

Two men flew above the barren wilds of the south of Rugalldon, far beyond the edge of the redwood forest, where the soil was red and jagged and the brush was hoary and dry. There was a dark figure on the horizon that was jumping from sight in bursts, and Vardanhe and Talthier were in hasteful chase of it atop his poleaxe, though the eerily smooth trip left plenty of idle banter time. Scarcely acquainted, the two made mutterings back and forth in concern and the disarming of concern, over and over. The poleaxe was a speedy vessel; Viskalokel, as Talthier'd finally confessed its name. Talk of superstitions, some faint attempt at easing their fret passed the time as Vard took to standing at the far forward tip of the shaft, his massive axe slung at his back and carried as if it held no weight.

"It's unnerving standing on this thing," he confessed dryly to Talthier, who smirked in reply.

"Some people like jumping around on it."

"So I heard." Vard shot Talthier a glare above a faint smile. "Cass told me all about your creepy plague doctor."

Talthier laughed deeply. "Smoke's not *creepy*." His laughter trailed some, then a distant sort of look took his face. "... no, maybe he is... a *little*."

"Gallock assassin?"

"That's what they wanted. He refused."

Vard let out a low, long whistle. "Nobody refuses Vaelet."

"Welp." Talthier shifted, crossing one leg over the other in a flamboyantly dainty gesture. "A lot of our group comes from 'nobody this or that's this or that person'." His hands came together atop his knee. "Nobody defies Zerrandenian patriarchy, nobody leaves the Gallodanian Academy, nobody smacks up Ethuel Welkinslight and gets off without punishment, yadda." He raised a finger. "Or how about nobody sends Rofvannon running squealing home, or goes galavanting around Ebranel without being struck by lightning..."

"*Yeah yeah*." Vard shot him a glare. "We get it. Letharia's impressive. What else do you expect? This is in no way my point."

"Of course. But you shouldn't be surprised, then, should you?"

Vard's head shook slowly. "You guys."

Another black flash ahead. Talthier moved both hands to the Viska's staff

and clenched tightly.

“How close are we now...”

Vard’s arm lifted to point a finger beyond the sloping shoreline ahead, to the mount of ragged rock that sat just beyond amid the waves. His head shook again, his arm dropped.

“They’re going to make it there before us if we don’t go faster.”

“This is Viska’s top speed,” Talthier grumbled lightly. “Sulvane’s there, isn’t he?”

“Far be it from me to misjudge Sulvane’s strength, brother, trust me. My thing is I don’t know who that is. And whoever it is killed Aro.” A hateful growl underscored his words. “I wouldn’t leave anyone alone with someone who could do that.”

“Let alone far-step.”

“Only Letharia can pull that off... so far as I know.”

“Celestine can.”

Vard flashed Talthier a look. “... how?”

“He taught her.” Shrug.

“Ancients.” Vard huffed. “That used to be a Gallock technique, back in the last king’s young days-”

Ahead, a bright flash of white light.

Both men hunched down, took hold of Viska.

A fight on the horizon.

“*Shit. Tal, go. Go.*”

Hallmarks of Sulvane’s power flung from a crevasse in the landscape, spiralling away wildly as the shrine’s narrow entrance came to view and the poleaxe swung wide and down to bring them within view. A clawing, lurching black mass of arms and hands was lumbering at Sulvane at the sheer stone wall, the tiny grotto behind him marked with the emblem of Kobrechima and its warden in furious defense of it.

The ivory staff was alight with a crimson lightning. Its bolts struck and slammed at his assailant, drew only a low laughter from the man in his regal...

... Gallodanian garb.

“*Bhelrand!?*”

His name called in shock by the masked Ebranellian drew his gaze. The king's baritone voice arose in reply.

*"Oh look, two Ebs on a stick."*

The manic elation in the king's face burned in fury against the blighted eye and threw Vard's focus off with a thrash and a shriek of pain. Viska halted midair, skidding and reeling back. Before them, Sulvane caught sight and let out a roar.

*"Get the hell out of here!!!!"*

Red light and barking thunder snapped at Bhelrand, thumped against him, shoved him down and back. Hands of black thrashed and darted at him, narrowly snipping the edges of Sulvane's robe as he frantically sidestepped, all but danced out of reach as he made his own assault against the king.

"Where's Safurien?" Talthier flashed glances around, took study of the place as the battle before them raged. No sign of her. What had he done to her?

"He didn't eat her, did he??"

Vard reached a hand back to smack at Talthier's shoulder. "Can't eat Ancients, dumbass! Had to have hidden her..."

Viska bore backward and around, began a circle of the area as its two passengers scanned the ground for sign of the reincarnated Ancient as Sulvane kept at her kidnapper with his onslaught of lightning and fire. Far below, above the ravine wherein lay the shrine, a flash of red caught Vard's eye.

Safurien, cowering, tucked behind one of the knotted shrubs.

*"Down, Tal!"* A finger jabbed in her direction.

Viska lowered, dashing airborne toward the little girl. As it neared the ground, a **blur**

**stepped just before them.**

Bhelrand's snarling face nearly met Vard's as one of the black hands lifted and pulled back.

Talthier stood on Viska's back end and stomped hard. Vard's end tipped upward, launched him off the shaft and out of the king's grasp. The blue-haired one snapped away and lifted, hurried after Vard to place Viska beneath him again.

Sulvane appeared in a mad dash behind Bhelrand. *"What part of get the hell out of here did you miss?!"*

The duo atop Viska lifted back as Sulvane swung his ivory staff with rage.

The assault of red lightning crashed against the king and pressed him back, away from the girl.

“You can’t have them!” Sulvane hissed angrily as the king was driven away. “Give. Up!”

A sudden  
jump.

Bhelrand’s black arms encircled Sulvane suddenly as he’d far-stepped into his midst, closer than the staff.

Two ensnared the half-vlint’s throat.

“*Good one.*” Sulvane grinned.

Vardanhe’s voice lifted in a horrified, pleading scream as blackness, fire and heat enveloped Sulvane. A shimmer arose. Soul stealing. The king’s maw gaped and drew in the light like a gasp.

“... *have to get out of here.*”

Talthier’s whisper was given as his hand snatched at Vard’s collar tightly, holding fast to Viska, pulling the poleaxe back and upward at full speed. The masked one thrashed, yanked against him, screeching Sulvane’s name as he was carried out of reach of this horror. Talthier kept a firm hold of them both as he sped away to the Cape of Knives again, in wide-eyed terror and the swiftest motion Viska would allow.

Vard fell to hateful tears of defeat, laced fingers into his own hair and gripped tightly, shaking his head again and again. Mutters of no, no. Insults and lamentations in his own colors.

“*It’s beyond us.*” Talthier kept hold of him. “It’s so far beyond us, Vardy.”

“*I’ll kill him! I’ll do it myself!! Take me back!!*”

“Vardy.”

“*Take me back...*”

Silence remained until they returned to the Anartia. Anger, disbelief. Another fallen. Another taken. Another dear friend laid low for this quest of his. Now Safurien and the ouroboros were both out of their hands.

The king would next want to seek out what lay in Rugalldon. The Anartia

would only have hope to stop him there.