

How is pacing, buildup, and the action? Does it feel cliché? Or fresh? Are monologues balanced, or too much? This is also a death scene 😊. Does it punch? Or does it fall flat?

Thanks in advance!

Edit: Here's a version 2, the old version after it.

Version 2

With a resounding groan, the massive doors of the sanctum yawned open. The stench of sulfur slammed into them. Kal had always thought temples should feel peaceful and symmetrical. This one quaked like a forge about to burst. Veins of magma boiled in rivers along either side of the cavernous room. Sweat trickled down his spine as he wiped his brow with a shaky hand.

A dozen hooded enforcers loomed in a semicircle at the chamber's heart, cloaks snapping in the molten draft. *Six against twelve*. Not terrible odds, provided none of them tripped, or panicked, or forgot how to breathe. His pulse hammered all the same.

Columns spiraled upward, fire runes flaring in rhythm with the frantic heartbeat of the blazing sphere suspended above a central the altar. Shadows stretched long across the stone. At the center, Nina sagged in Mira's grip, wrists straining weakly as she was dragged step by step up the stairs.

If they weren't all about to die, he would have killed for five uninterrupted minutes to sketch the altar and pick apart how those jagged runes might channel such a flame. But five minutes wouldn't save Nina. And none of his studies had ever prepared him for this.

Draekonis stood tall above them beside the altar, a twisted craftsman admiring his work. Saints, the hood should've stayed on. Scales like shattered obsidian cut down his reddish jaw, ridges plating his brow, and molten eyes that looked like they could set your bones alight just by staring too long.

"There she is!" Wyn shouted.

Mira snapped her head toward the intrusion, eyes narrowed. "Stop them!" she barked. She yanked Nina closer as she ascended the dais.

Ashford raised his broadsword, stepping in front of the team like a steel wall. "Lira! Kal! Cover our flanks!"

The enforcers lunged, a wave of crimson cloaks and black smoke rushing towards them. Ashford moved with the discipline of a conductor's baton. A gentleman clad in iron-dark armor, but there was nothing courtly in the weight of his blows. Each stroke landed as if he were carving order into chaos itself.

And Lira—Saints, Lira was the solo. A streak of steel and motion, vaulting off stone like gravity was optional. Every strike a fierce note. If she was the melody, all he could do was scramble to keep the rhythm and pray he didn't miss his cue.

"Kal, on your right!" Wyn called. Arrows whistled past, punching with the precision of a metronome. The enforcer staggered, an arrow jutting from his side. Snarling, he hurled a fireball. Kal fumbled for the rune on his bracer, fingers slipping as the heat screamed closer. *Oh saints, oh saints!*

Dawn's water surged past, hissing as it drowned the fire. Kal's shield finally flared, humming against his arm. His lungs seized; he had nearly been incinerated.

Boots slammed into the enforcer's side. Steel clanged. Kal's breath hitched as Lira's dagger slipped clean between the ribs at just the right angle. The man coughed blood, crumpling as she wrenched the blade free and kicked him down. *Stars above, she even made murder look artful.*

"Kal! Focus!" she barked.

Right. Focus. Survive first. Admire later.

A blade arced for his head. Kal's body jolted into motion on instinct—*finally*. He yanked a vial from his belt, smashed it at his feet. Glass shattered into mist that stuck like cobwebs. The enforcer froze mid-swing, locked in a cage of glittering glass.

Kal managed a shaky grin. "Going somewhere?"

Then a sword punched clean through the enforcer's chest. Kal yelped, stumbling back as blood sprayed across the floor. Ashford stood behind the corpse, steady as iron. He wrenched free and met Kal's wide eyes. "Stay sharp, Kal. You're doing well."

Doing well?! His hands wouldn't stop shaking, his bracers clattering like dice in a cup. If this was 'well', saints help them all.

Another enforcer surged forward, blade raised. Ashford shifted to meet him, steel ringing out as their swords collided. The impact drove Ashford back a step. For the first time Kal noticed how tight his jaw was, how hard his boots scraped for purchase against the stone.

Panic clawed at Kal's chest. His fingers dove into his satchel and hurled the vial blindly. It burst against the stone short of its mark, spilling glittering smoke that did nothing but cloud Ashford's footing.

Hands flew to his mouth as Ashford stumbled, coughing. Saints above, he had blinded Ashford instead of helping. Should he try again? But what if he only made it worse? His mind spun, every vial at his belt a trap waiting to kill his friends instead of their enemies. His bracers rattled against him. The enforcer pressed harder; Ashford's polished poise

cracked into raw struggle, shoulders bowing. For a heartbeat, he thought he had doomed him.

Then, with a guttural roar, Ashford drove his knee into the enforcer's gut and tore free of the lock. His broadsword plunged deep into the man's chest, and a savage kick sent the corpse sprawling. Kal's hand tightened on his satchel. If his help only made things worse, maybe he wasn't meant for this fight. Maybe he was—

A jolt slammed into his back. Kal spun, bracer sparking as he nearly threw a vial—

"Saints, Kal!" Lira's face filled his vision. She froze, eyes flashing to something behind him. "Move!"

She yanked him sideways, shoulder cracking against a column as heat seared past. Fire roared into stone with a thunderous crack. Kal pressed flat against the column, lungs sawing for air. Lira's hand pinned him at his collarbone. She pulled back a fraction, eyes raking over his face. "Are you alright?" Her lips parted, green eyes catching the firelight.

He swallowed hard. "I—yeah..."

For a heartbeat, the battle noise blurred into silence, drowned beneath the thunder of his own pulse. Her eyes flicked down to his mouth, then back up. Her breath trembled, mixing with his. For one reckless second, he was pulled by an impossible gravity toward the gold rings burning in her eyes. If he leaned forward an inch—

No. Not here. Not now. He would ruin the moment. Survive first.

A spark hissed at his feet. He jolted, yelped, and hurled a vial without thinking. Golden smoke burst up in a choking plume, blinding two enforcers who crashed into each other like drunks at a tavern brawl. Kal slapped his bracer. A concussive shockwave flattened them both.

A boisterous cry. Gorrick's axe came down like a smith's hammer against brittle iron. Kal filed that away under *'terrifying observations': Syndicate armor did not hold up well against sheer brute force*. Gorrick wrenched his axe free, sweat streaking down his temple. Another enforcer darted in to aid his fallen comrades. Steel scraped across Gorrick's arm, leaving a smoking gouge. Teeth bared, he swung again. The enforcer jerked beneath the strike. He gripped his arm. With a growl, he tore a vial from his belt, bit the cork free, and poured the liquid over the burn. A sharp hiss sizzled from the acrid wound.

Gorrick straightened, rolling his shoulder once. He caught Kal's wide-eyed stare. A quick, toothy grin split his beard before he turned back toward Ashford's flank, axe already raised.

Saints, what kind of man grinned through pain? If that was strength, what did that make him? A scholar fumbling glass while soldiers bled for him.

The other enforcer was already pushing up on shaky arms. Orange light flared in his palms pointed at him. Lira vaulted, dagger catching the glow mid-arc. She came down hard, steel slamming into his skull. A wild burst seared across her thigh. She hissed, crumpling over the body, the scent of charred leather rising. Still, her blade wrenched free, and his hands fell limp.

Kal clenched his jaw. No. He wasn't allowed to falter now—not while Lira staggered, blood streaking her leg, dagger still raised. If she could keep fighting through fire and steel, then he could damn well manage one vial. His hand shot to his belt, closing on a green vial. This might help.

Wyn's voice cut through the clash of steel: "NINA!"

Kal's head snapped up. Mira was dragging her higher up the steps, Nina's fire spilling wild and jagged from her hands. Wyn broke from the melee, dagger flashing as he sprinted after her. For one breathless second, Kal believed he might reach her—

Then Draekonis opened his maw.

Flame thundered into the stone, a living wall cutting Wyn off. Even from here, the heat seared Kal's face. His stomach clenched. Saints, they'd lose her—

"Damn it—" He hurled a vial blind into the smoke. Glass burst, light scattering. It felt useless, small, against the inferno.

Beside him, Lira was still fending off enemies with reckless grace. But her breaths came too fast now, her shoulders heaving with effort.

"Lira, on your left!" he shouted.

She twisted, dagger catching an incoming strike. The clash rang out sharp, steel on steel. She kicked the enforcer back, but Kal saw the tremor in her injured leg, the falter in her stance. Sweat plastered hair against her cheek. She was pushing herself past her edge, and every calculation in his head told him what that meant in a fight like this. Kal pulled the green vial. An herbal tincture—a new blend, meant to burn off exhaustion and keep the body moving long after it should have quit. For once, he had exactly what Lira needed.

His heart hammered, ready to call her name, to shove it into her hand. Steel flashed through the smoke.

"Lira!"

She twisted, dagger rising, every line of her body coiled to meet the strike. Saints, she almost had it.

But the angle was wrong.

Kal's stomach dropped before the blade hit home.

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Cold fire ripped through her torso. Steel burst out beneath her ribs, and her breath hitched jagged and wet. The enforcer yanked the blade free. The chamber spun; the ground slammed into her back. Heat spread under her, slick and fast.

She tried to push up, to snarl, to fight, but her arms trembled violently, useless. Saints, not now. She had more to do—more to say.

Above the roar of Syndicate fire and Guard steel, a single voice cut through.

“LIRA!”

Her head lolled toward him. Through the blur, she saw him—eyes wide, mouth shaping her name like he could drag her back with it. Her vision narrowed until all she could see was him. Her hand twitched weakly toward him, stained red. For a heartbeat, she thought maybe if she could just touch him, just say it—

With a yell, Kal hurled two vials. Blue fire erupted, hurling the enforcer backward. His scream cut short against the stone with a sickening crunch.

Kal dropped to his knees beside her.

“No, no, no...” he whispered, pulling her into his arms. He fumbled to uncork the vial in his hands like he had never used one before. “Stay with me, Lira. Please. Just breathe. That’s all you have to do.”

His bracers flared, sparks screaming across the runes as if he could alchemize a miracle out of sheer will.

Her eyes softened. “Kal...” She had to tell him. The words she had hidden behind every smirk, every sidelong glance. Always waiting, always believing there would be time.

But time was gone.

“Kal... I—” Her throat seized. Blood spilled across her lips, hot and bitter. The words drowned before they could live.

He pressed the vial to her wound. The liquid hissed on her blood. His runes flared brighter, frantic. “You don’t get to give up! Not here. Not like this!”

Her fingers brushed his wrist, steadying him for one last moment. Her body refused to answer her—but she still managed the crooked smile she always gave him after teasing. Weak. Tired. But still hers.

“Hold the line,” she rasped. “Nina... needs you.”

“No!” His head shook hard, tears streaking his face. “I’m not leaving you!”

The battle dulled, falling away. No clash of steel, no roar of fire. Only his voice, frayed and breaking, and the weight of his arms holding her.

“Kal,” she whispered, lips trembling. Not this time. Her throat flooded, but she forced the words through.

“...I love you.”

Her body shuddered. Iron filled her mouth. But the words were free at last—an arrow loosed, flying true, even if she would never see where it landed. Her hand slipped from his wrist. Her chest stilled. But her smile lingered; she had finally let herself say it.

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The air left his lungs like an arrow had struck. His tears blurred her face, but he couldn’t risk missing even a second. “No, no, no... Lira—”

But the light was already dimming in her eyes. Fading like a rune sputtered when the energy bled dry. He watched in helpless horror as her focus slipped, her hand slackened on his wrist, and that brilliant, infuriating, impossible spark that was Lira Valiance winked out.

His chest caved. The roar of the battlefield muffled, meaningless. His mind, so good at building, fixing, solving, found nothing. Nothing he made could hold her here. Kal’s hands trembled as he pulled her against him. Her cheeks were streaked with soot and sweat. He pressed his lips to her skin, desperate, as though breath and touch could force warmth back into her the way a rune channels elements. But her skin was already cooling against the suffocating heat of the chamber. Her lips still carried the ghost of a smile.

Ashford dropped to one knee beside them, his broadsword clattering as his gaze swept over her. His jaw clenched, a flicker of raw emotion crossing his face. “Kal,” he said softly, gripping his shoulder. “She fought with everything she had—”

“It shouldn’t have been her!” Kal’s breath shuddered as he looked up, tears streaming down his face. “She shouldn’t have—” His voice broke, and he looked back at Lira. Her eyes were the green of moss between cobblestones, life that thrived even where it shouldn’t, staring empty at the ceiling. Strands of brown hair clung damp to her face, the braid over her shoulder unraveling where sweat and blood had loosened it. She looked so achingly alive, even as the light was gone.

His hands shook, desperate to hold on. At last he lowered her, fingers locking over hers.

Dawn wrapped her arms around him. Kal resisted, body rigid, but her embrace did not loosen. Slowly, the fight bled out of him. He sagged against her, shoulders heaving, forehead pressed to her shoulder as sobs tore free.

“She gave us a fighting chance,” Dawn murmured, voice steady though thick with her own grief. One hand cradled the back of his head, the other bracing his shaking shoulder. “Don’t let her sacrifice be in vain, Kal. Live for her.”

He clutched at her like a child clinging to a mother in the dark.

Wyn shot an arrow. Gorrick’s axe split the skull of a Syndicate soldier who had tried to crawl away. Both turned immediately, rushing to them. Wyn dropped to his knees, eyes glassy as they fixed on Lira’s still form.

Gorrick loomed, fists clenched until the knuckles blanched. With an aching tenderness, he reached down and brushed her lashes shut. “We finish this. For her.”

The scent of ash and iron burned in his lungs, and for a heartbeat, he hated their words. Lira was gone. But their arms held him through the breaking. Enough to remember the battle hadn’t ended, and the world would not stop for their grief.

And then, unbidden, he heard her. That crooked lilt she always used when he froze in training: *Come on, Kal. You’ve got this.*

He could feel the phantom press of her hand on his arm. His throat clenched. Saints, she would have teased him if he stayed on his knees. She would want him standing tall, fighting. She would want him alive.

Kal bowed his head against her hair, whispering through his tears. “I rise for you, Lira. I swear it.”

He dragged a trembling hand across his eyes, smearing ash and saltwater, forcing himself to see clearly.

Version 1

Kal had always thought temples should feel quiet, orderly and symmetrical. This one just looked like a forge about to collapse. Veins of molten rock bled through the black stone, streams of lava ran on each side, columns shuddered with every pulse of unstable magic, and at the center an altar glared like an over-engineered furnace someone had left running too hot.

Of course, his brain couldn’t stop cataloguing it. The fire runes scrawled over the altar were imperfect, etched too deep. Maybe that was the point? The light refracting through the Flame That Never Dies was volatile, like it had its own panicked heartbeat. If they weren’t all about to die, he would have loved five uninterrupted minutes and a notebook.

Instead, Mira was dragging Nina toward it. And Drakonis stood waiting like some twisted craftsman admiring his work. Saints, the hood should've stayed on. Up close, his face wasn't just dragon-like—it was like someone had tried to sculpt a priest out of volcanic rock and given up halfway. Jagged scales like broken glass ran down his jaw, ridges across his brow like armor plating. And those molten, unblinking eyes looked like they could set your bones alight just by staring too long. His mouth was the worst: too sharp, too thin. A predator's maw. He didn't look like a zealot. He looked like a creepier Ignisari dragged straight out of an old anthology.

"There she is!" Wyn shouted.

The enforcers lunged, a wave of crimson cloaks and black smoke rushing towards them.

Ashford raised his broadsword, stepping in front of the team. "Form up! We need to get to Nina!"

Gorrick barreled through the front line, his axe hitting like a smith's hammer against brittle steel. Kal filed that in the back of his brain under *'terrifying observations':*
Syndicate armor did not hold up well against sheer brute force.

Wyn's arrows whistled past, each one punching with the precision of a metronome. Dawn's water swept in smooth refrains, shielding and shoving with the grace of a practiced dancer. She shouted for them to stay together—good advice, though not something the chaos seemed willing to honor.

Ashford was a gentleman clad in iron, dark armor gleaming in the firelight, but there was nothing courtly in the weight of his blows. His broadsword moved with the discipline of a conductor's baton. No strike wasted, every cut deliberate. As if he were carving order into chaos itself.

And Lira—Saints, Lira was the solo. A streak of steel and motion, cutting tendons, vaulting off stone like she thought gravity was optional. She fought like music breaking loose from a lute, every strike a fierce, gorgeous note. Kal's vials hissed and popped out of rhythm, his bracers humming like half-tuned strings. But she was the melody lodged in his ears, pulling him forward like he had been born to follow. If she was the music, all he could do was scramble to keep the rhythm—and pray he didn't miss his cue.

"Lira, on your right!" Wyn called. Kal tracked her pivot, the way her dagger met the enforcer's side in a perfect countermove. Saints, she made even murder look artful.

Then two enforcers tried to box her in. Kal's stomach lurched, but she was already vaulting a broken column, landing behind them and dropping both with strikes so clean it made his hands itch for a sketchbook.

Focus, Whetherbee. Survive first, admire later.

An enforcer lunged for him, sword raised. Kal's body moved on practiced instinct. A vial hit the floor, glass shattering into mist that stuck like cobwebs and crystalized. The enforcer froze mid-swing, locked in a cage of glittering glass.

Kal managed a shaky grin. "Going somewhere?"

Two more rushed in. He flicked another vial, watched it burst into golden smoke that blinded them both until they crashed into each other like drunks at a tavern. His bracers flared, sending out a shockwave that flattened them. His lungs burned. His heart was hammering, not just from fear, but from trying to match her rhythm.

"Lira! Kal! Cover our flanks!" Ashford barked. His broadsword cleaved through an enforcer who tried to close in.

Kal pivoted toward the order, just in time to see Lira vault high—her dagger catching torchlight as she rained down on Syndicate forces pressing the edge. Saints, she was unstoppable. But when her blade hit home, he noticed the slight hitch in her landing. Too heavy. Too labored.

Kal's fingers flew to his belt, pulling a vial free. He hurled it at the next wave, the glass exploding into jagged shards that jutted from the floor like spikes. The enforcers screamed as they stumbled into it.

"We're holding them!" Kal shouted, sweat stinging his eyes. He slapped the rune on his bracer, a small shield sparking to life just in time to deflect a flaming arrow aimed at Dawn's back. The impact rattled his bones, but it held.

Above them, Mira dragged Nina higher up the dais, forcing her toward the altar.

Wyn's raw voice cut through: "Nina!"

Kal's head snapped up, saw Wyn tear free and sprint toward the dais, bow discarded, dagger drawn. Then a torrent of fire roared from Draekonis's throat, a wall of flame slamming down like a curtain to cut him off.

"Damn it—" Kal hurled another vial into the smoke. Beside him, Lira was still moving, still cutting through their enemies with reckless grace. But her breaths came too fast now, her shoulders heaving with effort.

"Lira, on your left!" he shouted, his voice cracking with strain.

Her braid whipped as her dagger caught an incoming strike. The clash rang out sharp, steel on steel. She kicked the enforcer back, but Kal saw the tremor in her leg, the falter in her stance. Sweat plastered hair against her cheek. She was pushing herself past her edge, and every calculation in his head told him what that meant in a fight like this. Kal's hand dove into his satchel, fingers fumbling past smoke bombs and glass vials until they found a small green vial. An herbal tincture—a new blend, meant to burn off exhaustion

and keep the body moving long after it should have quit. For once, he had exactly what Lira needed.

He yanked it free, heart hammering, ready to call her name, to shove it into her hand—
Steel flashed through the smoke.

“Lira!”

She twisted, dagger rising, every line of her body coiled to meet the strike. Saints, she almost had it.

But the angle was wrong.

Kal’s stomach dropped even before the blade hit home.

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Cold fire ripped through her torso. Steel burst out beneath her ribs, and her breath hitched jagged and wet. The enforcer yanked the blade free. The chamber spun; the ground slammed into her back. Heat spread under her, slick and fast.

She tried to push up, to snarl, to fight, but her arms trembled violently, useless. Saints, not now. She had more to do—more to say.

Above the roar of Syndicate fire and Guard steel, a single voice cut through.

“LIRA!”

Her head lolled toward him. Through the blur, she saw him—eyes wide, mouth shaping her name like he could drag her back with it. Her vision narrowed until all she could see was him. Her hand twitched weakly toward him, stained red. For a heartbeat, she thought maybe if she could just touch him, just say it—

With a snarl, Kal hurled two vials. Blue fire erupted, hurling the enforcer backward. His scream cut short against the stone with a sickening crunch.

Kal dropped to his knees beside her.

“No, no, no...” he whispered, pulling her into his arms. He grabbed a green vial from his pack, fumbling to uncork it like he had never used one before. “Stay with me, Lira. Please. Just breathe. That’s all you have to do.”

His bracers flared, sparks screaming across the runes as if he could alchemize a miracle out of metal and sheer will.

Her eyes softened through the haze. “Kal...” Her lips trembled. She had to tell him. The words she had hidden behind every smirk, every sidelong glance. Always waiting, always believing there would be time.

But time was gone.

“Kal... I—” Her throat seized. Blood spilled across her lips, hot and bitter. The words drowned before they could live.

He pressed the vial to her wound. The liquid hissed on her blood, useless. His runes flared brighter, frantic. “You don’t get to give up! Not here. Not like this!”

Her fingers brushed his wrist, steadying him for one last moment. Her body refused to answer her—but she still managed the crooked smile she always gave him after teasing. Weak. Tired. But still hers.

“Hold the line,” she rasped. “Unshakable. Nina... needs you.”

“No!” His head shook hard, tears streaking his face. “I’m not leaving you!”

The battle dulled, falling away. No clash of steel, no roar of fire. Only his voice, frayed and breaking, and the weight of his arms holding her.

“Kal,” she whispered, lips trembling. Not this time. She would not let silence win. Her throat flooded, but she forced the words through, ragged and wet.

“...I love you.”

Her body shuddered. Iron filled her mouth. But the words were free at last—an arrow loosed, flying true, even if she would never see where it landed. Her hand slipped from his wrist. Her chest stilled. But her smile lingered; she had finally let herself say it.

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The air left his lungs like an arrow had struck. His tears blurred her face, but he couldn’t risk missing even a second. “No, no, no... Lira—”

But the light was already dimming in her eyes. Fading like a rune sputtering out when the energy bled dry. He watched in helpless horror as her focus slipped, her hand slackened on his wrist, and that brilliant, infuriating, impossible spark that was Lira Valiance winked out.

His chest caved. The roar of the battlefield muffled, meaningless. His mind, so good at building, fixing, solving, found nothing. Nothing he made could hold her here. Kal’s hands trembled as he pulled her against him. Her cheeks were streaked with soot and sweat, yet still bore the faint, stubborn flush she carried into every fight. He pressed his lips to her skin, desperate, as though breath and touch could force warmth back into her the way a rune channels elements. But her skin was already cooling against the suffocating heat of the chamber, and the world would not answer his prayer.

Her lips still carried the ghost of a smile.

Ashford dropped to one knee beside them, his broadsword clattering as his gaze swept over her. His jaw clenched, a flicker of raw emotion crossing his face. “Kal,” he said softly, gripping his shoulder. “She fought with everything she had—”

“It shouldn’t have been her!” Kal’s breath shuddered as he looked up, tears streaming down his face. “She shouldn’t have—” His voice broke, and he looked back at Lira. Her eyes were the green of moss between cobblestones, life that thrived even where it shouldn’t, staring empty at the ceiling. Strands of brown hair clung damp to her face, the braid over her shoulder unraveling where sweat and blood had loosened it. She looked so achingly alive, even as the light was gone.

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Dawn wrapped her arms around him. Kal resisted, body rigid, but her embrace did not loosen. Slowly, the fight bled out of him. He sagged against her, shoulders heaving, forehead pressed to her shoulder as sobs tore free.

“She gave us a fighting chance,” Dawn murmured, voice steady though thick with her own grief. One hand cradled the back of his head, the other bracing his shaking shoulder. “Don’t let her sacrifice be in vain, Kal. Live for her.”

He clutched at her like a child clinging to a mother in the dark.

Wyn shot an arrow. Gorrick’s axe split the skull of a Syndicate soldier who had tried to crawl away. Both turned immediately, rushing to them. Wyn dropped to his knees, eyes glassy as they fixed on Lira’s still form. “She was the best of us.”

Gorrick loomed, his massive shoulders rising and falling with heaving breaths. His fists clenched until the knuckles blanched. With an aching tenderness, he reached down and brushed her lashes shut. “We finish this. For her.”

The scent of ash and iron burned in his lungs, and for a heartbeat, he hated their words. Lira was gone. But their arms held him through the breaking. Enough to remember the battle hadn’t ended, and the world would not stop for their grief.

And then, unbidden, he heard her. That crooked lilt she always used when he froze in training: *Come on, Kal. You’ve got this.*

He could feel the phantom press of her hand on his arm. His throat clenched. Saints, she would have teased him if he stayed on his knees. She would want him standing tall, fighting. She would want him alive.

Kal bowed his head against her hair, whispering through his tears. “I rise for you, Lira. I swear it.”

Dawn’s hands steadied him, coaxing him upright. When his body wanted to fold. Wyn slipped an arm around his shoulders. “I’ve got you, brother.”

Kal's breath hitched, tears streaking through the soot on his face. He dragged a trembling hand across his eyes, smearing ash and saltwater, forcing himself to see clearly.