

“Are you perhaps too tired, Nathaniel?”

Estarosa’s voice broke the silence of their small camp, teasing as she stared at the young man holding a sword, his shoulders slumped from exhaustion as he breathed heavily.

Nathaniel had grown accustomed to Estarosa’s taunts during their sparring sessions, yet they still infuriated him—especially when she laughed her chortling laugh as she stood there completely relaxed, her long red hair clasped in a thick ponytail and her purple eyes sparkling as she laughed at her own joke.

“Tired? You dream, Estarosa,” Nathaniel retorted.

She smirked as Nathan approached. He swung his sword at her, the blade a flash of silver. Estarosa blocked it easily. Nathan moved his blade, positioning it to defend himself, but Estarosa danced away.

Nathan came at her again, swinging his sword down. Estarosa twisted her body away from the blade and delivered a hard kick to Nathan’s chest.

Nathan felt the air leave his lungs as he was sent back. He caught himself before he ended up hitting the large boulder behind him. He floated in the air as he slashed, creating a small shockwave that flew toward Estarosa. Her eyes widened in surprise as she barely moved out of the way.

Nathan attempted to press the attack, flying toward her and striking with his blade like a sudden gust of wind. But Estarosa was quicker than even a starcat, and her rapier was a symphony of defense as she blocked Nathan’s attacks.

Estarosa rose to meet Nathaniel, and the two engaged in the air, flying this way and that, their swords singing their song. Their fighting grew more and more intense. Estarosa laughed every time Nathan missed—and he was loath to say he missed many times.

Estarosa's rapier, though, had touched Nathan several times—nothing big, a jab in the shoulder, a tap on the hand, a poke in the calf. Estarosa's way of letting him know she was faster.

Yet speed is not everything in battle. Estarosa, at times, could become brash. And as she laughed once again, Nathan moved to attack. She started to twirl away—though Nathan was ready, and he moved, cutting her off. His blade struck her arm with a hard smack.

Estarosa yelped, her smile gone.

Blue glowing runic tattoos began to appear on Estarosa's face as her eyes turned glowing blue.

"You would go into The Flow during a spar, Estarosa?" Nathaniel asked, bewildered as he watched Estarosa begin to slip into that most sacred of battle states.

"No. She shall not," a voice cut their duel.

Senior Jaknight Alphonse stepped forward. He had been watching the two spar from the opening in his tent. He had enjoyed it—but now that Estarosa had begun to enter The Flow, he decided it was time to end it before the sparring could escalate.

Estarosa had floated down, her face returning to normal.

"I apologize. I lost control. Your blow was quite hard, Nathaniel."

"You're a big woman. You can handle a small tap," Nathan said.

Estarosa burst out laughing. "Indeed, Nathaniel. Indeed. A good spar." She held her arms out for an embrace.

Nathaniel shook his head, a smile on his face, as he hugged her. Estarosa was head and shoulders taller than him, blessed with the great height of her Edenian heritage.

"You both sparred well, yes," Alphonse said, "but also, there are lessons to be learned.

Nathaniel, you must learn to adapt faster. Estarosa could have landed killing blows had she not decided to spend time with mockery.

And Estarosa—you must stop relying so much on your swiftness. Yes, it is great—but what happens when you face one who is as swift, or even swifter?

Nathaniel was able to strike you. Take heed of that, both of you. Do you understand?"

"Yes, Master Alphonse," they both said, bowing their heads in respect.

"Very good. Now both of you, go prepare. First Spear Reinhalt wishes a meeting by second starlight. He has new information."

Nathan placed a fist to the center of his chest and bowed his head again in the Jaknight salute.

Estarosa did the same. Alphonse returned the salute and began walking toward his tent.

Nathaniel and Estarosa stood for a moment before Estarosa turned around.

“You know, Nathaniel... I fear I may never find someone swifter than me.” She smiled as she said it. Yes, it was a tease—but she did feel that way deep inside.

“Surprising, Estarosa—seeing how I was able to land a blow.”

Estarosa shrugged. “Perhaps I let you. We wouldn’t want a disconfident Jaknight taking on an Alfaere for the fate of a flower in the Great Celestial Garden, would we?” She winked as she told him that, leaving for her tent.

Nathan stood speechless, unsure if his blow was earned or not.

Later, Nathan found himself in front of the large mirror in his tent. The tent was spacious—far bigger inside than out, as was standard for all Jaknight tents. A simple bed, a dresser, a mirror, and a small chamber room filled out the tent. It was, in many ways, more like an apartment than a tent.

Nathan looked at himself to ensure his uniform was properly prepared. His black tunic, beautifully embroidered with small white birds, ran a bit past his waist and was tied with a thick, oiled black leather belt. He wore black pants and dark brown boots. His left shoulder bore a shield-shaped silver pauldron.

Nathan looked down at his hands—they were shaking slightly. Nerves, most likely, he thought. This was the first time, after all, that he would be in a meeting as a Jaknight—someone who could speak, give their opinion, or even be given a mission.

That sent a chill down his spine.

Could he even handle a mission alone? he pondered.

“My father wouldn’t have had thoughts of doubt like I have,” he muttered to himself, shaking his head as if to remove the webs of self-doubt. He pulled on a pair of leather gloves to help calm his hands from shaking.

Nathan came out of his tent. The whole camp consisted of seven tents, lined up in a defensive formation. Nathaniel’s tent was at the rear of the formation, while First Spear Reinhalt’s tent was toward the front.

Nathaniel made his way there, stepping across the thick dewy grass. Twin moons offered their light.

“Nathaniel. Good evening.”

Nathaniel turned to see Kai, a sister Jaknight. She was dressed in a yellow tunic that illuminated her brown skin. Her thick curly hair was kept from falling into her eyes by the headband all Mercian women wore.

Kai was older than Nathaniel—but not by much.

“Good evening to you as well, Kai. I’m surprised you’re here. I was under the belief you were dealing with the Drinker of Dimensions alongside Sinckaide and Davi.”

Kai nodded. “We did. And though the Cosmic escaped our death songs, we did manage to bind him into one of the Cells.”

Nathan felt his chest tighten as Kai began to go into detail about how she and the others managed to capture a cosmic entity.