defiance transformed into shock.

This is war. Ugly and merciless, and without glory. There is no glory to being chopped apart like meat on a butcher's cold table. There is no glory in dying. Glory is reserved for flowery verses in poems, written by poets whose hands wield a pen like mine do a sword. I inhale, my lungs filling with acrid and iron smells of spent casings and all the blood I've spilled.

The ground trembles, and I see the charge of the heavily armored cuirassers, strapped in gleaming gold. Ah, the Usurper finally sends his dogs to play. Let them. I cast a glance behind me, and I see a mass of humanity; tens of thousands of red-clad foreigners milling about like a maelstrom. Time flows like honey, thick and deliberate. I am deep in my battle-trance, my mind trained to register every detail. Every movement. The crowd is moving, splitting down the middle like parting gates. To allow the cavalry charge to pass over only me.

The parting army reveals my handiwork. Corpses litter the ground underfoot, and I take in the grisly scene. There are at least a thousand dead. And only one of me. The thundering of hooves and clanging of armor snaps my attention back in front of me. I brace, Dawnbringer held to the side. I grip my weapon's hilt with both hands – legacy

dragging it down. But still I brace, and still they come – froth bubbling in the corners of horse mouths. They're large, larger than an average Pelaraami horse. Crossbreeds of Sredinan chargers and Konquestian warhooves, weighed down by armor and armored riders.

I can smell the sweat of these marvellous beasts, and my heart aches when I swing Dawnbringer. The force of their charge, hammering in my chest, diverts around me like a torrent would around a boulder. Three horses burst open, anointing me with their gore. I swing again, steel cleaving through metal and flesh and bone. Horse and rider whinny and scream. They fall around me. And the sound fades. All is distant now, as if the world were submerged under water. I focus on my grim work. My hands move on their own. Dodge, block, cut, punch. I cut a beast down and slam my fist into another. It flies back, a crumpled mess of armored flesh, taking three more with it.

Another rider tries to run me through with a lance, but the weapon splinters and breaks as it makes contact with my skin. A slash. He is no more. My beard and hair are soaked. I taste iron in my mouth. I turn and lunge, swinging at those who would turn and run.

Riders who aren't crushed by my onslaught watch, eyes empty. Faces slack, mouths hanging open. Some cradle their war-beasts, others stare at their missing limbs. Some cry and some writhe on the ground in pain, as blood spurts and fountains from wounds aplenty. I move like lightning, making short work of the remaining cavalrymen.

Then, there was calm.

I blink the blood out of my eyes, my chest heaving with quick, short breaths. I look at the sky, the warmth of sunlight sinking into my skin caked in crimson. I am a breaker of armies. They knew this. They still came. And I broke them.

A sound breaks through my battle-trance. The creaking of twenty thousand kilograms of steel whines through the soundless muck I was immersed in, and I turn to see an artillery cannon aligning its massive tube, training itself on me. These steel behemoths, made to raze cities, standing like boulders among the red tide that flooded the plains of Elderhearth. One of them pointed at me, its magitech firing systems flaring up with a low buzz. I am almost flattered. Almost.

I spread my legs and stand in a half-crouch. Heat builds inside of me, and I divert it to my legs. My muscles bulge and grow. The leathers that keep my greaves taut around my thighs and calves bulge and threaten to snap. Before the artillerists fire, I launch myself forward with a mighty leap.



I will show them fury. An artillery shell cast in flesh. I fall towards the machine of war.

I let the momentum of my landing carry through my fist as I smash into the artillery gun. It crumples underneath my strike like a thing made of paper. Steel groans as it collapses into itself. Roaring fire and the heat of a thousand forges envelop me in a great ball of flame as the powder and Crystals inside ignite and implode, swallowing the machine whole. The hand of a king rendering judgment upon this titanic, metal transgressor.

I stab Dawnbringer into the earth, and my fingers grasp the still-burning wreckage of the massive gun. My skin sizzles as I grip the molten metal. With a mighty heave, I raise the impossibly heavy hulk above my head. I can feel my muscle strands ripping themselves apart, and re-knitting themselves back together as Ruhanaan surges through me, giving me power. My spine compresses and I sink into the ground with twenty tons held above my head. Straining under its weight, I grit my teeth and hurl it forward – exhaling.

With a great arc of fire and smoke, it flies – impossibly – across the battlefield and descends upon another of its metal kin. Like a hawk, streaking towards its prey.

The sound, like a great metal bell signaling calamity, clangs through the battlefield as steel crashes into steel. Another deafening explosion, followed by a fireball that outshines the sun for a brief moment. It grows and grows, spreading, hungrily swallowing dozens of soldiers. The screams of men running everywhere and nowhere, trying to find respite from the fire that has them alight, pierce the air. Then the screams wink out, one by one, until there is nothing but silence. The two gargants now a twisted, molten ruin, belching smoke into the sky. The thundering of artillery falls silent as the world stares in shock.

More explosions rock the air, as ammunition stores light up from the spreading inferno.

I take my sword and step forward, my body covered in burns and bruises. It feels like a thousand wasp stings all at once. Smoke and heat curl off of me, trailing behind me as I walk. I imagine how I must look to the Sredinan invaders – a vengeful god of war, straight out of myth. Only one man, versus their hundred thousand, and it is their number that's growing smaller with each passing moment. This will be my legacy. Murder and mayhem and destruction.

Fitting, for a mad titan.

Sound crashes into me like a tidal wave, as a shrill cry of a hundred war-trumpets announce a newcomer to the field of battle. I feel a tug in my stomach, telling me to turn, to go elsewhere. But I see the imperious aquila with its azure eyes, atop its twin poles, moving towards me. A column of riders clad in gold and draped in violet cloth splits and surrounds me, and the tug stops. The jaws of a trap I didn't see now shut, and I – in the belly of the beast.

I see him. Walking. The Emperor of Sredinah, His Holiness Cassius Alexandrios Julius Invictor. The Dawnbringer Returned. He walks with a steady pace, confidence leaking from him like water from a sieve. He is clad in resplendent armor; a golden breastplate shaped like a man's torso, polished to a blinding sheen. A crimson cape, edged with the fur of Siewerski jaguars trailing behind him; his golden-haired head topped with a crown of golden leaves.

His face is not older than thirty winters, but he carries his youth with the grace of a man wizened by age and hardship. His eyes predatory, with a reptilian glint. And in his hand, a sword – gold jewel set into the crossguard, its sheen drinking in the sunlight. I glance at my sword and see a similar jewel, its shine dulled and hidden by the crusted gore.

So *this* is my adversary. I step forward to meet him, king to king. Man to man.

He stops, sword held in a classic sword-master's stance of greeting. Held diagonally, away from his body, the broad side of the blade towards me. Tip down to the ground. He is almost up to my shoulders in height. He might be tall and imperious, but he has brought war upon my doorstep – and for that, I will not give him the honor of greeting. A flash of irritation flickers over his face, but is quickly replaced by a curving smile that is anything but warm. He is offended by my slight. Good.

"What a mess you've made out of my army, Uther," he says, that cocksure lilt of Sredinan nobility heavy in his voice.

"You are not welcome here, usurper," I say, moving my sword, so its blade rests upon the bend of my elbow, edge toward him. Sword-master's way of saying *I will kill you*.

He raises an eyebrow, amusement playing on his face, and moves his sword in front of his legs. *Challenge denied*.

"Oh, but Uther, I am. Did you not think this day would not come? A peasant ascending the throne of Elderhearth? Calling yourself *Dawnbringer*? Laughable."

"Turn back, *Cassius*," I inject as much venom into my voice upon naming him, making my disrespect apparent. "Before I break you in front of your whole army. I will

forgive this transgression and pursue no vengeance.” I pause. “If you give up this madness.”

Laughter erupted from him. “You? Forgive *me*?” he continued to laugh, wiping a tear from the corner of his eye. “Nonsense, my good man.” He squared his shoulders.

“I have a proposition,” he waved his hand, and I sensed magic warbling in the air. His eyes glowed orange for a moment. A dome of ethereal orange light flickered into existence around us, enclosing us in the warding spell of Silence. All sound from beyond the dome was instantly cut – the outer world deaf to us, and we deaf to the outer world. He sighed, and pressed two fingers to the bridge of his nose. As if what he was about to propose could not be heard by anyone but me.

All my instincts were screaming to lunge at him, cut him in half, and end this farce while I still can. But that would take away what shred of honor I still had left in me. I remained still.

His golden Sons of Artorias surrounded the warding dome, making sure that no one can even see us inside.

He watched me, a predator watching prey. His gaze prickled the back of my mind uncomfortably. Like a very thin needle being pushed into my brain. It was strange, to feel...*hunted*.

“Listen, big man,” his voice dropping all pretense of royalty and grandeur. “I really would love to fight you and all, but after that prolonged display of violence, I’d rather not. Hell, I nearly shat myself just looking at you toss that artillery cannon like a child would a pebble.”

I opened my mouth to say something, but the abrupt change in his tone and demeanor struck me like a hammer. No words were coming to me. I saw his true self. Behind all that pomp and resplendence was...a dangerous man.

He smiled, knowingly. “What? Can’t a man be honest?” His courtly veneer now gone, the gutter voice of a sly manipulator in its place. Like the voice of scheming men I grew up with in the Commons. One I knew very well.

He stepped forward, now only an arm’s length away from me.

I moved on instinct, and my fingers wrapped around his throat. He let out a strained “urk”, as his face started going purple. He made no move with his sword. He only grabbed my wrist with his other arm and started to laugh through his constricting throat.

“Wh-” I said, stopping mid-breath. He wanted this. He planned this. Don’t think, Uther. Just squeeze, and snap his neck.

I quickly scanned our surroundings. His knights made no move to save their Emperor. They were just observing, still on the edges of the warding dome.

Cassius caught me looking at the knights, and his eyes told me that he knew exactly what I was thinking. A knowing smirk fighting for dominance over gasping for air. The sun playing on his face made his burnished irises look like slits. Golden eyes, like mine.

“K-kill...me!” he rasped. I loosened my fingers a bit, still holding him suspended above ground. Cassius wheezed a breath in, the purple receding from his skin somewhat. “R-right here! Jus-st s-squeeze!” He laughed – a wet, broken sound.

“But t-then, the s-second army I have c-cannot be s-stopped!”

He waited for the shock to paint itself on my face. A teathy grin flashing triumphantly. *Second army?*

I cut his amusement with an abrupt squeeze. He choked and tapped my wrist. I let him drop to the ground, thinking he’d fall to his knees. But he managed to remain upright.

I stared at him as he coughed and heaved, regaining his composure. He stood upright, his eyes bloodshot from the strain.

Cassius chuckled dryly, no humor in the sound. “Waiting. Near Elderport.”

He looked at me, eyes narrowing in satisfaction as I understood. He would attack the refugee train. My stomach became a knot, and I took a shaky breath.

“All those innocent lives...” he looked at his nails, considering the scale of the war crime. “Like lambs to slaughter. So, will you listen to my...proposition?”

My skin broke out in gooseflesh, my legs threatening to give out underneath me. Redness was coiling at the edges of my vision, but if I gave in to my bloodlust, then I would fail all that I am. I wanted to lunge at him, tear his pompous body limb from limb, and paint the ground red with his innards. To finish the job.

I wanted to punish him, to kill him. But despair and anger flared in me like a blacksmith’s fire. How did I not see this? I did not even consider it a possibility. My face hurt from the snarl that twisted it painfully. So this is defeat?

“You...would not dare,” I managed to squeeze through grit teeth. “Genocide?”

“Oh, but I would. You see, I like being prepared. And there is no world where I could take on the Titan of Elderhearth and win fairly. So, naturally, I had to be...creative. Anyhow, here is my proposal, King Uther,” he declared, imperiousness returning to his voice at the mention of my name. He waved off the word genocide with a lazy hand.

“You will surrender yourself to me, give up that fancy sword of yours, and I will ride into your lovely city with you collared at the end of my fancy chain. So I can parade you around, you understand? It isn’t enough that I ‘defeat’ you in battle,” he said, annoyed at the prospect.

“I must cast down your myth, unmake your legend, tear down all that you are...so your people feel utterly shamed by the fact that they let a peasant lord over them. I must debase you. Then I can rise upon the shoulders of giants...literally.”

Humiliation—only to feed his ambition. I took an involuntary step forward, the ground under my foot sinking with the power I was unconsciously summoning into my legs, like I would before a lunge. He backed away and tsked.

“Remember, Uther, fifty thousand people. More are swelling that number as they frantically join the evacuation train. What will they think of you when you’ve won? So much...waste,” he cleared his throat.

“Oh, and one more minor detail. After I’ve entered the City, I will have your right arm cut. It’s not a good look to let the ‘False Dawnbringer’ and his ‘heresy’ go unpunished. This whole Dawnbringer ordeal is...important to my people. Got to keep up appearances, you see.”

I shot him a glare full of hate, my lips quivering with unsaid retorts, my throat bulging with insults and threats that would do nothing but make me look like a pouty child.

He was a serpent, and I allowed myself to get bitten. His poison already working its way through my veins.

I took an oath. I swore I would bleed for my people, not consign them to death or oblivion. This crown upon my head drags my head down...its weight heavier than the mountain Elderhearth is built upon. This is the responsibility of those who take upon themselves a crown’s burden. To fight Cassius here, to kill him, would be the easiest thing in the world.

But it would be desperation born of arrogance from a wounded ego.

“It’s quite right, do take your time. I know this is not a decision made lightly. Agree to suffer at my hand, lose all that you are. Or, strike me down here and now, and win. But are you willing to pay that price, Uther?”

I am not that man. One last kingly act. That is all I have. I will not trade my honor for a hollow victory. I will suffer your degradations, little man. I will shoulder the burden of loss, and I will accept being hated by those I vowed to protect. I will walk to the gallows knowing that I saved them, and that is what is important.

Walls and buildings can be rebuilt, damage repaired. But lives lost in vain...those are losses that never go away. They stain the soul. I would rather die a condemned man than live out the rest of my days with the blood of innocents on my hands.

I take one deep, shaky breath. And I release all the power I’ve been holding inside myself. Cuts and burns and bruises flare up across my body like wildfires, the pain nearly making me black out. But I endure. I stab Dawnbringer into the ground, between me and him, and let my hands fall limp.

“I accept,” the poison fully sets.

His eyes wide, something between respect and surprise mixing on his face. I see now he didn’t expect this gambit of his to work. He probably had contingencies. They oft do. But such are lesser men driven by ambition. Drunk on their own power, motivated by greed. All they do is take and take, and they cannot imagine giving. Sacrifice for the greater good is for them an impossibility. A paradox. How can one give their life so freely? Give up power?

No. I am not like him. I am Uther Wolfswood, son of Kandor Wolfswood – a blacksmith from the Commons. A child of Elderhearth. And if my father taught me anything, he taught me that being good is choosing the pain of sacrifice over the comfort of power.

“Very well,” he stepped forward and took out a finely-made collar of black metal with a bluish hue. Crystallum. The collar had small, round pins on the inside – ones that would pierce my flesh just enough to disable me from using Ruhanaan. I laughed, as I felt the pins penetrate the skin on my neck. In that instant, I felt like an iron gate had slammed itself shut around my soul. My body felt...hollow. Like waking up in the morning, and finding the bed empty, with the warmth of your loved one still lingering on the mattress. I could sense that reserve of arcane power all around me, but I was unable to touch it. It was as if someone had cleaved my soul in two, and I felt incomplete. I gasped, and then laughed once more.

He stepped back, eyes confused, his posture guarded. Alert. As if I would lash out at him at any moment.

“I don’t need magic to tear your head off, Cassius,” I said matter-of-factly.

“Hm,” he said, attaching a length of silvery chain to the loop on the back of my collar. He waved his hand, and I knew he’d disabled the warding. He barked orders at his knights, then, in a loud voice, bellowed: “WE CAME! WE CONQUERED!”

Tens of thousands of voices broke into an earth-shattering chant.

“DAWN! BRINGER! DAWN! BRINGER!”

I closed my eyes, drowning all of it out.