

PROLOGUE

An ethereally beautiful woman clad entirely in white lay panting next to an older man. His features were obscured by the black cloak that he wore at all times, but the long, black beard that hung from his face was visible and soaking with sweat.

"We did it," Darkness said, groaning as he pushed himself to his feet.

"Yes," Light said, deigning to just keep laying there. "The Dungeons are free of Chaos's influence, if they wanted to be."

"How many rejected you?" Darkness asked her.

"Slightly less than half," she answered before gliding to her feet. "Three are close enough to Craesti and Ashkhas forces to be defeated fairly soon."

"I will point them to their targets," Darkness said, then grunted. "Well, once we recover. Come dear." He took her hand, and they walked into a different room. With a gesture, drips of a liquid energy too pure, too powerful, to be Aether dropped onto the floor from ten Inscribed spikes.

The first drop caused another Inscription, a perfect evolution of the gathering Inscriptions built into the Craesti training facilities, to flare to life. The two deities stepped into the middle, pulled each other close, and then they absorbed a flood of energy sufficient to overwhelm every single Core-level gatherer on the planet below them.

Hours, days, passed as they gathered, until finally Darkness stepped out of their embrace. "Fire's Inheritance!" He exclaimed, "one of my chosen ones has found it!"

"It was on the Askhas island," Light said, her eyes wide. "Why did we not realize it?"

"He hid it well from us, to keep it from Chaos," Darkness said, pride on his face. "Of course, the Ashkhas would not understand the M'Zee language. Come, let us watch Aiden explore."

"Remember to guide the Ashkhas Sayaad to the non-compliant Dungeon," Light said sternly. "Do not get too distracted by your favorite chosen."

Darkness just laughed, walking through their chambers to the globe, sending a few quick messages before zooming in on his favorite zoomie.

CHAPTER ONE

I carefully cycled my Aether through my meridians, keeping it just on the edge of pain. The scar tissue left over from my battle with the Illyrian champion and subsequent running fight through the city was mostly gone after a week of medical treatment and three days of constant work.

I was tired, having skipped sleep to get as far as I had. That thought caused me to yawn so hard my jaw cracked, and I had to quickly turn my head aside before I inhaled ground Nettle Leaf. I failed, and the resulting sneeze set me back ten minutes worth of preparing herbs. "Light," I exclaimed, stepping back from the work table before I broke something in irritation. "Gotta start again. At least this is giving me a good workout in Aether control." I shook my head, yawning again, before grabbing a cloth and wiping down the table.

I was in the middle of cleaning my mortar out when I heard the door creak open behind me. "Aiden," Jamila said, her tone low and chiding. I looked over at her, smiling at the beautiful young woman. She was a little under average height for a seventeen year old, or fifteen in the extended years of Zemias, the planet I'd been on for over a year now. She looked like a live-action Jasmine from Aladdin, a heart shaped face with caramel skin and long luscious black hair. She wore it in a ponytail, exposing her graceful neck. It also exposed the burn scars covering half her face. They were remnants from an attack she got caught in during our fight for the city. The injuries were unable to be healed until she grew strong enough to gain control of the insidious Aether left by the Core-level Illyrian her group fought.

"You look beautiful," I said.

She just shook her head. "Have you slept at all since your healing?"

I held my arms open for her, holding a yawn in, "Hug?"

"Just because you are cute does not get you out of trouble," she grumbled into my chest. "You need to rest."

"There's no time," I said. "Plus they don't have the right herbs here, so I had to adapt the recipes I know. I only just got a working gathering powder better than the stuff from the shop down the street last night."

"You know they are considered one of the best Alchemist shops around, right?" She smacked my chest.

"Yeah, but no one specializes in powders. Not here, not back in Craesti or Azyl City either. Except Librarian Narwan and me, as his apprentice," I said. "Plus, working on powders keeps my mind occupied but it's still simple enough I can cycle my Aether to clear the damage at the same time." I pointed over to the pile of completed powders. "See, these are all almost as good as my Complete Gathering Powder."

"Good. Now you can hand those out and sell the recipe *after*," she emphasized that word strongly, "taking a nap. We still have four more days before the gate opens, and you do not want to collapse from exhaustion and miss it, do you?"

I looked down at her, still holding her tightly. "Okay. Can you take half of those and take them to Lindsay, if we don't run into her on the way back to our rooms?"

She nodded, then helped me pack the powders, which I'd taken to calling Monster Miracle Mowders in my head, because alliteration is fun, into two bags. We then walked arm in arm back to the inn. Lindsay was nowhere to be seen, so Jamila left me at the door to my room

to attempt to track down the young woman who had similar scars. I wanted to help her out, as she only needed to reach Condensation to remove her scars, a much simpler prospect than reaching Core.

The room was empty. Jon was out somewhere. I looked out the window and realized it was mid-afternoon. I'd completely spaced out on the walk back. "Yeah, I need to sleep," I thought out loud, then laughed at myself. I contemplated getting ready for bed, then just collapsed into it without bothering to take off anything I was wearing.

I slept for three hours, before Jon, my best friend and roommate, shook me awake. He was a bit taller than I was, only a few centimeters short of two meters tall, and built like a brick. He'd grown both taller and thicker as he dove into his role on our team. He fought with a sword and shield, holding the line so the rest of us could do the damage. His short black hair, which he'd combed over to cover the burned patches, had started to develop hints of purple in it as his Ice Affinity continued to advance, reaching the Excellent level. His Bond with Zimnodlot probably caused it a bit as well, being the main source of his Affinities advancement. *I wonder if I'll get red streaks in my hair from Sia? Might look pretty awesome,* I thought.

"Come on, it is time for dinner," he said. "Vaya and Jamila both told me you need to eat. Princess Aleksandra might have said the same thing if she was not with Vaya at the time."

"Sure I can't keep sleeping?" I asked with a yawn.

"You know better. Light, you got on my boat about the same thing a few months ago," he said while hauling me to my feet.

"Yeah, yeah. You've got free rein to make fun of me for forgetting my own advice," I laughed self-deprecatingly as I brushed off my tunic in an attempt to smooth out the wrinkles. Also to brush off pieces of ground herbs from the stains covering the shirt I hadn't changed in three days. "Uh, I'm gonna take a shower real quick, and change clothes."

"I will let them know you are coming. Get pretty for your girlfriends," he said, a grin splitting his face.

"Uh huh, 'cause you didn't buy that shirt because Bridget said you looked good in green?" I smirked at him then rolled my eyes. "Yeah, we're both smitten."

He laughed and left the room while I collected a change of clothes and some toiletries. A quick shower after my nap left me feeling mostly human again. I hurriedly got dressed, pulling a purple tunic and black pants on before looking in the mirror. *Heh, I still remember what I looked like when I first arrived in this world. Now look at me. Darkness knows I wasn't this strong or good looking back on Earth.* I resisted the urge to flex before rolling my eyes at my antics.

I quickly smoothed my short-cropped black hair, then tousled it slightly in a futile attempt to make a cool looking messy hairdo. "Eh, good enough," I laughed at myself, then headed downstairs to join my friends for food.

Princess Aleksandra, Aleks to me, was the first to notice me. She stood and walked over to the entry into the dining room to intercept me. "Knight Aiden," her frosty tone let me know how much I'd messed up. "You are a Knight of the realm and head of a new noble household. You are to be a shining example of the best a gatherer can be. Not an idiot who tries to work himself to death while recovering from a significant injury." She crossed her arms under her chest, her blue eyes flaring at me.

"I know. I know. I won't make the same mistake again," I told her, holding my hands up as if to shield me from her wrath. My stomach chose that moment to growl loudly.

"Come on. You need to eat," she grabbed my arm and pulled me towards the table where she had been sitting with Lilianna, Milenna, Vaya, and Jamila. Lilianna and Milenna were two of the other girls on Aleks's team, while Vaya was my other girlfriend. The only girls missing were Hanna, Aleks's team's healer, and Lea, a member of Jamila's team. Xiao, Ming, Bridget and Jon were sitting at the table next to the young women. Xiao and Ming were brothers with Ming in charge of the other team from Azyl Academy. Bridget was Jon's girlfriend and the last human member of my team.

"Uh, how are Hanna and Lea doing?" I asked as I sat. Lindsay showed up within seconds, dropping a large plate of steak and veggies in front of me with a giant smile.

"Lea's legs are almost done growing back," Ming said from the table behind me. "They are expecting to be finished tomorrow morning, so she will have a couple of days to get used to them before we go into the Divine Territory."

"That's awesome!" I exclaimed.

"Hanna is mostly recovered, but she went to sleep early today. You missed her by ten minutes," Aleks said.

"Good. So, what've you all been up to the last couple of days?" I asked as I cut my steak into bite-sized chunks.

"Jamila and I have been working on a new healing technique with some of the Ashkhas healers," Vaya said. "In return, we have been working at a clinic helping civilians recover from the attack."

"Ooh, what technique?" Milenna asked, leaning forward.

"They call it the Steady Bazsazi Technique. It is a technique that speeds up someone's natural healing, rather than using Aether to force it. The main benefit is Aether efficiency, as it uses very little for the healing it does and we can set it up before a fight to heal minor scrapes as they happen," Vaya explained.

"It will also help keep all of you safer. Even if you get knocked unconscious or severely injured, it will prevent you from bleeding out, giving us time to reach you," Jamila interjected, looking over at me, at Milenna, and then behind her at Ming. "I do not want any of you to get crippled or killed."

"That is great, Jamila, Vaya," I said, reaching over to catch their hands. "We trust you to keep us safe and healed." I looked over everyone, about to say more when Aleks spoke up.

"As your Princess, I command you to prioritize coming back alive over any benefit the Divine Territory can provide," she said forcefully. "I know there are supposed to be treasures and resources that are not available anywhere else, things that can significantly increase your gathering level or capabilities, but you have to be alive to benefit. War is upon our Kingdom, and we will all be instrumental in the fights to come. Get stronger and take risks if you must, but be smart about it." She took a deep breath, then said quieter, "I do not want to lose any more friends."

"We'll all cover for each other, and work together to bring back riches for the Kingdom, and ourselves, successfully," I said with a grin. "And what have you been up to?"

Aleks shrugged, "Training mostly, working to improve my area techniques."

"Do not be shy, Princess," Lilianna said. "She has been negotiating a new trade treaty between our Kingdom, the Ashkhas, the Weltreich, and the Topraki. Our performance here, and

the war with the Illyrians, might have finally stopped the cross-border skirmishes with the Topraki.”

Aleks looked away with a blush.

“I took my team and Lilianna to the Dungeon you found,” Ming said. “It was an intense experience. We finished the first wave and left, getting a good set of Cores to work with, along with a Core-level sword and a set of bracers that strengthen Air attacks.”

I looked over at Jon and Bridget, then winked at Vaya, “We’ll have to go back before the Territory opens.”

“You got it,” Jon said with a grin. “Hopefully I’ll be able to get a new shield from it. My last one is barely holding together, but they do not sell many of higher quality here.”

“Could be. We could ask when we run it. Bruno might be amenable, if he’s allowed to be,” I said with a shrug. “Did you make any more of your bombs?”

“Of course,” Jon said, acting offended. “I have got dozens of them ready now, along with a bunch of healing powders.”

“Remind me to show you the recipe I figured out a bit ago,” I said. “I adapted the Complete Gathering Powder to use local ingredients.”

“Great!” Jon said.

We chatted for another half hour, and I put down a second plate of the steak. Finally, we wrapped up dinner. “Come on, Jon, let’s go work on some Alchemy,” I said as I stood.

“Two hours,” Vaya said, “then you really need to rest some more.”

“Will do,” I smiled at her, taking in the gorgeous face and long blonde hair of my girlfriend, then followed Jon out the door and down the block to the rented workrooms Librarian Narwan and Knight Kaminski had secured for us to use when we arrived in the massive city. We spent the next two hours doing Alchemy, where I explained what I’d done to reach the recipe I had, and Jon shot holes in my thinking.

”Why did you use powdered Neem Tree Leaves instead of the bark?” He asked me. “The bark would balance out the Metal from the Hadid Stem better, I think.”

“Good point,” I said with a self-deprecating grin. “I used the leaf because it was what I had available in the middle of the night.”

“Well, you should not be making new recipes without access to Herbalist shops,” Jon shook his head.

“Any other thoughts?” I asked.

“Not yet,” he answered. “Let us work through it for a bit, see if anything jumps out at me.”

I laughed, “Sure.” I pulled out all the ingredients, and Jon added in a few chunks of Neem Tree Bark so we could try the difference. Two hours quickly flew by as we rejiggered the recipe a few more times, changing proportions and trying out a few new ingredients before Jon finished up one last powder set.

He popped a portion of the powder into his mouth and nodded. “Another ten percent increase in strength,” he said after a few seconds.

“Yeah, but a twenty percent increase in cost. I think the recipe with the leaves instead of the one with the bark is the best value for the cost,” I said.

“Probably. We could sell both recipes and let whoever buys them decide which to make,” Jon said. “Well, let’s head to the Alchemist’s Treasures. Alchemist Michal treated me well when I went to get ingredients from them.”

"Sounds good," I said. We spent a few minutes cleaning and packing up before leaving the workshop. I followed Jon a bit over a block away to a large store with vines growing down on either side of the door. "Neat, these are Star Vines. Their flowers are used in several pills to help blood flow and decrease the risk of heart disease."

"Huh, I thought they were just decoration," Jon said with a shrug. He then pushed through the door into the shop. There were four freestanding shelves forming five aisles that led to a large counter at the front of the store. A bored-looking Ashkhas teenager read a large Alchemical reference book behind the counter. "Good day, Shirin, is Alchemist Michal available?"

"Oh, Jon," the young woman said, hopping to her feet. "Let me check." She hurried through the door at the rear of the store.

I turned and browsed through the powders on the third set of shelves. The first two shelves were ingredients and then two shelves of powders. Under the counter were pills, all in locked cabinets. There were hundreds of types of powders, all labeled with names, a short description of effects, and a price. *I've got a gold on me, that should cover everything I might need for the Dungeon run tomorrow. Hmm, let's find, ooh, nice.* I pulled a small bottle of Lightning Aether Flow Powder, which said it would give a quick infusion of Lightning, Air, and Fire Aether to fill your center after emptying it.

I grabbed ten of those, then ten focused on Wood, Water, and Earth, and ten centered on Ice. I would have bought more, but that was every one of them there. "Like most powders that refill your center, those are less effective when taken in succession," an older gravelly voice sounded from behind me.

"That's why I'm grabbing ten," I said while turning to find a positively ancient looking human. "Alchemist Michal, it is a pleasure to meet you." I bowed to him, carefully shifting my hands to not drop any of the powders.

"And I you, Knight Aiden, Munqiz of the city," Alchemist Michal bowed lower than I did. "What can my humble shop do for you?"

"Uh, I wanted to purchase some powders to prepare for a series of fights," I said, "and I wanted to trade two upgraded powder recipes."

"A series of fights, hmm? Headed to that Dungeon then?" He asked.

"You know about it?" Jon asked from beside him.

"My son is a captain in the Sayaad Pavilion, and he told me about it. Only get five of each of those, they will be nearly worthless after that many in an hour. There are two other recipes that are overall refills, you can take three before they stop working. Now this set here," he pulled another powder out, "is a single type, and you can only take one of each per day, but someone at your level should be able to convert Aether types well enough."

"I would like four of each of those, then," I said. "And what about that refill pill?" I walked to the front and pointed.

"That will fill a normal Complete Condensation gatherer, and you can take two in a day without losing efficacy," the old man nodded. "Hmm, tell me about this powder recipe."

I nodded, "The recipe Jon and I came up with is a tweaking of a powder recipe I perfected over the last few months, focusing on effectiveness for the least cost. There are two, one that is roughly fifty percent more effective than the Common Gathering Powder you sell,

and it only cost ten coppers to make. Jon came up with a recipe that is sixty percent better, but it costs forty coppers.”

“I will take both recipes if you want to trade. That amount of powders and pills are not worth the trade, though, so how about I pay you,” he thought for a second, “five gold?”

“Ten gold, but it will only be paid in Alchemical goods from your shop,” I countered. “Goods purchased at cost.”

“I can accept that,” he nodded. “Shirin, please get my journal.” The Ashkhas teenager, who’d been staring at me unabashedly for the entirety of our discussion, nearly tripped over her own tail in an attempt to rush as fast as she could to the back room. She came back shortly with a quill pen, ink pot, and large notebook, and handed them to Alchemist Michal carefully. He took them with a nod, then quickly penned out our agreement on its own page. I detailed the recipes we’d figured out, and he recorded us as spending fifteen silver, forty less than the list price, for the refill powders and pills we’d purchased.

Jon spent another five on healing and blood clotting powders, then we bowed goodbye to the Alchemist and his assistant, who immediately closed the store to go focus on producing the new powders.

Back at the inn, we found Vaya and Bridget waiting in the lobby with four cups of tea. “It has been three hours, not two,” Vaya stated calmly.

“It has,” I replied. “We finished experimenting with the recipes after two hours, then cleaned up the workroom and did some shopping.” I gestured at the bag and described what we got. “So we should be much better prepared this time.”

“I made another five of the Earthen Anchored Barrier Inscriptions,” Bridget said, “along with a couple dozen various attack inscriptions.”

“I can’t wait to hit the Dungeon again,” I said exuberantly. We chatted for another hour, drinking tea and just being friends, letting me rest and cuddle Vaya at the same time.

CHAPTER TWO

I bent over, gagging as I tried my best not to throw up after the teleport. “Light,” I panted, not spewing my guts only by sheer stubbornness.

“Are you okay, sir?” a High Smoke Ashkhas asked from the front of the platform. She was younger than I was and wearing a set of leather armor that I'd seen quite a few others wearing in the Sayaad Hall.

“Yeah, I'll be fine,” I said, straightening out. “Teleporting like that doesn't agree with me.”

“Sorry. May I ask you to please vacate the Transport Platform? I cannot signal for another group to transport until you are off,” she said with a slight bow.

We hurried off the slightly elevated surface. “Sorry,” I said. “I'll clear out faster next time.”

“Thank you! Have a great stay at the Jungle Arena Camp,” she said, her feline face stretching in a grin I recognized from retail stores everywhere.

We all murmured thanks then turned to the camp. The teleport had taken us to a new clearing, just outside the ring of trees I recognized from our mad dash to escape the high-level Beast. Inside the clearing, two large wooden buildings had been erected already. One was four stories tall, with a dozen windows on each level facing us, looking like a large hotel or apartment building. The other was two stories tall, with two massive doors and no windows. Near the entrance to the Dungeon, three shaded stalls were set up.

“Huh, there is a tiny market set up at the entrance,” Jon pointed at the stalls.

I looked closer and noticed that two of the stalls were set to either side of a worn dirt path leading to the third, and they had shelves stacked on and around the booths. They were both manned by two people, and each had a small line in front. I could see one of the Ashkhas, the leonine race whose city we were in, talking to a Volk, the dwarf-like race that were our allies, animatedly waving their arms and gesturing at an item on the table next to them. The third stand, in contrast, had a single person sitting at it, writing on something in front of them.

“Come on, we are supposed to speak to the Sayaad Guild representative,” Vaya said, starting to walk towards the Dungeon. “I see the Sayaad symbol on the booth at the end of the path.”

We marched down the trail. I heard the merchant next to it discussing their wares, selling items to help their customers do better in the Dungeon. *Huh, that guy just tried to sell a healing powder for ten silver, when the Alchemist's Treasures sold that one for two. Wow, captive pricing is in full swing here. Glad we stocked up ahead of time,* I thought to myself.

“Good morning, sir,” I said, stepping to the front of our little group and bowing to the Core-level gatherer at the stand.

“Good morning, Knight Aiden,” he responded, standing and bowing just as low to me. The Ashkhas was a bit taller than I was, just a bit over two meters tall, with tan fur going grey around his eyes and ears. His smile revealed the sharp teeth in the front of his mouth, though flatter teeth near the back revealed the omnivore nature of the Ashkhas. “I am Caretaker Zana. The Dungeon's middle difficulty instance,” the word instance was in English, “, recommended for Condensation level gatherers, is available. The Dungeon has the amazing ability to hold three different parties in it at the same time, as long as they are using different difficulty tiers. Bruno calls it ‘instancing’, and I find it fascinating. You are free to head in. Take care of yourselves. While he does not like killing, he cannot stop his monsters if you all go down.” He pointed us to

the middle of three entrances to the Dungeon. The other two had a shimmery film of Aether across the front blocking the doorway.

"Thank you," we all said with a bow.

"That's so cool!" I said, bouncing on my feet. I looked deeply at the entrances into the Dungeon, pushing Aether into my Divine Senses Technique to try and get a better look at whatever it was doing. Swirls of Aether could be seen flowing around the opening, but nothing that looked like a rune or technique. With a shrug, I stepped through. A gut-wrenching sensation of movement was gone in an instant and we were in the middle of the clearing.

"Aiden!" Bruno's voice thundered around. "Welcome back to the Jungle Arena Dungeon!"

"It is good to be back, Bruno," I said.

"I owe you so much! These last two weeks have been the best of my entire being. I'm getting stronger! Did they tell you I have instances now? It's radical, man. My easiest level is usually run by guys at the Aether Gatherers level, I think it's called. They can run every day, and I can start a new instance only a few minutes after a group finishes. They don't give me much, but something is better than nothing! Your level takes me an hour to recover, while the highest level, uh, Core I think, I can only do two instances a day. But it was one a week ago! Hah. How many waves do you think you'll take today?"

"Are they the same as before?" I asked.

"The first is, but I've got sooooo many new Beasties, that every wave past the first is a new experience," his enthusiasm thundered around us.

"Well, we'll push as far as we can," I said.

"Good, because you won't get any cool equipment if you can't beat the second wave," he told us. "No first clear bonus this time."

"Aww," Bridget said. "I was hoping to get Kami something."

"I really wanted a shield," Jon said loudly, then winked at the sky.

I shook my head at him, then turned to the others. "Ready?" I asked, and got a bunch of nods. Sia was sulking, wearing a suppression collar again so we could fight together. "We're ready!"

"Then let's get ready to rumble!" Bruno shouted while beams of Aether shot out of the false sky above us. Twenty-four Soldier Ants formed around us, only to be met with a withering storm of Aether. I sent two Lightning Aether Blasts that obliterated my targets, while a beam of Fire swept across three others from Sia's place on my shoulder. Ice Spears, Earthen Spikes, Vine Whips, and Air Blades shot out from my team, leaving the majority of the Ants splatters of goo on the ground. Only a few made it close enough to retaliate with Aether Slashes.

Kami leaped in front of the attacks, an aura of Earth and Metal Aether forming into a wall that stopped the attacks instantly. Sia and Zim leaped into the air and Blasted away the last Ants of this round.

"Well, that went smoothly," I said. "Ten minutes, refill as best you can. Next round has more, but we should be able to avoid using a Barrier Inscription."

"How are your meridians?" Vaya asked, chewing her lip as she looked at me.

"Pain free. I did get the last of the damage cleared off yesterday," I said. "In fact, they feel stronger than they had been."

"Good," she smiled, then closed her eyes.

I felt the Aether around us surge towards her, only balanced out by the others' pulls. There was so much ambient Aether, though, that none of us had any issues with running out.

A tone rang out across the field. "That was your thirty second warning, I won't repeat this information," Bruno told us, his voice robotic and toneless.

I stood and started to charge another two attacks. This time, thirty-two Soldier Ants appeared. We destroyed just as many before they reached their range of a few meters, but a dozen survived to attack. Jon and Kami blocked the majority of them, and I deflected one Slash away from myself and Vaya.

I leaped forward and it tried to bite me. I stopped its mandibles from closing around my waist with my trisula held in a reverse grip, before flaring Aether into the General Strengthening Technique. I felt the difference from its evolution, an unconscious increase in the efficiency and strength of the Technique. With a grunt, I threw my arms to either side of my body, ripping the Ant's pincers off its face. I rotated my wrists and slammed my hands back together, this time with the point out. The Beast's head exploded and I had to spit gore out of my mouth as I turned to survey my team.

Jon was defending against three Ants, and I watched as he skillfully deflected two of them into each other with his shield. He then stepped forward and skewered the untangled one through the face, dropping it. I sent an Air Aether Blast into the other two. The explosion of Air Blades that formed around it sliced off several legs, leaving them easy prey.

Vaya had entangled three before carefully stabbing them dead, while Lampart casually dismembered another Ant.

"Does this seem too easy to you all?" Jon asked.

"We have all grown significantly stronger," Bridget said, "and we know what to expect this time. Of course this is going better."

Ten minutes, Sia sent right after landing on the last Ant and ripping its head off its torso. Also, these are slightly weaker than the ones we fought last time. Weak level fours instead of average.

"Thanks Sia," I said before sitting down to gather, though I barely had any Aether missing. *My natural regeneration went up again, I thought, looking around my center. And I'm starting to think my Aether capacity is just ridiculous. I could probably use a thousand of these simple Aether Blasts without running out. Alright, full. Not enough time to work on enhancing my meridians. I opened my eyes and looked around. About a minute left, I think. Let's build up a Wrath of the Lightning Herald, but let's change some runes. See if I can make it multitarget instead of single.*

I stepped away from the others, giving myself a bit of space, then swept my hands up in front of me from my side, then out to either side before bringing them straight up. I turned around and dropped them to create two semi-circles of runes above me. I heard the chime, then filled in the space between with runes, replacing several 'target' and 'enhance' runes with a few that meant various versions of 'split' or 'redirect'.

The beams of Aether fell and Ants appeared. The first flying ones showed up in this stage, and I thrust my hand forward. A Lightning Bolt shot from my trisula, then hit the split rune at the very front of the cage I'd built. It wrapped around me, then blasted off a dozen in every direction but towards my friends. My meridians strained a bit, my mind stressed by forcing the Technique to function even with the imperfect rune structure.

Six Flying Soldier Ants were blasted out of the sky by the modified Wrath. The other six Bolts struck the Soldier Ants, but every one of them continued to trudge forward, though slower than their comrades. "They're stronger!" I yelled out before sending a Fire Aether Blast into the fastest Ant.

"I am raising a wall," Vaya called. "Aiden, protect me. Jon and Kami have that side."

"Got it," I twisted to see Vaya stab her swords into the ground, and a waist-high wall of vines erupted. It started out only a meter wide, but slowly extended to either side. I moved in front of her, stabbing into an Ant with my left hand before picking it up and bodily flinging it into the next two. Lampart darted to my right, bounding off the growing wall to grab a Flying Ant as it tried to dive bomb us. She took a nasty gash to her side, but ripped the thing's wings off. With a roar, she pushed off the falling Beast to land behind me, shoving it so it fell onto another Ant.

Metal Slashes flashed at me and my arms blurred as I pushed myself to deflect each one. An Ant tried to climb the newly formed wall, but I slammed a Forceful Punch into its head and it exploded. A few more quick blocks came before our attacks killed the last Ant trying to clear the wall. I had a minor scrape along my right forearm where a pincer had glanced off my trisula, but nothing that would reduce my capability.

I turned to find the others had killed all but one of the other Ants. Jon had the last one pinned between his shield and an Earthen Wall Kami had built. "Hey, you should strengthen that wall so it sticks around," Jon called out. "And gather for a bit. I will hold this one so the round does not end."

"You can get another five minutes with that trick!" Bruno called out. "If you have not slain a Beast by the end of those five minutes, the next round will start anyway." His voice was robotic, then it became more lifelike. "Bro, sorry. You're not the first to try that. If you don't kill something every few minutes, it counts against your break time. I can give you a one minute warning, though."

"Hey, five minutes is better than none!" Jon yelled back, a cheeky grin on his face.

"Good call, Jon," I said, then rushed over to Vaya.

"Make pillars of stone every twenty or so centimeters?" She asked, still holding the vines in a wall. "I can wrap the vines around them so they stay, but I cannot stop the technique without wasting a lot more Aether."

"Got it," I said. I moved to the left side of the wall and crouched. My hand stretched out to ten centimeters over the ground, and I poured a moderate amount of Aether into the technique Vaya had shown me way back in Craesti City. The next four minutes passed quickly, and I managed to get a dozen pillars done in that time, giving us a few meters of protection on the next round.

A chime sounded around us, our one-minute timer. Jon started to count out loud, and twenty seconds prior to our limit he crushed the poor Ant. "Ten minutes before the next round, starting now," Bruno announced. "No more modifications to the battlefield until the start of the next round."

"Thanks Bruno," I said. "Okay, two more rounds, then we get a longer break between waves. Anyone need any Alchemical powders?"

"Nah, already used my own," Bridget said, gesturing to her belt pouch. "Kami had a couple of cuts that could have become more serious, so I used an Earthen Beast Healing Powder. Better than the human ones for my baby."

Kami snorted at Bridget, shaking her head at the expression.

I nodded, and everyone else just shook their heads, laughing a little at the pangolin. I examined my center and decided to take a Refined Jungle Gathering Powder, what I'd decided to call the recipe that Jon had helped me with. A small surge of Aether flowed towards me, my normal pull enhanced by around fifty percent by the powder, and I focused on pulling it in and condensing it into the liquid Aether I needed now.

I only managed to replace about half what I had spent on the round when the next warning sounded. *Hopefully we'll get thirty minutes or more to gather between waves. Eh, if not, I've got the refill powders to try and tide us over.* I started this round off the same way as the last, though I managed to fit an extra 'split' and combined 'many' and 'target' on a whim. Eighteen Bolts flew out this time, and I mentally forced the majority of them to strike the weaker flying bugs. My head ached from the effort, but I pushed through and watched the stricken fliers fall.

Vaya extended the wall, and I blasted away at the Beasts from behind it. The fight was closer this time, the Beasts getting both more numerous and stronger left me grappling with two Soldier Ants on top of the vines. I twisted around, shoving one Ant's head into the other just as it was about to bite me. A leg speared through my Iron Bones, Granite Skin Technique and ripped a gash in my leg before I was able to wrench its head off. I leaped over the spasming body and sent an Aether Blast into the other one's thorax with a kick, splitting it in two.

I looked over to see Sia slice the wings off the last flier, then catch it and bite off its legs as well. Every other Beast was dead except one that Jon had pinned again. *We can use this one to extend our time. I will kill it in four minutes, then you kill yours four minutes later, Jon,* Sia commanded. I sat wearily, then the Ant head exploded into the colorless, heatless flames of the Dungeon taking its Aether back. I threw the Cores that landed close to me into a bag before reaching over to pull another pillar of rock out of the ground.

Vaya and I worked quickly, and we were able to make an arc that extended almost eight meters across and two deep. "Last round before the wave ends. Bridget, can you use a barrier to block off the other side of the circle?" I asked when the last warning popped us out of our gathering trances.

"Yeah. Are we going to use one every round in the next wave?"

"Don't know yet," I shrugged. "Depends on what we're fighting. Stay safe." I stepped to the edge of the wall and worked through my new technique for the third time. A few more tweaks let me get twenty Bolts out that were a bit stronger than the first set, taking ten flyers and four crawlers out of the battle before they could do more than materialize. I paid a bit more attention to the others, and saw that Jon and Bridget had copied me, extending and enhancing their area techniques to take out more Beasts before they could reach us.

Of course, that only made it so an equal number of the Ants reached our little fort as the previous round. Bridget blocked off the rear, though, so half the Ants were stuck walking around the Aether Barrier, giving us breathing room. I held the middle of the wall, with Jon at the leftmost corner between vines and Aether. Kami held the right. Lampart was focused on enhancing the vines, repairing the cuts that the Ants were putting into the wall while Vaya alternatively healed us, stabbed over the wall with Aether Blasts, or brought tangles of thorns to wrap around our enemies.

Sia and Zim flashed through the sky above us, dogfighting with four Flying Soldier Ants. Zim flared his wings and released a cloud of Ice, freezing two Ants wings and causing them to fall. One recovered before it hit the ground, though, and Zim had to dive to avoid a Metal Slash. Bridget hit the barely aloft Beast with an Air Aether Blast, ripping its wings apart and sending it to the ground. *Light, sometimes I wish I had a polearm!* I thought, shaking my head and sending out a spike-shaped Earth Aether Blast to smash an Ant away from Kami.

The last Ant collapsed to Jon's Ice aura technique. "Congratulations on besting the first wave! You may now choose to complete the Dungeon and earn your rewards, or continue to another wave for a much greater prize! Please either walk to the flashing lights with your choice, or announce your selection out loud in a language the Dungeon understands. You have thirty minutes to make your choice. If you choose to continue, the battle will commence at the end of the decision time."

I looked at my team, "Of course we're continuing. Thirty minute break, gather every bit you can."

CHAPTER THREE

The effects of the Refined Jungle Gathering Powder had not yet run out, boosting my refill efficiency through the first 20 minutes of the break.. I was sitting at about two-thirds of my total Aether capacity when the vine wall we'd built dissolved into colorless flames. "No field modifications may be maintained into a different wave," Bruno's robotic voice announced.

"Any hints on the next wave?" I asked.

"Sorry bro, that's against the rules. I can't break them, even if I wanted to," he responded in the Southern California surfer voice that was his real personality. "It will push you, but I totally believe you can do it. Only one minute until the new wave begins."

Vaya called us all to get next to her, then used the Steady Bazsazi Technique to give us a tiny amount of healing continuously for the next couple of minutes. "Just in case," she said, making sure to get all of the Bonds as well.

Jon clapped my shoulder, "We are ready."

"Let's do this," I shouted, then we spread out. *Many targets or one? Let's go with one very strong technique, just to obliterate something,* I thought, then worked through the motions of Wrath of the Lightning Herald. *Need to figure out what to call the other version. Something suitably pretentious to match the source. Eh, think of it later.*

Seconds passed, then eight beams of Aether fell. I could feel them, this time, rather than just see them. In front of me, the spawn point disgorged a massive Mountain Bear, and I met its roar with a tiny Fireball. It snapped it up, snorted at me, then seized as the Lightning bolt that followed smashed into its skull. The Beast collapsed to its side, muscles locked up and unable to function properly.

The stream of Aether petered out. The Bear groaned and rolled to its feet. Its movements were unsteady, but it was getting its faculties back faster than I wanted. I Blasted it with Air and Fire, leaving scorched lacerations around its body.

Eruptions of Aether surrounded me, as each of us focused on one enemy. I risked a quick glance and saw Vaya had entangled one with vines that pulsed as they constricted. Wicked thorns dug into its skin. Sia had grown much larger, stretching the limits of the collar he wore, and was savaging another Bear with flame and talon.

Jon and Zim had combined their techniques to create a field of Ice that left two Bears taking slow, stomping steps forward to maintain their footing. Bridget sent waves of Air Blades at a Mountain Bear that had stopped to erect a wall of stone. Kami rushed forward, seeming to swell in size and mass as she rammed into her target, and the two Beasts set into each other with tooth and claw.

A roar brought my attention back to my Bear, which had gotten its feet under control. It was charging at me, with only a dozen meters of space between us. I ran forward, meeting its charge. While running, I focused on forming a Forceful Punch, surrounding my right arm with the Technique. Aether glowed on the Bear's claws, and it swiped at my head. The air in front of the attack screamed with the speed and strength of its arm.

I ducked, resisting the buffeting of the air, and sprung upward to discharge the Punch into its face, stopping it from biting my shoulder and shattering its jaw while slamming Aether into its skull. The Beast jerked upward, its body collapsing and running into my side, throwing me backward by its sheer mass. I rolled, throwing my arms outward to regain my balance and

spring to my feet. The Beast wasn't moving, and the tiny amount of Essence that flowed into me let me know I'd defeated it. *Plenty of room in my Core. It's getting so much better at storing Essence, even if the size is only slightly larger.*

I turned and sent a Lightning Blast at the Beast fighting Kami, causing it to spasm for a second. Kami took advantage, knocking aside its paws and clawing out the Bear's throat before screaming in victory. Sia was already pouncing upon the closest of the slowed Beasts that Jon was affecting with his aura technique. The other Bears tried to reach Jon, but he was effectively kiting them while slashing at their eyes from just out of range of their claws. Zim shot an Icicle into the top of the closest Bear's neck, and Sia landed on it, driving it into the Beast's brain. It collapsed, dead instantly.

Kami rushed to the side, landing on the Beast Vaya had trapped. In seconds, she had it ripped into ribbons, and Vaya dropped the technique and knelt panting. Within only thirty seconds, we'd mopped up every Bear, leaving only a single one bleeding out. "Rest and recover as best you can," I yelled out. "If you're at less than half your total Aether capacity, I have refill powders."

"So do I," Bridget said.

I nodded at her, "Good." With a thought, I dove into my center and felt my reserves. *I'm just over sixty percent. Which for many others would be their entire capacity. Fifteen minutes isn't enough time to refill, even with a gathering powder. I should still be fine, though.*

"Hopefully they do not double in number for the next round," Jon said, collapsing. "I do not know if we could deal with twenty-four or thirty-two of them."

"That wouldn't make sense," I said. "They'll probably just get stronger between each round, with maybe a single doubling. Anything else would spike the difficulty too much."

"Jon, can you make an Ice field over half the arena with your potions?" Vaya asked.

"Yeah, but it will take half of my supply," he said.

"Okay, then in the third round, do that. We should be able to concentrate on the other half and eliminate them quickly, before doubling up. In this round, I will entangle three of them and hold them off while you kill them. We will see what the fourth round brings," she said before pulling out a pill and swallowing it. Aether flowed into her, a torrent that everyone could feel. *Heh, good pill. I wonder what it was?*

I downed another gathering powder, losing a bit of effectiveness due to repeating them so quickly, but it still increased my gathering speed significantly. I filled another fifteen percent before the one minute warning rolled through the arena. I stood, stretching real quick before stepping into my strongest technique again. *I need to expand upon this. It's not strong enough for opponents at my level without draining too much from my Aether and Essence too. More Aether from my surroundings, layering on the enhance, pull, and gather runes thicker maybe?*

More runes flew out of my hands, all the practice that Librarian Narwan and Knight Kaminski had forced upon us enhanced my ability to create and maintain them as my hands swept through the complex motions of my technique. Runes formed a dense cloud around me as the next round started.

Eight Bears formed, each one moving from a high level four to a peak level four, equal to a person about to move from Threshold to Complete Condensation. Since Beasts were supposed to be stronger than a person at their level, they should have been a challenge for

someone two levels beyond us. Unfortunately for the Aether created Beasts, we were not typical gatherers.

My left arm sent a Fireball at the Beast as it charged at me, madness in its eyes. Like the Bear in the last round, it tried to eat the Fire, snuffing out the Technique with fangs of Metal. "Too bad," I shouted at it, "that all I needed was a path!" My right arm thrust forward, and a full fifth of my Aether blasted out of me into a Lightning Bolt three times the size of the last round. The runes around me collapsed into Aether, slamming into the Bolt and further strengthening it.

It barely had time to blink before being blown backward, Lightning searing through its insides and liquifying its organs. The Bolt carried it to the edge of the Arena, where it was slammed into a tree and split apart. It was really gross. My hand tingled, my projection and arm meridians feeling the strain of the massive technique.

I turned towards Kami again, only to see her on top of her Bear, slashing her claws through the Beast's defense and shrugging off most of its counterattacks on her scales. *Huh, I knew Bridget had gotten a potion that improved Kami's armor, but I didn't realize it was that strong. Nice.* Kami still bled a bit, but nowhere near as bad as I would have expected.

I continued to turn and saw Bridget dancing around a thrashing Bear. Rather than attempt to weather her storm of Air Blades with a wall of stone, this one had simply barreled through and sought to end her with a single slash. Unfortunately for it, she was even faster than I was, and was dodging around its powerful attacks and slashing lines of blood into its hide with ease. She maneuvered it such that I had a clear line to its right rear leg, so I shot a massive blast of Fire, Lightning, and Air combined.

As the Elements formed around my trisula, I forced them together. *Still haven't gotten the chance to talk to Librarian Narwan about mixed Elements, but these three should make Plasma, which I vaguely recall from the Affinity Powders. Let's see what happens.* The Aether's merged, creating a single blast of pink Aether that absolutely destroyed the Bear's leg, burning so hot as to turn it to ash so fast as to feel instantaneous.

Bridget immediately reversed her retreat, dodging a weak slash from the collapsing Bear to stab her machete into its eyes, killing it with one final blow. With a shout, she sprinted at one of the three Bears Vaya had entangled and I nearly flew to join her. Slashes and Blasts rained upon its head and torso, while it roared in anger and defiance, unable to move its legs. Jon, Sia, and Zim fell upon the other side, and quickly slew the Bear to Vaya's left. I slipped to the rear of the last Bear and ripped the tendons of its legs apart, at which point Vaya dropped her Technique and collapsed.

I leaped off the crippled Bear to reach her side as quickly as I could. A quick examination of her condition told me she was just low on Aether, so I rushed over to where I left my bag and pulled the Wood Aether refill pill out. I knelt and held her head up, helping her swallow the pill and recover. "That was awesome," I told her as she blinked in exhaustion. "Rest and recover quickly, we've only got fifteen minutes."

Her energy levels soared in my perceptions, and she sat up under her own power within seconds. "That pill was amazing," she said. "I am feeling much better now."

I stroked her hair, "Good. Three more rounds."

"We have got this," she said. "You could probably beat all of them yourself."

"Well, maybe," I laughed, "but not while trying to protect the rest of you. Come on, you could too."

"You should recover. I am fine now," she smiled at me, the affection plain on her face.

I leaned in and kissed her lightly, "Okay. I will keep us all safe." I checked my center to find myself with only two-fifths of the Aether left in my pool, and my meridians were down to only vapor. I dug out a Lightning refill pill and dropped it into my mouth. A storm of Aether, ninety percent Lightning but trace amounts of the other seven Elements, shot up my digestion meridian into my center, and I had to concentrate to force it to condense. My pool rapidly refilled, and then spilled into my meridians. *Wow, that pill was amazing. From forty percent to ninety percent full with one. I wonder if I can get the recipe with my store credit?*

The next round had the Bears at the very bottom of level five, still nearly fifty percent stronger than the previous round. *If they keep this growth, the last round will be incredibly difficult*, I thought while unleashing my strongest attack on it. Even with the increase in strength of the Beast, my Wrath of the Lightning Herald still obliterated its ability to defend, at least when powered by nearly half my total Aether.

I dropped to a knee, a wave of exhaustion flowing through me at the massive expulsion of Aether. With a grunt, I forced myself to stand, and started to send ranged attacks at the Bear fighting with Kami yet again. *If it worked before, don't mess with it*, I thought while blowing the Bear's left rear leg out from under it with an Air Aether Blast.

We blew through the Beasts in this round, with half of them sliding around unable to find purchase to stand. Jon had used six vials of his Slippery Ice Concoction, though he winced with each one. I knew roughly how much wealth he'd just sent sliding onto the ground of the Dungeon, but I also knew that the Cores we were getting from the Beasts would more than offset the cost, much less the rewards from the Dungeon. *We'll definitely stop at this wave, though*, I thought, *just to reduce our likelihood of injury. Maybe when we get back, we can try for the third wave.*

The fourth round went similarly, though I had to Blast the Bear I hit first multiple times, as it recovered too quickly from the Wrath to leave alone. By the time I had finished it off, Kami was in dire straits. I sprinted to her side, layering the Iron Bones, Granite Skin Technique over my upper body and shoulder checked the Bear off her. A few scales fell away when the Beast's mouth was ripped off the pangolin. The Bear rolled with the hit, trying to crush me. All that did was let me stab my weapons deep into its body and then Blast it away with Air and Fire.

Kami and I fell upon Jon's Bear and then we all attacked Vaya's. Only a minute later we had cleared the round, though we didn't get any extra time as a panicked Bear dove at Zim forcing Jon and I to kill it. "Is anyone hurt?" I asked, then felt a wave of healing from Vaya flow into me. The cuts on my forearms and calves I hadn't realized were there quickly healed. "Thanks." I smiled over at her, and she smiled back while pushing Aether into Kami.

"Can you give Kami an Earth Aether refill powder?" Bridget asked.

"Sure," I nodded, then pulled out my bag again. Jon and Zim took an Ice refill, while Vaya grabbed the other Earth one.

"Last round," Vaya said with a stretch when the warning chimed out.

"Yup," I responded, then stepped into my technique. Each round so far was leading to tiny gains in strength and efficiency, and I thought through what I was doing yet again. I was mostly through when one beam of Aether fell behind me, in front of Jon. The pressure from the Beast's Aether pushed down upon us.

"It is a level six Beast, though only just advanced," Sia sent to all of us. *"Burn it down quickly. Do not let it have time to prepare a technique!"*

I grabbed the dome of runes surrounding me with a grunt, forcing them to turn and move sideways. The Beast stood and roared. It was six meters tall, and it had layers of stone armor covering its back, head, and legs. The second I got a clear shot, I blew every bit of Aether I could without damaging my meridians, dropping me from about seventy percent to fifteen in only a few seconds. My Lightning hit its front-most leg at the same time a massive Fireball landed on its snout.

As the Fire flashed out, an Icicle from Zim stabbed into a seam in its shoulder armor, stabbing a few centimeters in. A small area of frost spread from the injury that was further accelerated when Jon sent his Slowing Snowball Technique, a ball of Air, Ice and Water that surrounded a potion vial full of a liquid that froze on contact with air, into the same spot. Vines shot from the ground, dripping poison from their thorns and an Earthen Spike exploded from beneath the Beast into its chest.

As the other's techniques impacted the Beast, I ran towards it and activated my Dancing Northern Wind Technique, stepping into the air three times so I was above the Bear. It roared again, a wave of Aether shattering both Vaya's vines and Kami's Spike. A ball of Aether formed in its mouth, strong enough to worry me. I flipped over, conjuring another platform of Air under my foot and shoved downward. I rotated before slamming feet first into its snout, crushing the technique before it could finish it.

The Aether detonated, shattering the Beast's jaw and staggering it while sending me flying back into the air, this time uncontrolled. I arced up, then Sia caught me and helped me to the ground. Zim and Jon were pelting the Beast as it stumbled, and then I saw Lampart dart under its legs and slice a chunk out of its suddenly exposed throat before narrowly dodging the blind return swipe. Sia set me down, and I nearly collapsed.

"Are you okay?" Vaya asked me while sending a Wood Aether Blast that rocked the thing's head backward.

"Yeah, just sprained," I said with a grimace.

Jon ran forward, his sword glowing with Aether, and cut into the Bear's leg that I had blasted. It tried to retaliate, but the damage was too much and it collapsed to the ground.

"Jump!" A strangled voice I didn't recognize sounded in all of our ears. *That's Bruno, I think, seeming as if he was talking through a wall.* None of us questioned it and jumped in various ways. Jon leaped upwards, easily clearing two meters of vertical distance, which is all that saved him from a field of Stone Spikes that would have skewered him a dozen times over. Jon's shield glowed, the bottom edge coated with Aether as he fell, and he screamed as he landed on the Beast's side. With a yell of effort, he drove the point at the bottom of his shield into the Bear, cutting through it for half the shield's length.

The Bear groaned in agony, but its twitching form quickly stilled. The Essence from the Beast was equal to every other Bear combined, and the total haul of the day put my Core at nearly half full.

We all collapsed, exhausted and just about out of Aether. "Great job everyone," I panted out. "Bruno, we're done with this, right?"

"Congratulations on completing the second wave! You were doing so well, I increased the difficulty. That was awesome, and I got so much Mana from it! Because you defeated the

Boss, you get extra rewards this time,” Bruno announced. Two chests materialized just to the side of where we were recovering.

I staggered to my feet and opened the first chest. Inside were sixteen of the unattributed Cores, each the size of my fist. “These are level six Cores,” I said.

“You did beat a level six Bear,” Bruno stated. “I knew you could. Awesome job bros.”

The second chest held a set of stone armor that would fit over Kami’s head and back, and Bridget wasted no time in helping her get into it. The headpiece included spikes to either side and straight up, giving Kami some additional weapons as well. A bracelet and a staff were the last of the rewards.

“Okay dudes. Have the pangolin put some Earth Mana into the armor,” Bruno’s voice bounded through the clearing, obviously excited.

Kami did, and the armor vanished, shrinking to a collar. She repeated the action, feeling it out, and the armor spread across her body, this time covering her legs as well. She walked around the Arena, testing her new equipment.

“Now, that bracelet should work as a way to speed up your natural healing,” Bruno said. “It works with any type of Mana, but best with Water. The staff increases the strength of any Water, Wood, or Earth spell cast through it. I know none of you use a staff, but come on. Wizard staff, dude.”

“Thanks Bruno,” I said. “We’re just going to gather back to full, then get out of your hair.”

“No problem, dude,” Bruno said. “Except you need to leave so I can start recharging for the next run. I can’t wait for you to come back! Now shoo!”

CHAPTER FOUR

We stumbled out of the Dungeon, tired and aching. Caretaker Zana appeared in front of us and sent a wave of Aether across my team. "Good, you are all alive," he said, relief in his voice.

"Yup, though it was a close one," I said with a cough. "Bruno decided to challenge us with a level six Mountain Bear as the last round of the second wave."

"I will note that as a possibility," Caretaker Zana said. "Come, I will escort you to The Dungeoneer's Delight."

I nodded agreeably, following along behind him as we approached the hotel looking building. "What's in the other building?" I asked.

"A warehouse and workshops," he answered. "There we store food collected from the surrounding forest and any Dungeon rewards you wish to sell to us. Additionally, there are two smithies, two Alchemy workstations, and one Inscription workstation that you can use before a Dungeon excursion to prepare. The Dungeoneer's Delight is an inn and tavern dedicated to serving people after they leave the Dungeon or as they prepare for their trip into it."

We approached the building, but no sound was coming from it. The building had double doors leading inside, with carvings of various Beasts decorating them. Caretaker Zana opened it, and suddenly there was a clamor of talking and someone playing a lyre as background music. I was stunned by the deluge of sound, and noticed the edges of the door had tiny Inscriptions running along them. There were at least twenty people of various races seated at seven different tables. Standing on a slightly elevated stage a Topraki girl was lightly strumming her stringed instrument, with a cap placed on the stage to collect tips. We hurried inside, and the door closed behind us.

"Caretaker Zana!" An older Volk woman yelled from behind a bar. *She's either the tallest Volk ever, or is standing on a stool*, I thought looking over at her. "Who are these folk?"

"Proprietor Klara, this is Munqiz Aiden, Vaya, Bridget, and Jon, along with their Bonds. The Ashkhas Sayaad will cover their expenses for today," Caretaker Zana said, immediately stifling all conversation. The Topraki girl got wide eyes, and she stood on her tiptoes to see over the patrons as they jumped to their feet. The Ashkhas group standing nearest to me bowed low, making a right angle at their waist. Like a reverse wave, everyone else in the inn bowed as well.

Vaya poked my back. I looked at her questioningly, and she gestured with her head at the bowing crowd. "Uh, thank you. Please, go back to your meals," I said uncomfortably.

"Come, please be seated over here," Klara said, hopping down next to the bar and leading us to a larger table. She was only a bit over one and a quarter meters tall. There were six chairs, but she grabbed one and hauled it off. I sensed her strength as Foundation Condensation. She had dark brown hair, black eyes and a wide grin on her face. "Here you go, pretty birdies." She brought back two perches that would let Sia and Zim, both in their smallest forms, sit at the same height as the table. Kami just sat in an empty spot between chairs, and Lampart was able to hop into the fifth chair, taking the spot next to Vaya.

"Uh, can we have water, please?" I asked. "And some food would be awesome."

"Of course!" Klara said. "We have poached River Bass over a bed of Rainforest Asparagus, Jungle Boar stew, or Mirari Bazr Anaconda on a bed of various lettuces. The Anaconda is level four, while the others are level two, and so you will get less meat overall."

"One of each!" Jon said loudly, his stomach gurgling.

Klara looked over the group and nodded, "I will bring out two platters of each dish along with your drinks. That will let you try them all. If you want more, just let me know. I will also dig up some Soldier Ant and Jungle Boar meat for the Bonds. Be back in a crack." She turned and bustled out through the door behind the bar.

"Back in a crack?" I asked, looking over at Jon.

"Crack of thunder," Vaya said when Jon shrugged.

"Neat," I said, then lay my head on the table. Vaya reached over and massaged my neck. "I love you." *Did I really just say that?!* I thought, panicked a bit. She paused, and I looked over to see her with a beauteous smile and shining eyes. My mind blanked for a second, looking at her smile. *I mean it, I thought. I truly do. I've known her for most of a year, and I'm sure of it.*

"I love you too," she whispered, leaning in close to me. She put her head on the table next to mine and pressed her forehead into mine.

We rested like that for a minute, when Klara returned bearing two large trays. A shining band of Earth Aether held them level with her hands, and she quickly set both down on the table. Each tray held two platters of food and a large bowl of soup. We each received a smaller plate and bowl along with a knife and a spoon to eat with. She bustled off, disappearing quickly, and then returning with four glasses of water. She expertly set them down in front of us. She then left to grab four shallow bowls, also full of water, for each of the Bonds.

I tucked in, grabbing a small piece of Anaconda meat and a large helping of the Glacier Lettuce, Sailabi Cress, and Aik Kale. There was a light glaze of a tangy sauce on it that made the meat melt into my mouth. The Earth Aether in the leafy greens tempered the burning of the Fire that filled the Anaconda meat. I ate slowly, enjoying the food and the camaraderie, letting the Aether from the meal slowly fill my Aether pool.

An hour later, we'd demolished every bit of food. Klara had come back twice, once with the meals for the Bonds and once to bring a third of every dish. After two glasses of water, we'd switched to a refreshing fruit tea that Klara claimed was a specialty of her homeland. I was sitting and sipping while Bridget and Vaya debated the best way to wear their hair in a fight. *I wonder if we'll find any Dungeons like Bruno's in Craesti? It'd be great if one popped up fairly close to Azyl, but I doubt we're that lucky. Maybe they can move, or spawn another if they grow enough? I wonder what their purpose is now, since it seems like Light broke the connection they had to Chaos. I'll have to ask Bruno if we make it back for another run before heading home.*

I yawned, extremely tired considering it was only midday. "Proprietor Klara," I waved my hand at her. "Is there a place where we can put down a Beast Core Aether Formation and gather for an hour or two?"

"Of course. My inn has three gathering rooms with Formations already carved," she said. "Two of them are open now."

"I will take the other Bonds to find a place to rest," Sia said. *"And I wish to see if Ezekiel is around."*

"Have fun. If you manage to speak to him, tell him thanks from all of us," I said to Sia. He smacked my head with his wing, then flew towards the door. Zim, Lampart, and Kami followed after him, though only after getting a head pat or scratch from their partners.

"See, that's how you're supposed to treat me!" I laughed at Sia.

"Only when you earn it," He cawed with laughter, and the other patrons of the inn laughed along with him.

"Yeah, yeah, laugh it up, fireball," I grumbled, then followed Klara into a hallway, grabbing my bag as I went. On one side were three doors, with a fourth straight ahead, and on the right were the stairs to the next level.

"The second or third room is available," she gestured at them. "The third has a better Aether Gathering Formation, but not quite as good of a Beast Core Aether Formation. The second had a better Core Formation and an Isolation Formation, but does not have an Aether Gathering Formation, so it only has the Aether from whatever Core you use." She paused for a second. "I have heard that the other teams love to use the second room with the Cores from the Dungeon, since they have no Affinity. Is that true?"

I pulled my backpack off and pulled out one of the level four Cores we'd looted from a Bear. "Check it out for yourself," I said, then handed it to her.

She stared at it for a few seconds. "This is amazing!" she exclaimed, then handed it back. "Maybe someday I will brave the Jungle Arena Dungeon."

"With some preparation, the first five rounds are not too difficult at your gathering level," Bridget said. "I would be happy to talk you through what we did to prepare after we gather."

"I would like that," Klara said. A bell ringing was heard from behind us. "Please, enjoy the room, and if you need help come find me. I must be going."

"Thank you for your help," I said.

"You are most welcome, Munqiz Aiden," she said with a grin. She bowed to all of us, then turned and left the hallway.

"Alright, uh, which room?" I asked, turning towards the others.

"Second," Vaya said. "We should use that Core you are holding to refill our centers and work on advancing. The Isolation Formation will make sure we use it fully."

With a sharp nod, Jon led us to the second door on the left. The room was about four meters on each side. A pedestal stood in the center of the room covered in Inscriptions. The top was indented inward as a place to put Beast Cores. Six benches filled the rest of the room, three along the walls and three halfway between the walls and the pedestal. They were a dark brown wood, with runes carved into them. The walls were bare wood and yet more Inscriptions dotted them. "Nice," I said, examining the runes.

"The Saunas back at the inn have similar Inscriptions," Bridget said, walking past me to get to the pedestal. "They are just covered by a decorative layer of wood to hide them."

"Huh, learn something new," I said. "Well, we've got another four hours until we teleport out, so let's make use of the time." I put the Core into the slot, then pulled another out of my bag in case we needed another one. The pillar lit up, the runes blazing with Aether as they pulled it out of the Core and dispersed it into the room. I hopped back over the bench behind me, then sat on the rearmost seat leaning against the wall. The others spread out, and I scooted sideways until we were all sitting in the corners of the room. We were as far from each other as we could be, to reduce the effect we would have on each other's gathering. It normally didn't matter much, but we wanted to squeak every bit of benefit out of the unsuspected Core as we could.

After sitting, I looked over at my friends while focusing on my Aether Sight, enhancing it slightly with my technique. Jon, Vaya, and Bridget had already dropped into their meditation,

and I could see tiny vestiges of their technique floating around them. *Looking through Aether this dense is always trippy*, I thought, *it looks like thick, light gray fog is covering everything, but I can see every detail on Vaya's beautiful face without distortion. It's almost like the Aether is being processed and filtered out by my brain, but still allowing me to see it if I want to. So weird, but awesome. Okay, time to gather.*

I swallowed a Large Gathering Pill, the strongest one I had on me, and felt the surge of energy from my Center as it started to work, massively increasing my Aether gathering rate. I then dove into my center, shutting everything beyond it out of my mind, and looked around. I perceived my center as a spherical cavern sitting just below my solar plexus. At the bottom was my pool, slowly filling with Aether as my digestion and gathering meridians pulled from the food I'd eaten and the air around me. At the midpoint, my Seed Core floated in the air. I'd gotten it from the first Dungeon we'd found, well before I should have had a Core. It helped a lot in propelling me forward on my gathering journey. Forming a ring on the outer perimeter of my center were the openings of all forty-two meridians, the maximum any single person could have. Above them my center curved, forming nearly a perfect sphere. Directly above my Core, halfway to the top, four stylized runes in the shape of a Zarorzal formed the Bond Mark that connected me to Sia.

I looked at it closely and realized that the runes had changed. "Huh, that's not just Fire enhancement anymore," I said while bringing my viewpoint up to it. "Air and Lightning are both in the mix now. Neat! I wonder if that happened when Sia evolved?" I looked over to the side, examining my Core Runes that floated like a crown around my Core. "None of them have changed. I really need to find some better ones, though." I shook my head.

"Okay," I said to myself quietly, "let's fill up first. Spirals, then runes." I pulled a tiny amount of the Aether from my pool and formed it into spirals reaching out of my center to my skin. Each spiral was connected to a meridian, and looped to my Core. I had been working on this technique for months and was easily able to form them while keeping them from touching. The last ten percent of each spiral was laid close enough, though, that the gaseous Aether that flowed down each was compressed until it condensed.

At the outer edge of the spirals, I created the second part of the technique I'd earned from King Craesti, enhancing the pull of Aether into my technique. A sphere of points surrounded my Core, and inside it I drew dozens of runes to form the third part. Once done, my gathering rate spiked again, the pressure surrounding me from the Beast Core shoveling Aether into me as fast as I could take it. Twenty minutes passed before the Aether in my pool reached the base of my meridians. The pure Aether of the Beast Core split into a perfect balance of Elements for me, one of the many reasons these Cores were immensely valuable. "Light, strong pill, one of the best gathering techniques, and a ridiculous Aether density, and it still takes me twenty minutes to fill my pool," I complained, then laughed. "Of course, it is better to have a massive capacity than a tiny one. Now, to fill my meridians."

It took another ten minutes. While my meridians weren't anywhere close to fully advanced, having so many made them hold roughly half what my pool could. "I wonder what Threshold gives? Eh, find out soon. Now, there's still plenty of Aether in the air. Gathering time, make my meridians larger and stronger." Slowly I started to push the spirals out, dismissing the inner runes to make space for a different set, while starting my Aether flowing quickly throughout my meridian system. Five minutes later, I had them ready, and pulsed the flow to twice as much,

squeezing my pool to shove Aether into my meridians. Part of my will was clamped over my Seed Core, keeping the Essence inside. "Yeah, not dealing with that again."

The pure Aether from outside kept flowing into me, refilling the Aether I was using up to enhance and strengthen my meridians. "Huh, I wonder if I can keep it from splitting," I said to myself. I kept the cycle moving, then reached out mentally and tried to grab a chunk of pure Aether from around me. It slipped through my mental fingers a few times, but I was able to get it quickly. I pulled it in, crushing it together to turn from gas into liquid, and then fed it into my life meridian. It wanted to split, but I wouldn't let it.

It worked! I thought, feeling the burn as my meridians stretched. *Wait, there is an immense amount of the unsuspected Aether around me. Can I stop it all from splitting?* I looked at the spirals flowing into my chest from my first technique, then widened one into a tube. I pulled the pure Aether into me through the tube. The first few motes split and changed, but I reduced the diameter of the tube until they couldn't. *It worked!* I made the same change to every other tube.

Of course, the pure Aether still split when it came out of the tubes, but with the spirals all ending near the same spot, I was able to mentally grab every bit and hold them together. After a few seconds, I relaxed my grip on some of it, but they didn't change. *Win!* I slowly created a ball of pure Aether, then split off enough to pulse through every meridian. I doubled up the Aether seven times, counting to ten between each pulse, then quadrupled the Aether on the eighth time. Each time using the pure Aether instead of aspected Aether.

The ball of pure Aether continued to grow, more of it coming in than I was using. *I wonder,* I thought, then when my count was up to pulse again, I instead doubled the Aether flow and held it, rather than let it pulse. I pushed a stream of Aether and kept it going, draining every bit I'd gathered to completely fill several meridians with twice as much Aether as they normally held.

It hurt. It felt like stretching my shoulder during physical therapy after surgery on a torn rotator cuff. It wasn't beyond what I could take, though, and I could feel that the pure Aether was healing any damage it was causing. I pulled more in, filling up more meridians, letting the massive tube of pure Aether cycle through according to Librarian Narwan's technique. Just, you know, twenty times bigger than the prescribed pulse and getting larger. Aether absorbed into my meridians, and I knew they were getting both larger and stronger. Various tiny impurities flowed out of them, pushed outward and stripped them from my meridians because of the pure Aether and the gathering technique. *Huh, neat. I didn't realize I had any more impurities to get rid of.*

I lost track of time, pulling and pushing, guiding my Aether and keeping the whole construct from crashing down around me, until there was no more Aether in the air. Slowly, the pure Aether drained away, used up to strengthen me, and I analyzed my gains. "Wow, that was as effective as the last ten gathering sessions combined," I said, coming out of my trance.

"Really?" Jon asked. "I got maybe three times as much as last time. Still totally worth it, but ten times?"

"Yeah, I tried something new," I said, then explained what I had done.

"Amazing," Vaya said with a grin. "You came up with an improvement on a technique created by masters, in an hour."

"Well, I mean," I stammered. "To be fair, this is a new environment."

"You should talk to Librarian Narwan when we get back, and we should get a room set up like this one for the other Cores," Vaya said. "But for now, we only have half an hour until we need to leave, and I desperately need a bath."

I realized that all of us had a black, gunky, oily film covering parts of our skin and hair. As if it was waiting for me to realize it was there, a disgusting smell smashed into my nose, causing me to gag. "Yeah, eww," I gasped.

"It is not that ..." Jon started, then he gagged too. "Okay, no talking, it gets in your mouth."

We scrambled out of the room, almost running into Klara. "All done?" she asked, but the towels in her arms let me know that was a rhetorical question. We all nodded. "Good. The room at the end leads to two doors. Men, you are on the left, women are on the right. Inside you will find a couple of bathtubs. They are already full, and there are Inscriptions to heat the water. After finishing, drain them and rinse them, please. Use the dark red soap first, and then the green one." She held out the towels. "Leave your shoes, and they will be cleaned."

I gingerly grabbed one, keeping it from touching any of the gunk, and kicked off my boots.

"Thank you," Vaya said emphatically.

Klara just laughed, "That is my job. I will knock on the door five minutes before the scheduled transport."

"Race you," Jon said, then sprinted down the hallway.

The bathroom had four tubs, each with a curtain hung around it. I quickly found the soaps, collected one of each color, and picked a tub. I closed the curtain and quickly started to get clean. *Wow, this gunk just won't come off*, I thought while scraping away at my skin with the dark red soap. After a few minutes of scraping, the soap started to work, and I was able to clean myself off. I had to drain the tub after a bit, and rinsed off under the spigot rather than wait for it to fully refill. It took three tubs full of water to get clean, and then I just laid back and relaxed in the tub until Klara knocked on the door.

After our bath, we threw on a set of extra clothes we'd brought, just in case our first set got too damaged, and put on the shoes left outside the door. "Wow, they really did get this clean," I exclaimed.

"Aether does amazing things," Jon said. We laughed, then walked out of the hallway to meet the girls in the dining area. "Congratulations again on a successful Dungeon run," Klara said when we entered.

"Thanks for your help," I said.

"You are most welcome, but now it is time for you to head back to the Transport Formation. I look forward to seeing you all again," she said, waving us out of the room. The other patrons clapped and cheered for us while we left.

"Okay Aiden," Jon said. "Do not throw up on the Hunter's Hall floor again."

"Ha, ha, ha," I enunciated at him.

CHAPTER FIVE

"Man, do we really have to wear this?" Jon whined while pulling at the neck of his formal keikogi.

"Dude, it's not even touching your neck. Stop messing with it," I said, shaking my head at his antics.

"I should have worn it before today. It's stiff and itchy," he complained.

"It is not, Jon," Aleks said. "You are just nervous about the dinner. Do not be. Just sit and enjoy the meal and presentation. If you are unsure about what to say, just do not make any comments about who you believe is winning the debate. We are here to show support to Kamran, but only obliquely. She is the one who is espousing support for increased trade between the Ashkhas Baqiya and Craesti Kingdom." She gave Jon a confident look "Do not worry if you speak out of turn, either. We will be able to deal with any repercussions. And yes, you have to wear it. The keikogi unites our peoples when we are abroad, and I have given you dispensation to wear it so that we may impress our trading partners more."

"Are you sure we should even be here?" I asked Aleks. "I'm not sure how comfortable I am with interfering in another country's democratic processes." 'Democratic' came out in English without a translation.

"Demo-what-ic?" Bridget asked.

"Uh, it's the word for this type of political government," I said. "Where everyone in a country, or district in this case, gets to vote on who will lead them or on the laws that will govern them."

"Ah, okay," she nodded.

We were riding in a carriage towards a banquet hall in the Merchant District, where the top two contenders for the Ashkhas Council were set to debate prior to the vote. Vaya and Aleks sat on either side of me while Jon and Bridget sat on the other side. My team and I were invited for winning the tournament, and Aleks was invited as the heir of Craesti. Her position was such that she could, and had, sign trade deals and treaties, though she leaned on Librarian Narwan and Knight Kaminski as advisors before doing so. This was especially true while I was recovering, as the combined nations planned the coming war with the Illyrian Empire.

The carriage ride wasn't long. We arrived at a fairly large facility after only ten minutes. In that short time period, though, we managed to go almost ten kilometers from our starting point. *Every time we leave the hotel*, I thought while staring out the window of the carriage, *I'm reminded how ridiculously big this city is*. The building we stopped in front of was two stories, square except for a dome covering most of the roof. The entrance had three pillars holding up a patio ceiling before reaching two doors that stretched through both stories. Carved along the pillars were scenes of trade, people of various races providing and receiving goods to and from the Ashkhas.

The doors were ostentatious, though I couldn't tell if they were solid gold or just plated really well in it. Each door had a single Ashkhas carved into it, staring nobly into the distance. An Ashkhas guard stood on either side of the doorway. They were both holding large pikes and wearing ornately decorated breastplates, helmets, gauntlets, and greaves that seemed to glow with Aether from their Inscriptions. When the carriage stopped, the leftmost guard strode down

the three stairs to the road and opened the door. "Welcome honored guests," he intoned. "Please allow me to assist you." He extended a hand up.

"Thank you," Aleks said, taking the hand and allowing him to assist her down from the carriage. I hopped down after her and turned to assist Vaya out as I'd been instructed. Jon followed Vaya and helped Bridget, following the customs of the Ashkhas. Aleks walked to the entrance, with the guard following just behind and to her right before peeling off to resume his station. The other guard opened the door for us to enter. Inside was a rectangular room with a dozen carved pillars holding up the dome. A stage had been set up in the middle, surrounded by dozens of tables between each of the pillars in three distinct circles. Two Ashkhas, both older, were discussing something next to the stage. I could tell they were trying to pretend that they didn't hate each other's guts, their posture leaning slightly away from and doing their best to not look at each other.

A young human woman met us at the door. "I am glad you were able to come, Princess Aleksandra, Knight Aiden, Lady Vaya, Mister Jon, and Miss Bridget. I am Yan and will be your guide and assistant for the debate and meal today. You have been given a place of honor to respect your positions and victory in the International Tournament of Champions. Please, follow me," she said while bowing deeply to us. She led us to the second table on our right in the front row. Five places were set there, and Aleks was led to the center seat. I was placed to her right, Vaya to my side, while Bridget and Jon sat to Aleks's left. Each place had two forks, two spoons, and a knife along with a glass of water and a glass of wine.

We didn't sit, instead standing behind our chairs like the few other guests present. I nodded to Prince Gunther, who was directly across the stage from where we were placed. After acknowledging Gunther, I looked around, but didn't see anyone else I knew and had spoken to. The lead Ashkhas team was sitting off to our right, but I didn't know any of them personally.

We chatted quietly for a few minutes, waiting while a couple dozen more Ashkhas filed in to be seated. Finally, every chair had someone standing beside it. The two Ashkhas that were pretending to make nice were joined by a third, and they stepped up onto the stage. The third one spoke, his voice echoing throughout the building, "Welcome to the final debate of this year's elections for the Merchant Council's Summit representative. Already the candidates have been narrowed down to the final two. Here we have Kamran, head of the Blue Dolphin trading family, and Mansour, the oldest son of the head of the Alchemist Cartel."

While the speakers were being introduced, servants brought out the first plate. On it was a salad full of level two and three greens and other vegetables. No one started to eat, yet, so I waited. The speaker reached behind himself and pulled out a cup, "Before we begin the debate, a toast! May the Ashkhas Baqiya continue to grow and prosper, that we may be a Baqiya no more!"

I started at that, but held my wine glass up with everyone else and took a sip. I thought back to the word 'Baqiya' and forced my translation ability to function. It worked and gave me a meaning of remnant. *They named themselves the Ashkhas Remnant. Their civilization was established at nearly the same time as the Craesti, who were fleeing a disaster that no one will talk about. Though everyone did get pretty high-strung about the Dungeon we first found.*

After the toast, we sat down and everyone started to eat. It was almost a game of who could eat the quietest, while the debate raged. The occasional clink of a glass sounded though. *Huh, I thought there would be Inscriptions to keep things quiet,* I thought, taking care to set my

glass down gently. *I wonder if it's a cultural thing to not use Inscriptions. Maybe if someone is really hated you are supposed to smack your lips loudly?* I had to work to keep in a snort of laughter.

The moderator alternated back and forth asking the questions selected for each round. The chosen speaker would get a few minutes to answer, then their opponent would get to ask them questions before giving their position and had to answer questions. The topics varied from setting up tariffs to rent subsidies and new construction.

"Our final question, do you support increasing taxes to pay for the coming war with the Illyrian Empire? Mansour, it is your question."

"We should not be going to war anyway," he answered brusquely. "Why should we involve ourselves in a war against one of our trading partners at the behest of another? All this will do is deplete our warrior Ahzab with no benefit to ourselves. What happens if a Beast wave attacks the wall, or Behemoth decides to attack again, while our forces are deployed? Let the lesser races fight it out. We do not need to involve ourselves in their childish squabbles."

"What?" Kamran said. "They attacked us first. We are already at war. They allied with Chaos cultists and corrupted Beasts, killing thousands of civilians in our city."

Mansour laughed, short and sharp, "So says a boy from Craesti. Lies and slander, I say, in an attempt to get our support. What proof do we have that he is telling the truth?"

"The attacks stopped after the destruction of the Illyrian ships?"

"That just proves the Craesti were behind the attack, not the Illyrians!" Mansour shouted. "They did it to bring our superior forces down upon the poor Illyrians, who have been slandered and maligned for years because of their gathering style."

"You mean the one that requires slaves and causing crippling damage to others, thus requiring them to assault every other nation and terrorize international shipping? That style? Please. You only argue for them because your parent's cartel sells nearly forty percent of your product to them. You are sticking your head in the sand and denying their attacks upon our shipping and the enslavement of our people, all so you can make extra profit. You are disgusting, and a curse upon the name of our Merchant's Council," Kamran said, her voice dripping venom.

I leaned towards Aleks and whispered, "Should I clap? I really want to clap."

"No," she admonished quietly, slapping my shoulder gently. "Everyone knows we are here to support Kamran but we do not want to advertise it too heavily. Our quiet support is better than being enthusiastic in our praise."

They continued back and forth for another ten minutes before the moderator finally stopped them. He stood in the center and looked out at everyone, "Thank you for attending this debate! The transcript will be produced and placed at Merchant Guild locations throughout the Baqiya. The final vote is in one week. Please, enjoy the dessert, and thank you for supporting the Merchant's Council."

A sumptuous cake was placed in front of me, and I ate it slowly, savoring the rich, chocolatey goodness. "So I can see why we are supporting Kamran," Jon said from the other side of the table.

"I was amazed that Mansour wasn't booed off the stage," I said. "How did someone so obviously divorced from reality reach the finals?"

"There are many who do not wish for war, and want to pretend the attacks never happened," Aleks said. "We can only thank Light that they are in the minority, but the Alchemist Cartel is powerful, and many others think that, since they are wealthy, they must know how to make sure everyone else is wealthy as well. They ignore the rumors that the Alchemist Cartel bullies nonaffiliated Alchemists to maintain their market share, while the Blue Dolphin trading company seeks to empower their customers. They believe that if their customers are richer, they will buy more stuff from them, thus enriching them both."

"Yup, a truly free market is better, as long as freedom is maintained and monopolies are prevented," I said, thinking back to Economics 101.

"I am finished. Are we ready to go?" Bridget asked, obviously bored with the political and economic discussion.

I looked at our plates, and they were all empty. "I'd like to try to speak with Prince Gunther before leaving. I'll meet you all in the carriage?"

"I will join you," Aleks said.

"Sure," I smiled at her, then gave Vaya a quick hug before walking around the stage. I avoided being drawn into a conversation with an Ashkhas merchant, who congratulated me for saving the city, by simply saying, "Thank you. I did my best, as did many others protecting the populace. I'm sorry, I must go speak with Prince Gunther. Have a great evening." They looked nonplussed but smiled as I walked off with a small bow.

"Prince Gunther," I said, bowing deeper to him, "I'm glad to see you up and about, and regret not getting the opportunity to test myself against you again."

"Ja, Aiden," he stood and bowed to me. "Congratulations on your victory in the tournament. Princess Aleksandra, it is an honor to speak with you again. I sorely regret not getting to face you in the ring. Either of you."

"I as well," Aleks said. "Just like I am annoyed at Aiden here for not properly fighting me in the final. Will you be journeying into the Divine Territory?"

"Of course!" He said boisterously. "I would not miss it even if I had to crawl on my hands. Just being at the entrance for a week will be worth a month outside. Even if a portion of my gains go to the smiling trickster next to you."

"Who, me?" I asked with a Cheshire grin.

"Yes, you," Gunther mock glared at me, then laughed. "Eh, served me right for being so overconfident. After the Territory, though, I want a real fight. No Aether techniques at all, just fists and martial capability."

"I'm down for that," I said.

He gave me a questioning look for a second, then nodded.

"It'll have to be here in the city, though, since we will be headed back to Craesti and preparing for war soon after," Aleks said.

"Of course. We may meet yet again on the battlefield against the Illyrians. Hopefully with the Ashkhas support," Gunther said with a grimace.

"May the war be swift and casualties low," I said with a frown. "Though I know it won't be."

"Well, Aiden," Gunther said, his voice serious, "war is never good, but there are times when it is the lesser evil."

"War is an ugly thing, but not the ugliest of things," I said, thinking of a quote I'd long memorized, then another. "It is well that war is so terrible, or we would grow too fond of it. Unfortunately, this is one of the times when it is necessary." I thought about why I'd originally sought to attend the Air Force Academy, and why I was now pushing myself to get stronger as fast as possible.

"Well said, Knight Aiden," Gunther said. "Regrettably, I must leave for the evening, but I would love to spend an evening discussing philosophy with you one day."

"After you beat me black and blue, we'll go get drinks and talk philosophy," I said.

"You are mining for quality ore," he said. At my questioning look, he said, "That is a plan, and I look forward to it."

"I as well," I said, bowing to him. "Have a great night, and I'll see you at the entrance to the Divine Territory."

He nodded to me and bowed to Aleks. We turned and walked out, meeting the others at the carriage. Most of the way through the ride back, I turned to the others, "Hey, I'd like to get together with Librarian Narwan to talk about the Dungeon run. Would you all like to join me?"

"Sure," Vaya said. "We should spend some time going through our actions and see if we can improve."

"May my team join as well?" Aleks asked. "We are going to the Dungeon tomorrow for the first time together, and any advice would be helpful."

"Of course," I said, at the same time Jon, Bridget, and Vaya said yes in various ways. "I also want to ask him about combining Aether to create new types."

"You mean like that weird beam thing you did to murder the murder bears?" Jon asked.

"Yeah. It was plasma or at least an attempt at it," I said. They gave me blank looks. "Uh, plasma is another state of matter, like a solid, liquid, or gas, where everything in the substance is ionized. Lightning can cause it to exist, and it can be extremely hot. The sun is made of it. I mixed Lightning, Fire, and Air into my Wrath of the Lightning Herald Technique to create it, and it seemed to make the Technique do more damage. Though it didn't have the electric stunning effect that pure Lightning can have."

"Interesting," Aleks said. "I have heard of mixing those three Elements to make Joy or Passion Aether, usually in some esoteric Inscriptions at extremely rich theaters. Though just Lightning and Fire creates nearly the same effect."

"That is correct Princess," Librarian Narwan said, appearing in the seat next to Jon.

I am proud to say I was the only person not to scream at his appearance. "Good evening, Master Narwan," I said with a seated bow.

He narrowed his eyes at me, then humphed. "As I was saying, most combinations of adjacent Aethers tend to make emotional or conceptual mixes, so creating a physical one is very interesting."

"Uh, conceptual?" I asked.

"Water, Wood, and Earth Aether in even quantities makes Life Aether, which is often used by the best healers," he said. "While Water and Ice can make Cold Aether, and is usually used in restaurants to store perishable goods. It is easier to create a very large cold box using Cold Aether rather than Ice Aether."

"Sir, why have we not been taught about the mixes yet?" Bridget asked.

"Normally, unless your gathering technique creates them, it is extremely difficult to form composite Aether before reaching Complete Condensation. It is only included in the third-tier curriculum. I had planned on bringing it up after the Divine Territory, as I expect many of you will reach Threshold while within, and you have always surprised me with your capability. I should have known our resident troublemaker would exceed my expectations yet again," he glared at me, but in a proud way. *He's really weird.*

"So, what is the benefit to using composite Aether instead of the pure Elements?" Vaya asked curiously.

"Typically, composite Aether gives you a more focused outcome," he answered. "Lightning, Metal, Wood, and Ice together make Destruction Aether, used in attacks similar to a simple Aether Blast to do significantly more damage, or used in Inscriptions to demolish buildings with little residue. A Destruction Aether Blast will do more damage but is easier to stop with an Aether Shield and often moves slower. There is a tradeoff, always. I will make a book of the most common composite Aethers available to you until you leave for the Divine Territory."

"Huh, that's like the vision I had when I first took the Affinity Powders," I said.

Librarian Narwan blinked. "Is that why you were able to use a composite Aether as early as you did? Hmm, I need more of those powders." He paused for a second. "Wait, I have two sets. Samantha has not taken them. Yes, another experimental subject. The book will be with Lindsay. Enjoy." He vanished. The door to the carriage did not move.

"How?" Jon asked incredulously.

"Maybe it is something you can do at his level? Or a technique he knows?" I said. "Hopefully we'll be able to do similar things when we reach that level of power."

"When?" Aleks asked, giving me a look.

"Yes, when," I said. "We will all make it, and together raise the strength of our nation to be preeminent in the world. So, what do you know about composite Aether, since you were educated in the palace."

"Other than some of the most common combinations, not much," she said. "My instructors, and my parents, all said that they would give more information when it became relevant. Unlike Master Narwan, my father said he would not teach me about them until I reached Seed Core. I look forward to trying it out, though I do not expect much."

"Either way, it'll be fun," I said.

CHAPTER SIX

Lindsay met us in the lobby of the inn we'd been staying at for the last month and a half. "Master Narwan wished for you to have this, and asked that you spend some time speaking with Miss Samantha tomorrow," she said with a smile.

"Thank you, Lindsay," I said, taking the book with a small bow. She giggled lightly, accidentally getting her hands in the way of mine, then turned to work on something at the desk. Vaya elbowed me. "What?" I asked. Her glare made me confused.

"She was flirting with you," she said flatly. "Do not encourage it, please."

"Uh, huh?" I asked confusedly, then shook my head. "I apologize, I did not realize and will do my best not to reciprocate. Doesn't she have a crush on Mentor Jameson?"

"A crush?" Jon asked, then nodded as context clues kicked in. "Yeah, she did wish to be his catch, but I do not think that would go anywhere. Now, what is in the book?"

"Uh, let's go sit somewhere and go through it," I said. "Aleks, you want to go get Lilianna, Milenna, and Hanna? Oh, and see if Jamila, Ming, Xiao, and Lea want to join as well, if they're around. Right over there looks comfortable and out of the way." I pointed to a spot where three couches circled a table.

She nodded, then jogged up the stairs nearby to their room.

I led the others to the couch that sat against the wall and sat in the middle. Vaya sat next to me, leaning into my side so she could read over my shoulder. Jon and Bridget sat on the couch to our right. I set the book down on the table and opened to the first page. "There are three types of mixed Aethers. The physical are manifestations of the physical world, with a more focused existence than pure Elemental Aether. The most common example is either Mud, a combination of Water and Earth, or Steam, Water and Fire mixed. After the physical Aethers are the conceptual, most often used with Water and Ice to form Connection Aether, used to reinforce walls by Connecting the various pieces together. The opposite, Separation Aether, is usually formed with Lightning and Water, and is used to break apart structures. The third most common are the emotional Aethers. Air and Fire together make Joy, while Earth and Water make Sadness."

"Wait, did they not already mix Water and Earth to make Mud?" Bridget asked, leaning forward.

"Yeah," I said. "Let's keep reading to see if they say why." I flipped the page and continued to read. "Creating a composite Aether requires a strong will and knowledge of Aether, as you must know what you wish to create and believe that you will be able to make it. There are hundreds of composite Aethers that I have seen, and dozens I myself have created, but only by believing and forcing the Aether to behave as you wish can you actually mix them together. It is recommended for beginners in this field to focus on the physical manifestations that are closest to your primary Affinity and to only mix two Elementary Aethers together. Mud, Lava, Mist, and Steam Aethers are the easiest to create."

"Mist?" Jon asked.

"Uh, Water and Air," I said. "I called it Fog when I last experienced it. Same thing, I guess."

"Maybe it depends on the proportion of Air and Water?" Milenna asked, sitting on the couch to my left. "Evenly mixed you get Fog, but more Air than Water would be Mist?"

"More Water than Air would make Bubbles!" Jon said, excited. "So many tricks."

Bridget whacked him upside the head. "What else does it say?"

"Well, the next page is a description of Mud, including how it feels, smells, and the sound it makes when you squish it," I said, reading. "So the more you know about your desired creation, I guess the easier it is to make it."

"Mud would be good for creating a quagmire," Vaya said. "I could use that to stop a charging Beast or sink an opponent and then harden it, locking them in place."

I kept turning the pages. "Yup. After Mud is Lava, lots of descriptions of how it smells and the feeling of the heat on your skin." I flipped through another dozen pages where various different things were described. Steam, Heat, Cold, Crystals (which was mostly about quartz, though the author didn't say that), Glacier (a combination of Earth and Ice), Dust, and many others. The author ended up describing things with three or more Aether combinations before he brought up a topic that made me excited.

"Ooh, here's something interesting. Water and Metal make Rust, and he argues that it is a physical manifestation, while some others, not referenced here, say it is a conceptual Aether as a type of Decay. Since Wood and Water most commonly make Rot, which has a similar argument about whether it is a physical or a conceptual Aether, he argues that many of the concepts are physical as well. It is simply our perception of the Aether that creates what it is. So if you think of Rot more as Decay, the mix of Wood and Water will make a more conceptual Aether, or you could make the physical manifestation of rotting wood instead. That's so weird," I said.

We spent the next hour flipping through the book and discussing the various types of Aether that it described. After quickly flipping through the book, we spent another hour discussing our Dungeon run, what we saw, and how we handled it. Jamila asked a question that made my whole team pause, "Was it not allowed to rush to one edge of the field? You know, use the edge of the arena as a wall?"

"Uh, no idea," I said. I laughed sheepishly, "It never occurred to me to move from the original starting spot."

"That would probably work well," Vaya said, "though you will have less time to deal with the closest Dungeon spawns."

"Light, why did we not think of that?" Jon asked.

"Bad assumptions," I said. "Have you run the Dungeon yet?" I asked Jamila.

"Yes," she said shyly, "But we only stayed for one wave. We are supposed to go again tomorrow afternoon. The information on the second wave you saw is very useful and knowing that the first wave is the same is a relief. Thank you."

"You are welcome," I said with a grin. Everyone not on our team expressed their thanks since both groups were going to the Dungeon tomorrow. After another ten minutes of discussing the theoretical behavior of the Dungeon Beasts and ways of countering them, I spent a bit of time telling them about how I used the pure Aether from the Dungeon to get a better result while gathering. Everyone threw some theories about why around, but no definitive answers came from it other than, use the technique. After the discussion, we broke up. The other two teams wanted to keep strategizing, but Vaya and Jon wanted to go try to make a composite Aether. The rest of my team headed to the courtyard behind the inn, and I quickly gave Jamila a hug and kiss before rushing after them.

We split up, moving to different sections of the courtyard so we wouldn't interfere with each other. I gave Bridget the book, since Vaya was sure she could make Mud Aether without it. I looked over at my girlfriend to see her sitting on the ground. She made a small amount of Water appear in front of her and mixed it into the dirt. A little bit of stirring later, and she had a full on mud pie. She caught me watching her, then winked at me. I shook my head and turned away, only to be caught by a mud splatter on the back of my head. I turned and glared at her, but she only gave me a 'who me' innocent look.

I just rolled my eyes at her, then turned back to the wall that Librarian Narwan had permanently enhanced when we arrived. *Okay, let's see if I can replicate that plasma beam*, I thought. I moved through the motions of Wrath of the Lightning Herald, but focused on mixing Air, Fire, and Lightning Aether again. I didn't remember exactly the proportion of each, and so I decided to just mix them equally. *Stupid mid-combat epiphanies not leaving perfect memories*, I grumbled when the even mix fizzled into nothing. *Even with strong willpower, you still need to approximate the actual amount of each or you end up with nothing. That's what it said in the book.*

I took a deep breath. *Okay, plasma is going to be an even mix of Air and Lightning, as the substance that is ionized and the ionization itself. Hot plasma is much more common than cold plasma, but it being hot isn't the main thing about it. Hmm, let's add half as much Fire, see if that works. If not I'll try equal. Five parts, two Lightning, two Air, one Fire, and go!* I moved through the motions, focusing on what the beam had looked like, the smell of ozone and burning hair that had accompanied it, and the sound of air breaking in the midst of the attack. I crushed the Aether together, forcing it to form what I wanted, and a beam of Plasma smashed into the wall. A centimeter deep depression was carved into the wall where my beam hit. Yes! I celebrated, knowing that I'd made a new discovery that would help us in a fight.

I played around with the Plasma Aether a bit longer, trying to see what all I could do with it. Plasma Blasts had a limited range, but hit harder than anything else I could use. I tried to punch with Plasma, and scoured the skin off my hand. *Ow, ow, Light, ow, that sucked. A lot of power though*, I looked at the divot in the wall. It was almost two centimeters deep, though it filled in quickly as Librarian Narwan's Inscription fixed the damage. *Okay, I think I've got the hang of this.*

I walked over to where Vaya was playing around with mud and asked, "How're things going?"

"Fairly well," she said, then threw a ball of mud into my face. "I think I am almost there."

I spat to the side. "I would expect nothing less," I said, wiping my cheeks off and glaring at her. I baked a bit of the mud off my hands and then cleaned them off on my pants. Jon was working on Mist, and achieving a small amount of success as well. I borrowed the book from him, flipping through the various pages to see what I wanted to work on next. *Let's try for a challenge to finish off the night.*

I focused on the emotional Aethers, and decided I needed more joy, or Joy, in my life. *Creating an emotional composite is the hardest of the three, since they are even less tangible than a conceptual mix. It says here to start by thinking of the times that the emotion was prevalent in your life, and to focus on what evokes that emotion about each of the two Elemental Aethers.* I held both hands out.

In my right I conjured a ball of Air Aether, and let it swirl around. A tiny bit of dirt got stuck in the wildly rotating vortex, dancing around the center. I smiled at the sight, thinking of how people described a joyful breeze and the feeling of the first warm wind of spring. Thinking of spring made me remember the spring break trip where I'd proposed to Jasmine, which segued nicely into my contemplation of fire.

We had been camping, a dozen friends from various squadrons next to the Pueblo reservoir. It wasn't wilderness camping like several of us liked, but we spent the first two days kayaking across the reservoir and just enjoying the time playing board games and telling stories around the joyfully flickering fire. *Those were great days*, I thought, looking at my left hand where a flickering sphere of Fire Aether hovered. Fire had always made me smile, at least when confined in a campfire or fireplace. The Fire I held danced, and I played with the shape.

Finally, I thought about what joy was, the happiness I felt when Jasmine said yes in front of our closest friends, the laughter Jon caused when he dumped a bucket of water on Mr. Stanilopolis' head, the frustrating jerk of a shopkeeper, and the quiet contentment I felt earlier, reading a book with Vaya and Jamila leaning on me. I looked over to my friends, Jon and Bridget goofing off while playing with Aether, and Vaya sitting in the mud. She caught me looking, and flashed me a brilliant smile that made my heart flutter. *I cannot forget the life I led before my arrival here, but it can only inform my life here, not dictate it. I can find joy here, and have. I'm in a world with real magic, and in a position to make extreme changes that will help everyone.*

I am Caleb Hill, and I am Kupiec Aiden. I cannot divorce myself from my past, even if it occasionally feels like it was just a dream. Joy, true joy, is more than happiness, more than just feelings. It is the contentment that comes from knowing that, no matter what, the people here with me and my other friends will be behind me one hundred percent, just as I will support them. As I contemplated my beliefs on Joy, I put my two hands together, merging the balls of Fire and Air. Time passed, and the balls slowly collapsed inward.

I opened my eyes to see a tiny ball of pink Aether, less than a tenth the size of the original Fire and Air spheres, jumping back and forth between my hands. It seemed almost incapable of sitting still, like an excitable puppy, and every movement evoked happiness in my mind.

"Of course," Jon said, startling me out of my introspection. "Only you would make a second new type of Aether in a single day. What did you make this time?"

"Uh, Joy Aether," I said, "or at least that's what I tried to make."

"I should hope you made what you wanted to," Vaya said, leaning over my other shoulder to look closely at the bouncing pink ball, "considering it has been almost an hour since you started."

"Really?" I asked, incredulous. "It didn't feel that long." I looked at the ball in my hands, and laughed. "Well, I figured Joy would be the easiest of the emotional composites mentioned in the book, considering the people around me right now are most of the biggest sources of joy in my life." I leaned into Vaya's cheek. I felt her face heat up, and just enjoyed the contentment of achieving something new and interesting, and sharing it with my friends. I talked a little about my thought process, describing what all I had done and bounced the Joy Aether around.

"What are you going to do with it?" Bridget asked.

"Uh, no idea," I said with a laugh. "I just wanted to see if I could do it."

"Well, that does give us ideas on how to make emotional Aether as well," Vaya said with a grin.

"What are your plans for the rest of the night?" Jon asked.

"Sia and I are going to gather together, and see about working on our Affinities. He's still ahead of me in Fire and Air, and he wants to see if he can push his Wood Affinity higher with my help," I said, then mentally called to Sia, *"We're done if you are free."*

"I will be there shortly," Sia said back to me. *"Zimnodlot, Kami, and Lampart are returning as well. We had a productive time hunting, though the Sayaad Guildsmen were confused why we wanted to transport alone."*

"That's great," I said, then turned to the others, "Your Bonds are on the way as well."

"Good, we can all use some time to gather with them," Vaya said.

It took Sia and the rest of them a couple of minutes to arrive. While waiting, I just kind of played with the new pink ball, tossing it to Vaya and maintaining it when she threw it back to me. Just the presence of the Joy Aether made everyone a bit happier. In the midst of one toss, Sia flew into the courtyard at his full size. His wingspan reached eight meters across. I looked up in awe at him, missing my catch. The ball of Joy splattered on the ground, then evaporated into the air. *Aww, but hey, Sia's back,* I thought. I was amazed yet again that he had tied his life to mine, gambling that I would surpass what he had achieved to this point. *"Are you ready to work on our Affinities some?"* I asked him.

"Of course, Aiden," he said. *"Do you want to work on Fire or Air? I need to work on Wood the most."*

"Uh, Fire, I think," I said. *"With your help, it'll tie with Lightning and that'll definitely help with the new Aether composite I just made."* I explained about the Plasma Aether.

"That is very interesting," he said. *"I have not tried to make any composites."* He shrank down and landed on my shoulders, one claw on either side of my head.

"Nope, you are not sitting on my head to gather," I grumbled aloud at him. "Not happening."

"Fine," he said to all of us, a tone of laughter embedded overtop his mental sending. He hopped off, increasing in size again, and wrapped his wings around me.

I leaned back against his feathers, and we linked our meridians together. We slowly built up the technique Librarian Narwan had taught us, focusing first on gathering to our current peak state before sharing specific Aethers back and forth. He sent his incredibly potent Fire Aether, and I responded with Wood Aether. I grabbed a hold of the Fire, cycling it through my meridians and grinding away at my Affinity.

I could tell that Sia was feeling the strain of his extremely low Affinity for Wood, and sympathized with the feeling of vines growing through his meridians. Of course, mine were currently on Fire, so I didn't sympathize too much. *I think I can use this to advance my tempering too,* I thought, then diverted a tiny bit of my attention to building the third-level tempering technique in my aorta, starting the process of tempering my arteries in Fire Aether. Millimeter by millimeter, the tempering climbed up, faster than when I had tempered with Lightning.

Splitting my mind like that was the limit of my capability, and the rest of the world faded away as we focused on getting the most out of our technique. I gritted my teeth, concentrating

through the agony of my meridians and blood vessels burning up. *Why is gathering always so painful?* I exclaimed.

After an hour, I had to call our session. My meridians were starting to be strained beyond what was safe. "Thanks Sia," I said. "A couple more weeks of this and the gains will be permanent. We'll be able to improve all of our Affinities over time. Uh, did you get a chance to speak with Librarian Narwan about the Divine Territory?"

"You are welcome," he answered. "It is not like this does not benefit me as well. I spoke to him, Sultah Aleahil, and the other Soul gatherers. They said no one really knows what will happen, since I am the first Core-level Beast Bonded to a Condensation-level gatherer who is entering into the Divine Territory. Most of them believe that I will simply be unable to enter, blocked in the same way that everyone above Condensation is. Sultah Aleahil is convinced I will be able to join you, our Soul Bond defeating the boundary, but that I will be unable to express my full power while there. He suggested wearing a suppression collar like in the tournament to increase the odds."

"And what does Librarian Narwan think?"

"He believes that I will be able to join, but that doing so will permanently reduce my level to be equivalent to yours." Sia paused for a second. *"In some ways, I believe that would actually increase my ability to help you grow. I cannot truly share my Aether and Affinities with you right now, as my Aether's density and purity would reduce you to meat paste. If we were at the same level, we could share much more freely, and I believe you would grow faster."*

"Really? If you were at a lower level I'd grow faster?"

"Look at Jon," Sia said. "He has a significantly lower number of meridians and worse Affinities than you, yet he is keeping up admirably. Yes, you are supporting him and your other friends, but you should be outstripping them. His Bond with Zimnodlot is letting them both grow faster, and I cannot support you in quite the same way, or to the same extent. Of course, if nothing changes, you will probably reach Core well before he does, but not by anywhere near the extent it would normally be."

"In some ways, I'm glad," I told him. "I don't want to outpace my friends too much. I've told you about my discussion with Darkness, and I truly believe I will need all the help I can get in surviving what is to come. If the trip brings you down and lets us advance quicker, we will just have to focus on making sure everyone else here can advance just as fast. I will not allow them to fall behind."

"Good! I will assist you with that. We do not know what will happen when you try to enter the Divine Territory, though I know you all will advance while you are there. Light, knowing you, I would not be surprised if you came back at the end of Completion." His laughing cry echoed through the air.

"Well, I'm glad you have such a high estimation of my capability," I said dryly. I laughed. "I really am the main character, aren't I?"

"What?"

I laughed again, self-deprecatingly this time, and explained about the isekai novels I'd read back on Earth, and how what I went through was so similar to them.

He laughed at me, not with me, then said, *"Now that we are unable to gather, can you show me the Plasma Aether you mentioned before?"*

“Sure,” I said. We spent the next twenty minutes working on it. I demonstrated a few times, and when he was unable to create it, I described everything I could remember about plasma from my chemistry and physics classes at USAFA, bringing a melancholy joy into my heart as I remembered my physical chemistry classes. Finally, it was time to go to sleep, for the few hours I needed as a Condensation-level gatherer.

CHAPTER SEVEN

The next few days passed quickly, gathering and training interspersed with some time to see the city and shopping. I upgraded my armor at the Merchant's Guild, still sad I wasn't able to speak with Captain Svik again. They gave me a great deal, but I only had enough money on me to get a set of chainmail at the Complete Condensation level. The others upgraded various equipment as well, so we were all as prepared as we could be.

Since the teams were going to be split up in arrival zones in the Divine Territory, I spent most of the evenings with Jamila. The first night, I went with her and Hanna to a clinic in the poorer part of the city, where she tried to teach me some basic healing techniques. "No, not like that," she corrected me as I stood over a ten year old boy who'd broken his arm. "You can do that internally, but in someone else you have to spread the Aether apart. Watch again." Her tone was annoyed, as this was the seventh time she'd had to stop me from healing someone.

I watched, adding Aether to my eyes and enhancing my now-permanent Aether Sight. I'd learned how to tone it down, as there were times that it made it difficult to see what was going on normally, but I couldn't turn it off. Jamila's Aether control was greater than mine, and I saw the weave she created out of it to direct the broken pieces of bone back together.

After a few minutes, she helped the boy off the table and put on a splint. "Now, be careful," she said. "It will be sore for a few days. Eat more food if you can."

"Thank you, miss," he said, awkwardly forming the Craesti words in his leonine mouth before rushing out the door.

Jamila turned to me, then gave me a hug. "You are an amazing gatherer, and can do some really awesome things with Aether," she said into my chest. "But you are a lousy healer."

"I don't know how you maintain such dexterity with your Aether flows when working through someone's aura," I said. "Everything gets slippery."

"Counselor Zhiyu did say not everyone was cut out to be a healer," Jamila said, stepping back and looking at me. "How does it feel to not be the best at something?"

"Hey, I'm not the best at a lot of things," I said with a fake pout. "But I am going to keep practicing. I don't like not being able to heal someone if I have to."

"Well, you did get the hang of the Enhanced Regeneration Technique," she said. "At our gathering and tempering levels, it will help someone a lot. It will save you on healing potion ingredients if nothing else, mister best alchemist in our generation."

"Fine, I'll allow it," I said, then pulled her into a kiss. "Can I make some powders to give to the clinic, since I can't seem to actually heal directly with Aether?"

"Yes, go talk to Mother Aisha," she said.

I spent the next two hours making powders. The clinic had a small Alchemy set, but my travel set was better. They provided all the ingredients, so I just ground out some general healing powders, blood regeneration powders, bone healing powders, and disease curing powders. *I'm so glad that there seems to be a minimum size for gathering ability*, I thought while finishing up a disease curing powder. *The thought of enhanced germs makes me shudder.*

Jamila and I spent an hour after that walking through a local park, then heading back to our inn. The next night, we went out to a play, rather than go heal again. "I want to spend time with you," she said, "even if that is selfish."

"You can't heal everything," I said. "And if you burn out, you'll fail to become the greatest healer ever, as I know you will."

I had worried we'd have to procure more camping gear to prepare for the trip, but we were each provided a bag the day prior to leaving. They were massive backpacks, over a meter tall, with shoulder straps and a waist belt to help hold them up. I lifted the bag up with one hand, "Huh, not very heavy," I said, looking at Knight Kaminski. "Where do we get the equipment to fill it up?"

She laughed, "Look inside."

Jon beat me to it, throwing the flap that covered the top of the bag off and gasped. I followed suit, and discovered that it was half full with way more stuff than should be able to fit inside.

"The bottom pocket is nearly as big," Knight Kaminski said, "and is for you to place extra clothing, personal items, and anything else you think you will need. Each team has a full cook set split between them, as well as a camping set. The camping set includes four tents, rain tarps, two heating rocks, and an alarm Formation. Individually, you all were given two weeks of rations, a firestarter, and a harvesting set geared towards your capabilities. Bridget, Jon, you were given skinning and butchery tools, while Aiden and Vaya were given herbalist tools. Additionally, there are twenty healing pills, five blood replenishment pills, twenty-four gathering pills, and a dozen Aether replenishment pills. I highly suggest you restock what you took into the Dungeon and buy anything else you think you will need. Leave the top half of the bags empty, you will need space for what you harvest."

"Why are they so light? And how much do they hold?" Bridget asked, while Vaya was just staring at the bags wide-eyed.

"They are Inscribed to hold nearly ten times their physical volume," Knight Kaminski said. Vaya made a gagging noise in the back of her throat at that. "And they will reduce the weight by around ninety percent. Similar to the packs supplied to you during the tournament, they are to be returned upon leaving the Divine Territory, but you may attempt to purchase them with harvested goods. That will be difficult, as each of these is worth around ten platinum."

"Ten platinum!" Jon exclaimed, almost jumping away from the bag. "What happens if they are damaged or destroyed during the expedition?"

"Nothing," she said. "And you will be able to trade for them at a significantly reduced cost. Though, with the reduction in taxation upon the other's findings and lack of one on yours, it may not be that much reduced. Each of these backpacks is Inscribed by Masters of at least Perfect Core, and the fastest Inscriber took over a month to make. That is not including the rare materials needed to create this type of bag."

"Why do they allow us to take them at all?" Vaya asked.

"Because the Divine Territory is full of rare materials, and they want you to bring them back," Knight Kaminski answered. "You will be given a briefing tonight on many of the rarest plants and Beasts you will find there, and what the most effective ways to harvest them are. A reference is included for each team, given to the team leader in their bag. Now, take some time to discuss what you should bring and then go shopping. You have until lunch, when the lecture will start."

The discussion took only ten minutes, settling on basically what we brought to the expedition to the Dungeon and then doubling it. The resulting shopping trip didn't take long,

though it left me a few gold poorer and completely out of store credit at Alchemist's Treasures. The briefing was interesting and mostly consisted of lots of different types of Light or Darkness aligned plants and level four Beasts. I made some notes, but only on the way of harvesting Day and Night Lilies, and how to spot Mirage Lizards when they are moving. Mirage Lizards were completely invisible if they were holding still, so that was a no-go.

"Librarian Narwan," I asked at the end of the briefing, suppressing a yawn as it was getting late. "Have you made any progress on the Light or Darkness Affinity powders? Anything specific we should be looking for to help?"

"Hmm, I have not made any significant progress on either powder for humans," he answered. "I am missing something there. I have managed to make a basic framework for a Light Affinity Powder for birds like Siarczysty that should be ready for testing once you return."

"Light Affinity!" Sia sent to me, listening in from outside. *"That..., I cannot fathom it. I would be more than happy to test it."*

"Good," Librarian Narwan said. "I will ensure you are not the first though."

"Light Affinity," Milenna gasped at roughly the same time. "You prove yet again that you are the greatest Alchemist ever, Master Narwan."

"Why thank you, my dear," he said, looking pleased as punch.

Sia and I gathered for the next hour after we were dismissed, driving each other's Affinities forward while working on body tempering at the same time. Sia had a similar technique to temper his blood, and was working on his Wood tempering and Affinity while I focused on Fire. Every second burned, but we endured, racing to get stronger faster. *"Light Affinity will make you extremely deadly,"* I sent to him.

"Yes, as long as it does not take away my sanity or sapience," Sia sent back. *"Every Beast with Light Affinity is an animal, not a person."*

"We won't risk that," I said. *"You will not be the first, or even the tenth, test subject. Okay?"*

"Of course," Sia said. *"Good night. We shall see in the morning if I get to come with you or not."*

After a sumptuous breakfast, where Lindsey and the rest of the staff pulled out all the stops cooking, Librarian Narwan gave me a small bottle. "This is concentrated coffee," he said. "Mix with water ten to one."

"Thank you!" I exclaimed, excited by the present.

"Bring me a Dusk Vine root if you can," he said.

"Will do," I said. I went up to my room, grabbing the backpack and checking over everything I was leaving. *A couple of sets of clothing, a few Knick-knacks I'd purchased, that's it.* "Hmm, what to do with this?"

"Lindsey said the servants will take all the stuff from our rooms to storage," Jon said, hefting his bag.

"Cool," I said. "I should've asked earlier." We hurried out of the room, meeting everyone in the hallway and stampeding down the stairs.

Just before heading out the door, Samantha pulled me aside. "Can I, uh, speak to you for a minute?" She asked me.

"Sure," I said. "We're a little ahead of schedule."

"Solwantedtosay," she started, speaking too quickly, then took a deep breath to slow down. "So I wanted to say, I'm sorry for avoiding you the last week. I don't want you to think I don't like you, I just..." she stopped.

I gave her time, knowing the others would wait, letting her process and get up the courage to say whatever she was trying to say.

"I've been speaking to Milenna, Hanna, and Lea, trying to understand this world a bit better. You know, from the perspective of people our age," she continued. "Trying to come to grips with the different social mores, because... Because I like you. I, uh, I like like you, you know." She hung her head, cheeks blazing. "I also needed to make sure my feelings weren't just, you know, because you rescued me."

"That is probably it," I said, lifting her face with her chin. "It's fine if that is the case, since you don't really know me."

"But I know enough," she said. "I know you're hot." She very obviously checked me out, causing me to blush. "You're smart. Strong. Well liked. Important. But most importantly, you're kind. Yes, you saved me when you didn't have to. You risked getting injured, risked getting in trouble to save me, then you risked your life to protect people you didn't know. Your actions show that you are an amazing young man, I want to get to know you better. I know you have three girlfriends already, so I wanted to find out how common that was."

"Two," I said. "I'm only courting Jamila and Vaya."

She blinked. "Sure you are," she said, her tone not believing me. She took a deep breath again, suddenly on the verge of tears. "I just needed to tell you how I felt before you left. Just in case. In case you." She stopped.

"In case I don't come back," I said gently. She nodded shakily. I put my other hand on her shoulder, looking into her eyes. "Nothing I've heard says the Divine Territory is that dangerous, but even if it is," I continued, seeing the flash of concern in her eyes, "our main priority will be our safety. Yes, we want to explore and find useful things, but they are worthless if we don't get to come back. I know, man dies for money, but none of us are hurting for basic wealth."

"I was talking to Lindsey. She said the last time they opened the territory, we were able to send a four person team, and only three came back. She said that is the expected casualty rate," Sam said shakily.

I pulled her into a hug. "We'll be safe. All three teams have amazing healers, healing pills, and are able to defend against anything that could go into the territory. I promise, we'll all be back," I said. *And hopefully, while we're gone, your crush will be revealed for what it is, a crush. I saved you from slavery, of course you'd latch onto me. Some time away will do her good,* I thought. *But I won't abandon her either. I don't leave my friends behind.*

Finally, she stopped crying and stepped back from my arms, embarrassed by her actions. "I'm sorry. You must be late," she said, not looking at me.

"We'll continue this talk when we get back, okay?" I asked. "Even if we don't, Librarian Narwan, Knight Kaminski, Light, even King Craesti will be delighted to help you and protect you."

She nodded with a weak grin, then waved me away. I gave her a bow, making her smile more genuine, then rushed out. Obviously, I was the last one to the carriage. "So," Xiao asked, "what did Miss Samantha want?" His grin was obvious.

I pulled a nut from a small package I'd grabbed for a snack and threw it at him.

"What, everyone knows who her hero is," Aleks joked.

I shook my head, leaning back against the seat while everyone, Vaya and Jamila included, made fun of me. I could tell that some of it was because they were tense. We all were anxious about the trip.

The journey across town was fairly quick, and we ended up only a few blocks away from the Stairway of Determination. I looked out the window at it, a melancholy feeling rising up in my chest. I both hated and loved that it let me see Jasmine again. I shook my head, looking around at my friends. *No being all maudlin now*, I thought. *It's time for another adventure.*

"*I am sorry for your loss*," Sia sent, letting me know I'd accidentally sent him something. "*Even if it was better for me.*"

"*Thanks*," I replied. "*It gets better with time, but losing everything is still hard. At least here I've found great friends, loved ones, and you. Still undecided on that last one though.*"

"*Ha, ha*," Sia replied. "*You know you love me.*"

I replied with just an amused feeling, and he squawked loudly from the top of the carriage. Ahead of us, I saw a short wall, only three meters high or so. The air above it glittered, though, making me think there was some form of Aether shield in place. Two Ashkhas guards had already opened a gate wide enough to fit our carriage. We slowed down, but rode through the gate. The brief glimpse I had of the metal structure showed it was covered in Inscriptions.

The carriage turned off to the side, and we were let out. Inside the walls was a fifteen meter by fifteen meter area. The outer two and a half meters was grass, and that is where the carriage parked. The inside ten meter square was full of twenty centimeter square tiles. They were a beautiful white and black marble, something I hadn't seen yet. Each one had dozens of Inscriptions on it, the size of the runes varying from nearly five centimeters to the limits of my ability to see. I stepped out of the carriage, only to blink at the massive increase in Aether density. I had to adjust the Aether flowing into my eyes, reducing the sensitivity of my Aether Sight, to be able to see through the haze.

I could have just waited a second to adjust, but I was still practicing with my new, now permanently on, Aether Sight. I'd figured out how to adjust it slightly, but I could not turn it off. I shook the thoughts out of my head, then bent over to inspect the Inscriptions. *Gathering, gathering, collecting, something, something, Light Aether? Huh*, I thought, then looked at the air. I focused, readjusting my Sight to be more sensitive, and was nearly blinded at the amount of radiant Light Aether in the air. On the other side, Darkness swallowed the courtyard, with only tiny flashes of the other Aethers.

"Aiden, get your bag," Jon shouted at me, knocking me out of my contemplation of the unexpected Aether density.

"Oh, right," I said. I quickly pulled it from the storage compartment, the last one to do so. Sia, shrank to his smallest size, landed on my shoulder and bumped his head into mine. "Did you notice that the air is almost entirely Light and Darkness Aether here?"

"*Yes, it is slightly uncomfortable to fly here*," he answered me. "*I realized I unconsciously use the Air and Fire Aether in the air to support myself. Hopefully the Divine Territory will have a more normal mixture.*"

"*Hopefully*," I said back, then turned to the rest of the courtyard. No one else was there yet.

On thinking this, another carriage entered and turned towards the opposite side. It began disgorging Volk, and I waved to Prince Gunther and his team. He nodded back, then turned and pulled his pack out of their carriage. It was the same as mine. Over the next few minutes, the Ashkhas and Topraki teams arrived. As soon as the Topraki had retrieved their gear, Sultah Aleahil and three other Ashkhas, all feeling as if they'd never gathered at all, appeared near the middle.

"Welcome, honored contestants and allies," Sultah Aleahil said. "Congratulations, you have excelled and proven your skill in front of the gathered nations. You are a credit to yourselves, your nation, and your generation, and I for one expect great things from you all. Not only did you excel in the tournament, but, when my people were attacked, every one of you stepped up to protect the civilians around you. Because of your actions, I have declared that the normal forty percent tax on harvests will be reduced to ten percent."

The other three teams cheered. Sultah Aleahil continued, "In addition, because of your actions in part, but mostly because of the Craesti who stopped the portals bringing in the Chaos Beasts, we have decided to extend the opening of the Divine Territory of Alilahat Nuwr from one week to one month. It was going to be longer, but we need the Soul Core gatherers for the major push against the Illyrian Empire. Use this time wisely, finding rare items and gathering in a unique environment. Remember to protect your teammates. I would like for all of you to come back. Do not discount the dangers of the Beasts that can be found in the ruins littering the area. Now, let us begin."

Two other Ashkhas Soul Cores stepped back, tapping a foot each on a black square. Immediately a three meter by three meter square of tiles in between them dropped into the ground, sliding out of the way for a platform to raise up. Two pillars were on the platform, of a metal I'd never seen before. It glimmered a deep purple, but it was iridescent across all of the colors of the Elemental spectrum. When the platform snapped into place, the leftmost pillar began shining a brilliant white, while the rightmost one seemed to suck in all the light. Runes formed on them, black on the white pillar and white on the black.

They flowed, moving and changing every second, so many runes that I almost couldn't tell where one started and another began. The two Ashkhas moved forward, placing a hand on the side of each, and then I felt their power. So much power. My Aether Sight blinded me for a second, before my brain filtered out the glaring beams of Aether the pillars had turned into. In between the pillars, I watched as streamers of Aether mixed. *Whoa, that*, I started to think, concentrating on the interplay of different Elements.

After a minute of mixing, a line formed vertically in the center, then ripped apart. Space itself was torn, and through the hole we could see a courtyard similar to this one. The walls surrounding it, what little we could see, were broken apart. Thirty seconds later, the view changed, another courtyard appearing. I could tell it was different only by the change in damage to the walls. The view flickered again, changing, before stabilizing.

"Knight Aiden, your team is first," Sultah Aleahil said. "After each team enters, the portal will change to a new location. Each of the landing locations are approximately twenty kilometers away from each other, with sixteen total locations. The center of the Divine Territory is fifty kilometers straight ahead, but I do not recommend you explore too deeply. The territory gets more dangerous the closer to the center you are, though it also gets more rewarding. Do not

interfere with each other.” He looked sternly at everyone. “There are more than enough treasures inside for all.”

“Well, let’s do this,” I said, stepping forward. Jamila squeezed my shoulder and gave me a grin, then Ming and Xiao held up their hands for high-fives. *Heh, I taught them that*, I thought with a grin. I led my friends to the glimmering portal, and we stepped through.

CHAPTER EIGHT

Walking through the portal felt like stepping into a vertical sheet of water. I moved through it, trying to sense the Aether and what happened when we were transported, but there wasn't anything. One instant, we were on Monster Island, the next I was somewhere else. *I'm not moving through space*, I thought wide eyed, *space was folded or connected at that location. It's not the same as the Transport Formations the Ashkhas have. That's so cool, but Light, how much power that must take.*

"Are you okay, Aiden?" Vaya asked next to me.

"Huh, oh, yeah," I said. "I got lost in thought for a second. Wait, where's Sia?" I turned around and saw the portal flashing, with Sia stuck in the middle. A ribbon of Aether shot out of him to me, and I mentally grabbed onto it and pulled. Sia screamed, and a massive amount of Aether pulled out of him, streaming into the stone of the archway the portal was anchored to on this end.

The string of Aether stretched for a second, and then Sia shot out of the entry into my arms. The portal flickered for a second, then became opaque. Sia's impact knocked me down, and I cradled his shivering body. His aura, the feeling of his strength, had dropped significantly. "Sia, are you okay?" I asked worriedly.

"Yes," he said, exhaustion evident in his mental voice. *"But I do not want to do that ever again. It seems Librarian Narwan was right. I am now only level five, but it didn't reduce my mental processes at all. I think it only reduced the total amount of Aether I can store and use, so I'm stronger than any other Zarorzel at my level of advancement. Other than the pain, that might make this worth it."*

"Is he okay?" Vaya asked, crowding in on my shoulder.

"Yes, didn't you hear him?" I said. She shook her head. "Well, Sia, looks like you also lost the ability to communicate without me."

"Oh, great. Me feel dumber already," he said, *"stuck only talk you."*

I bopped his head, still in his smallest size. "Librarian Narwan was right," I announced to the group, "Sia is now level five again, so he'll have to communicate with your Bonds instead of you. Alright, let's look around, and figure out where we want to go next."

The courtyard they were in was roughly the same size as the one they'd left, only the walls surrounding it were broken in numerous places. Where the gate had stood was only a hole, showing a broken-up paved road that vanished into a forest ahead of us. On the wall nearest the gate, I saw what looked like writing. I jogged towards it, squinting for a second. I could not read the words at first, then the words shimmered into focus. Unfortunately, half the message was broken off, destroyed in the general decay of the rest of the area.

"Welcome challengers to the, something," I read aloud. "You have two weeks, uh, no two ten-days, something, Then the Tower of Trials will, something."

"You can read that?" Vaya asked.

"Yeah. I guess Darkness's gift just keeps on giving," I said with a grin. "The time period must be why no one's found whatever the Tower of Trials is, since they only ever had it open for a week."

"Do you notice that?" Bridget asked, walking slowly towards us.

"Notice what?" Vaya asked.

"I feel heavier, like something is pushing down on my shoulders," she answered, grimacing slightly as she moved towards us.

I focused, stepping forward slightly. "Yeah, but it's very light. Still, good call on feeling it. The tiny change might make a fight dangerous when it didn't need to be."

"Let us take a few minutes to get used to it," Bridget said. "Kami is not liking it, it seems to be bothering her more than me."

"Sia, are you feeling it too?" I asked him.

"No, but let me go. I will try to fly and see," Sia answered. I lifted him up, and let him leap from my arm. He flapped a few times, gaining altitude. "Yes, I am feeling it now. Will mess with my endurance some, though not significantly. Come, Zim, we will fly together and explore just around the ruins."

"Stay safe," I said to him. He scoffed back, circling quickly before Zim joined him and they flew off to my left. I did some jumping jacks, running splits, and a simple martial form, getting used to the extra weight I had pulling down on me.

I also took some time to analyze the Aether flowing through the courtyard. *The tiles in here are pristine and keep the Aether balanced. Instead of Light and Dark, though, this one has Earth, Air, Fire, and Water in exactly equal amounts. It's all flowing into the pillars. I wonder what that equal mix is making, and why they used Light and Dark back in the city. Do they make the same thing, or do you need different Elements for opening the way versus maintaining it? There's so much I don't know, but I wonder if even Sultah Aleahil knows why. These ruins are old, like that lighthouse or the ruins we found in the Zaboij Swamp. I wonder if they're from before the gods died, if whatever caused deities to die also destroyed this civilization. Are they even from the same people?*

Sia returned while I was lost in thought, landing on my shoulder. "There are a few Beasts nearby. A few Ice Affinity warthogs, a Night Panther, and a herd of Besha Fuzhu. I could separate out a lower-level Fuzhu so we could have dinner, if you would like. The strongest of them is only level four."

"Okay," I sent back to him. "But later," I said out loud. "Let's decide what our goal is for the next few days."

"What's Sia asking about?" Vaya queried from beside me.

"He found a herd of Fuzhu, and he thinks he could bring us one to take down for dinner. Fresh meat would be good, save our supplies for later in the month."

"I would like to spend the next few days scouting and looking for neat items out on the edges," Bridget said. "We have two weeks before whatever the Tower of Trials is, and I would like to make some serious gains with minimal risk out here first."

"Same," Jon said, giving his girlfriend a hug, "though I am more interested in seeing how we perform in a lower risk area first. I do not want any of you to get hurt, and Samantha promised to make my life miserable if any of you 'don't come back'." He made quote signs for the last few words, apparently having learned about them from Sam.

"Sounds fine to me," I said. "Since this place is shaped like a circle, should we head sunwards or widdershins?"

"Lampart says she has never eaten Fuzhu before," Vaya said.

"Ooh, me either," Jon said. "I want to try some."

"Of course, you would mimic the panther and think about meat," Bridget said with a laugh in her voice. "But either direction is fine with me, so using food as the deciding vote works."

"Woo, special venison!" Jon said, doing a little dance where he stood.

"What do you think, Sia?" I asked. Rather than answer, he sent an image that my brain interpreted as a map. "Alright, let's head down the trail a bit, then Sia showed me a picture of where the Fuzhu are. There is a large clearing with a small pond in the middle where they are watering."

"You all should go to the edge and wait," Sia said to me. *"Zimnodlot can show you the way, and I will harry the Beasts to flee nearby. Take out a few of them as they run by."*

"Good plan," I told him, repeating it for the sake of the others.

After a minute, we settled on a two-wide column formation. Jon and Kami led, with Lampart and Bridget behind Kami and Vaya and I behind Jon in that order. Jon seemed to flinch as he stepped out of the ruins onto the remnants of the road. Vaya did as well, and I looked closer at the boundary. It seemed like there was a wall of Aether, thin but noticeable, where the gate would have been. Stepping through it, I noticed that the pressure pushing down on my shoulders increased slightly, but noticeably.

Huh, weird, I thought. I pushed some extra Aether into my Sight, trying to see what was different. After a moment, I realized, *The Aether here feels different. More pure or more real, if only the slightest bit. Why? That doesn't make sense.* I looked down the road. The ancient street was pristine for about twenty meters, then a massive tree punctured through it. The forest swallowed the road after that, but I could see just a bit beyond, and whatever was making the Aether more was stronger in the trees. Just a bit, but enough that I could tell, superhuman senses helping of course. *There's something there, but I don't know what it means. Maybe we'll find something out about it here.*

We moved slowly through the forest, stepping carefully to stay undetected. Just because Sia hadn't seen any other Beasts didn't mean they weren't around. Zim fluttered ahead of us, flying silently and nearly invisibly, even though he was a brilliant white. Every minute or so, he'd deliberately flare his wings so Jon could see him and guide us in the correct direction.

It took about fifteen minutes before Zim landed on a bush in front of us. Jon listened intently to the owl then nodded. He pointed past the bush and mimicked a deer's horns on his head. I nodded, and Bridget carefully cast a circle of stilled Air around us. "Zim says the clearing with the Fuzhu is beyond the next row of bushes. They are drinking from a pond near the center. Sia is going to attack them from above and drive them towards us," Jon said.

"Okay. Jon, you and Zim take the rearmost Fuzhu, Vaya, you and Lampart the next one, and Bridget and I will take third rearmost. We won't be able to preserve any more than that, so let's not take anymore," I said. "Simple attacks, don't use too much Aether. We don't know what else is around." Bridget dismissed the silencing technique, and we carefully crept through the bush.

The clearing was easily thirty meters across, with the pond covering five of that. The clearing continued to our right for a few meters before merging into the forest, with a large gap in the bushes surrounding it. *That's where they should run to, I think.* A small stream left the pond heading inward, but nothing fed into it. There were at least thirty Fuzhu drinking the water. They were a dappled brown and green, with short, wiry fur, deer-like except for the four large

horns sticking out of their heads. The horns were only ten to twenty centimeters long, but the twisting nature meant that a wound would hurt immensely. I caught a glimpse of flame over the trees on the far side of the clearing. *"We're ready, Sia."*

"Then we begin," he replied, then screeched out. I saw a flare of Fire hit the ground as Sia enlarged himself to his biggest form. He was smaller than he had been, his lost power reducing his size too, but he still outclassed the terrified prey animals by a significant amount. *Heh, he could probably take the whole herd himself,* I thought, *but this way we all feel like we contributed.*

Sia's attack crippled one of the Beasts, hitting an older herd member who had looked weak. The Fuzhu cried out, turning to stampede away from the terrifying Fire Beast. The three largest bellowed and sent spikes of Wood at Sia, who contemptuously burned them out of the sky. The adults of the herd formed a circle around the eight children while fleeing, and they shimmered with Wood and Earth, a shield forming around them.

As the Beasts plunged passed us, I sent out two Metal Aether Blasts, focusing on the form to create something more like a Metal dagger that stabbed into the chest of my chosen Beast. Immediately after my attack hit, a blade of Air Aether sliced open its neck, and it collapsed. Vaya had entangled her target's legs with vines, and the poor thing snapped all of them as it collapsed. Lampart pounced forward, her powerful jaws shattering its spine and putting it out of its misery. Jon and Zim had speared theirs with Icicles, freezing a good chunk of its chest and neck solid.

The rest of the Beasts flinched away from us, and a younger one ran headfirst into a tree and snapped its neck. The others fled, leaving their dead brethren behind. "Well, four is more than three, so we'll have to do our best to preserve the meat," I said.

"Lampart, Zimnodlot, Kami, and I will eat this one," Sia said from the already parboiled Beast, then he bent over and took a bite.

"Got it," I said back. *"Might need your help later with smoking the meat, but I'll let you know."*

"Got it," he replied, his voice sounding full even though he talked with his mind not his mouth.

"Gross!" I yelled at him. "Don't talk with your mouth full."

"Aiden, help me build a small hut here," Vaya said, moving forward. "Bridget taught me how to make a smoker for the meat we get." She guided me on setting up a smoking hut, where we could lay out strips of meat over a banked fire to preserve them. Bridget and Jon worked on skinning and carving the meat while disposing of the guts. Lampart helped them eagerly, scarfing down the proffered organs quickly and purring loudly as she munched. They also collected two level one and two level two Beast Cores, which we would use to power the Formations included in our bags.

Bridget came over partway through us building the smokehouse and pointed out a few mistakes. "If we want to have only a single structure, you need to make the opening a bit smaller, and we need to have an exhaust area," she said, pointing to where we had built a large cavity to put wood in. "How are we going to close it off?"

"I can make a simple wood door to cover the doorway," Vaya said. "Aiden, while I work on that, can you make the grills to hold the meat?"

"Sure," I said. I turned my Aether Sight to the ground, and focused on it. I saw several tiny spots of Metal Aether near the edge of the clearing, so I made my way over to one. *Let's try to make a metal grill rather than stone. See if I can adapt the Earth moving technique to move the Metal I'm sensing.* I sat on the ground directly over the blob of Metal Aether closest to the surface, then extended my Aether down towards it. I tried to form the runes for the technique, replacing Earth with Metal, just above it, but my range didn't quite reach. *Eh, more power should make it work better,* I thought, pulling the technique up as I pushed several times more Aether than it needed to work normally.

The technique fell apart explosively, showering me with dirt. "Are you okay?" Vaya called, looking at me.

"Yeah," I yelled back. "Just lost control of a technique. I was trying to pull up Metal instead of dirt."

"Okay," Vaya said, and I heard Jon laughing from where he crouched.

Well, I can get closer now, I thought, looking at the ten centimeter deep crater I'd accidentally made. This time, I didn't just send a surge of Aether. Rather, I slowly ramped up how much I put in while focusing on controlling the rune's spacing and stability. Slowly, I saw the Metal Aether start to push itself upward, responding to my call.

A fist-sized chunk of copper ore ripped out of the dirt once it got close. I had forgotten to reduce the Aether in my technique as it rose, since the speed didn't change until the last little bit. Once there was very little Earth holding it back, it shot upward into my hand. "Ow," I shook my hand, dropping the copper. My hand stung. "Okay, now what?" I picked up the ore, seeing the orange-brown color of copper coming out of parts of the chunk.

"Oh hey, you found a chunk of native copper," Bridget said, walking over. "My dad would occasionally find some hunting around. You just got to clean off the dirt and it should be useful."

"Thanks," I said, getting to my feet. I turned to head towards the pond when something slammed into my back, knocking me to the ground.

A massive Night Jaguar bit down on the back of my neck but was unable to break through my upgraded circlet's shield quickly enough to take me out. I tried to roll, but it was able to hold me still, at least until I flared Aether into the General Strengthening Technique and pushed myself up.

A blast of Aether flew over my head as the Beast leaped off me, blowing it backward as Bridget sprinted the rest of the distance. A cry sounded, and Sia dove, talons ripping into the Beast. It twisted and seemed to sink into the shadows of the nearest trees, and Sia flew through the rest of its body like it was not there.

I sent a quick Lightning Blast at it, but it vanished from one spot and appeared in another nearby. A gout of Flame from Sia landed nearby, and the Jaguar growled before turning and vanishing into the forest. "Did it get through my armor?" I asked, having felt its rear claws scrambling on my back.

"No, but that shirt is done for," Vaya said. "Are you hurt?"

I shook my head, "Just startled. It tried to bite me, but the circlet Captain Skipari gave me held it off. Uh, let's stay away from the trees, just in case it comes back."

Lampart looked at Vaya, who cocked her head. "Lampart says that it should stay away, now that we have proven not to be easy prey."

"Thank you, Lampart," I said, nodding to the Bond. "I'll still feel better if we give ourselves some space."

"I am sorry I did not sense it coming," Sia said.

"Not your fault," I told him. *"How long had you been level six?"*

"Almost ten years," Sia said.

"So you will need more than a few hours to get used to not being that strong anymore. Don't beat yourself up about it," I said.

We got back to work and had a smokehouse built and running with as much meat as we could stuff into it in less than an hour. Bridget and Jon cooked the rest over a fire, and we decided to set up camp and brought out the different Formations we'd been given. "We should explore the area for a few days, but keep coming back here at night," Bridget said. "Use it as a home camp."

CHAPTER NINE

"That fried Fuzhu ready yet?" Vaya asked Jon, who was poking at the aforementioned food cooking merrily on the frying pan.

He carefully spread some spices over it, flipped it, repeated the process on the other side, and then declared, "They are done." He pulled the pan off the fire and set it on a flat stone Vaya had made for that purpose.

I grabbed my knife and stabbed a piece, putting it onto my plate, after Vaya and Bridget had gotten theirs. "Really guys," Jon said. "Leaving me the last piece."

"It is the biggest," Bridget said, rolling her eyes.

"Uh, so it is," Jon said sheepishly.

I tucked in, telling Jon, "This is really good." I cut apart the massive slab of magical venison, thankful that the frying pan included was huge. We each had almost a kilogram of meat as we tried to use up what we couldn't fit in the makeshift smokehouse Vaya and I had made.

"Thanks," he said. "Turns out, practicing Alchemy makes learning to cook simple."

"So when are you going to cook for us, Aiden," Vaya asked.

"Uh, once I figure out how to make porridge without burning it," I said, laughing. The others laughed with me. We ate quickly, joking around with each other but still keeping an eye on our surroundings.

When we were mostly done, Zimnodlot landed on Jon's shoulder and stole a bite from his fork. "Hey!" Jon glared up at him. Some silent communication between them came, and Jon laughed. "Well, thank you for the compliment. You should still ask, though."

After eating, I took all the plates over to the edge of the pond before starting to scrub them. After the first plate, I looked into the water, trying to see how much I could see. *Huh, I thought, there's a big flow of Wood and Fire Aether at the bottom of the pond, though I can barely see it through the Water Aether. Darkness, this water might be one of the best sources of Aether here!*

"Hey, do you see or sense anything in the water?" I asked Vaya.

She looked into it, then shrugged. "Not really. There might be some underwater grass around the edge, but it is too cloudy to see much in the middle. Why?"

"There's something in the depths," I said. "I want to check it out."

"Alright, I will help Jon build up a large fire to help you dry out," she said, shaking her head. "Maybe if it is safe we could all go swimming. I know Kami would like that."

"Let's finish setting up the camp first," I said, scrubbing away at the last plate. "Though it is too bad I don't see any fish."

"Eh, I would rather have Fuzhu," she said. "We eat immense quantities of fish back at our manor, so I'm more than happy to not eat it here."

"Good to know," I said. "I'll have to make sure to secure a supply of fish from Azyl when I get some land." She slapped my shoulder, and I fell over laughing. "And we'll raise Earthen Boar for our dinners."

"You mean we will have many different Beasts, rotating every week, cooked by the best chefs we can find," she said. "I fully expect to be wowed every night by dinner, got it?" She held a straight face for all of ten seconds, before grinning.

"Well, I shall endeavor to do my best, my lady," I said, affecting a haughty accent.

"Hey, stop flirting and help me put up the tent," Jon yelled out. He was putting up a tent about five meters from the pond, leaving ten before the edge of the forest.

"No!" I yelled back before standing up. "Well, actually I should help him before he breaks the whole thing."

Vaya shook her head, "Bridget is putting up the illusion Formation, and I finished setting up the alarm Formation before coming over."

"Well, maybe we should all go swimming soon," I said with a grin.

"*I will not be swimming*," Sia said, making me burst out laughing.

"Why not?" I asked him as he landed on my shoulder.

"*I am a Zarorzel, or Fire Eagle. Not a water pigeon. Pfft, I only touch water to get fish*," he said.

I repeated it for Vaya's benefit, before I laughed. "I can see that," I told him. "But us humans like to splash around."

"*Yet another way in which you are strange*," he sent to me, his amusement flowing through our Bond.

I grinned, then went to help Jon. We quickly put the tent together, large enough to fit all four of us and maybe Lampart. I put together a post that Zim and Sia could sleep on inside as well, but Kami had indicated she did not want to sleep in a tent anyway.

"Alright," I said, standing on the edge of the pond. I had stripped down to only a pair of shorts worn as underwear.

"Are you sure you want to go alone?" Vaya asked.

"Not really," I shrugged. "But there doesn't seem to be anything moving down there, just whatever is absorbing or generating that Aether flow. It hasn't changed in the last hour, so," I shrugged again. "So there doesn't seem to be any danger."

"Yeah, but I do not think you should go alone," Vaya said. "So I am coming with you." She shucked out of her tunic, wearing only a wrap over her chest and a pair of shorts.

I goggled for a second, before saying, "Wow. Just wow."

She grinned at me, "That is a good reaction. Now, shall we?" She gestured at the water.

I nodded, taking a few deep breaths before diving into the water. A splash next to me signaled Vaya diving in as well. I pushed against the water, swimming deeper and letting my Aether Sight guide me. We swam deeper, quickly going over ten meters down. *Wow, this is really deep for the width of the pond*, I thought. *And whatever spring feeds it is super pressurized*. Each stroke was difficult, and I had already started using the General Strengthening Technique to continue to head deeper in.

The mixed flow of Fire and Wood Aether got closer, and then I swam into it. Only, the water around me disappeared and I fell head first towards the floor. A quick flip let me land on my feet, and I stepped sideways and caught Vaya as she fell through the air. "Are you okay?" I asked.

"Yes, thank you," she said with a grin. I realized I was holding onto her legs and belly with no clothing in the way, and immediately blushed and set her down. "Aww." She pouted at me, then looked around excitedly. "So, where are we?"

"No idea," I said, looking around as well. We were standing in an open chamber with stone tile floors. The water above us made a plane, though on the opposite side from where we stood a series of steps led back to it as a way out. The rest of the walls were carved with scenes

of battle and wonder. Directly to the left of the stairs, a representation of a planet was surrounded by ten figures, their hands extended to it.

The next image had life exploding across the planet, hundreds of little animals and plants carved on an image of our continent. "Huh," I said. "Look, there is much more beyond the Illyrian Empire and the Weltreich. I wonder what is above them?"

"I think this mountain range is considered impassible. It has extremely difficult terrain and a lot of Primordial Beasts in it," Vaya said, following me to the map. "At least, I read that once."

"I wonder how deep the Illyrians go," I said. The mountain ranges on either side of their empire met at a point, where they built the fortress fort of Borgby, and that was all we knew about them. The map in front of us had them form almost a diamond, but the northernmost area had a gap of nearly a hundred kilometers. The westernmost mountain range, where they bordered the Topraki, was enormous.

"Let us move on to the next picture," Vaya said, pulling my arms. It seemed to focus in on the peninsula where Craesti was built, but also including the Weltreich and Monster Island.

"Huh," I said. "Oddali didn't use to be near the tip of the peninsula." I pointed. "There's at least another fifty kilometers beyond it."

"Here, right here are the ruins we found. It is marked as a city," Vaya said. "There are a dozen listed. There's another, deeper into the Zabo, two are in the Great Western Forest, and at least three are in the Weltreich."

"I think this one," I indicated the northernmost one, "Is where the Geist tower the Volk have."

"So there might be one in the ruins we found!" Vaya exclaimed, then wrapped me in a hug. "Princess Aleksandra will make sure we get access to it. We can fully temper, even beyond the day we got. Maybe this one won't have the same limitation!"

"Look at this next one," I said. A battle scene was drawn, and the Lamia were easily recognizable, due to the one we had fought against on our way to Monster Island. A dozen types of Beast hybrids fought with the Lamia against humans. Only, I realized after a second, they weren't human, but elves. Almost all of the Beasts were fighting with tooth and claw, but a group of birds with human-like torsos, heads, and arms wielded weapons alongside the Lamia. "Huh, those are elves, and those are harpies. The elves have pointed ears and are tall and willowy, just like my original world's legends described them. I," I sat down, leaning against the wall, my breath catching in surprise. "I don't understand. What is the connection, and why does my world have legends about everything here!"

"I do not know," Vaya said, putting her hands on my shoulder. "But I know that I will stay by your side as long as you will have me." She leaned in and kissed me, and I kissed her back.

A bit of time went by before I gently pulled away, blushing a bit. Vaya was flushed as well, and both of us were breathing heavily. "So, let's see if we can translate this story," I said.

Vaya gave me an annoyed smile, before shaking her head. "Okay. Maybe we will find something that will point to a treasure or hidden knowledge."

"Well, the image of the elves probably shows the founding of whatever nation this was," I pointed. "You can see the Stairway of Determination in the next one, along with three other buildings of similar size. I wonder what happened to that palace." The image had six elves, three men and three women, standing before an indistinct crowd in front of a palace. Rising into

the sky behind it was the Stairway of Determination, only it was at least twice as tall as it currently was, and two other towers of indeterminate usage.

"They look prosperous here," Vaya stood in front of the next one, showing a full harbor and hundreds of ships sailing into and out of it.

"But not happy," I said, looking closer. "Look, the dock foreman there is beating a worker, and there are dozens of beggars shown. Why would they put that on this image?"

"The nobles at the top of the picture look happy," Vaya gestured. Each carving was three meters tall and wide, giving plenty of space to show immense amounts of detail. "But whoever carved this went out of their way to make them look greedy and nefarious."

"Huh, so they did," I said. "So we've got the creation of the world, the forming of whatever nation this was. One picture of prosperity after defeating the Lamia, Harpies, and other Beasts, but not everyone is happy."

"Next we have a group of people meeting in secret," Vaya said. "This one is the same worker that was being beaten in the other picture. There is a Lamia and a bird-person."

"Harpy," I said. "Legends on my world called them Harpies."

"They are doing something, here," she said, nodding at my interruption

"Summoning the Chaos Beasts," I said. "That is the same Formation that the Illyrians were using to create the portals, though a bunch of it is blurred out."

"But much larger," she pointed out. "It looks like it is surrounding the entirety of the building they are in, rather than just one level of a ship."

"Another fight, Chaos Beasts, Lamia, Harpies, even some elves are fighting against the other elves. This time the main group of elves are losing," I said. "And what is that?"

"A Xiangliu," Vaya breathed out. "I thought they were a myth."

"I want them to be," I said, looking at the hydra-like creature. It had a large, snake-like body, coiled up and ready to strike at a battalion of elves in plate armor. Only, instead of lizard heads on the ends of its nine necks, it had heads that looked like malformed babies, with massive mouths full of pointed teeth. The eyes were depicted as black voids, holes carved into the stone and filled with obsidian. Just seeing it made my gut scream 'danger.'

"The next picture has the city burning, but the Beasts are being beaten back. Except for here, that, I do not know what that is," Vaya pointed.

"A dragon," I said. I looked closer, "undead dragon. Look, it seems like part of it is rotting."

"That makes sense," Vaya said, "These guys look familiar." She indicated a section where a Lamia was leading a group of drowned zombies. "So we should be on the lookout for all the other Beasts that are pictured here."

"The city is a ruin here, and there are only two things still pictured," I said, looking at the next image. "The zombie dragon and an elf depicted with a glowing aura." In the carving, the dragon was being blasted to the ground by an Aether attack of some kind. The elf's expression was full of hate and loathing. "The dragon is injured, more than it had been, and there are the corpses of fifteen more elves laid out near where the surviving elf would have leaped from."

The next to last image showed that same elf looking around at the ruin of his homeland with tears flowing down his face, a massive ring of runes carved in the ground around him, as he shot off towards a tower depicted far in the distance. The ground around it was made blurry to indicate uncertainty. The tower itself was made with an iridescent stone that seemed to show

all ten Aether colors as I moved my head around. "What's that?" I asked Vaya, indicating the tower.

"I do not know," she said. "It looks like it is far to the North and West, so maybe in the Illyrian's territory, or beyond?"

"That might be awesome to find," I said with a grin. She nodded, then we turned to the next image.

The last image showed him with seven others looking down at the world, different areas burning or being consumed by other Chaos Beasts. They had their hands extended, echoing the creation of the world, with Aether flowing into the planet. Each Chaos Beast was depicted screaming in pain, partially dissolved, and the fires were in the middle of being extinguished.

At this image, Vaya collapsed. "That, that is the canonical depiction of the sacrifice of the Elemental Gods. The elf is in the position of Fire. Are these images saying the sacrifice happened because of these peoples?"

"Not just them," I said. "If you look at the second battle, the zombies aren't just elves. There are people like the Topraki in it, though they are more doglike than those we saw." I put my hand on her shoulder. "The Lamia also said that she was representing her people, so there must be more somewhere. We know now what some enemies are going to be, and we can work on figuring out how the god's sacrifice walled them away. Maybe, with better information, we can reinforce the barrier without having to sacrifice our lives, but even if we have to, we can save the world."

"But Chaos can only be coming because someone is summoning them," Vaya said, pointing at the depicted image.

"So maybe all we have to do is stop them," I said. "Come on, let's look over the pictures again, see if we can find anything that will help us fight them, and then head back to the others. I'm sure they are getting worried."

"Wait," Vaya said, putting her hand on my shoulder. "That part, there, looks like a button." She reached forward and pushed in the pillar that the elf was raising from in the second to last image.

CHAPTER TEN

A voice rang out, "You have found the history of my people. Learn from our mistakes, and take these to assist you on your way." I translated for Vaya while a pillar rose out of the center of the area. Just above it floated two pills roughly the size of a gum ball you'd get from a vending machine.

I reached forward and pulled them out of whatever field was holding them up. It didn't react to my hand at all, and I handed one to Vaya. The voice spoke again, "Learn from my people's mistakes. Do not let War and Death into the realm again. My brethren and I had to die to power the barrier that kept them away, but they will come again eventually. With the knowledge you can find in my inheritance zone, you can find their weaknesses and prepare to defeat them forever. Only you, those still in the second realm, can advance properly."

"What are these pills?" I asked, but didn't receive an answer. After a minute, I shrugged. "So we can either take these without knowing what they are, or we can wait, potentially leaving us weaker than we could be for the Tower of Trials."

"This is supposed to be a reward," Vaya said. "Though I kinda want to cut the pills in half and share with Jon and Bridget."

"DO NOT!" That same voice said.

"So, you are listening. Huh, who are you?" I shouted.

"Take one pill each and focus on your cultivation method. You will gain a permanent benefit. Failure to take the entire pill will cause crippling damage to your dantian. One pill is all you can ever take. You must take it before leaving."

"Can we get two more for our friends standing watch?" Vaya said after I translated for her.

I repeated her question. It didn't respond. I shrugged then asked, "Can you answer any questions?" Again, silence. I turned to Vaya, "Well, I guess we just leave."

"It did say to take them before leaving," Vaya said.

I nodded, *I learned my lesson about taking unknown pills*, and started walking to the stairway leading up. She just gave me a look when I winked at her. I climbed the stairs, quickly getting in reach of the water. I stuck my hand into it. "Oh no, I'm leaving without taking the pill! I won't take something I don't know what it is!" I said, keeping the sarcasm out of my voice by dint of translation.

I very slowly stepped upwards, getting my left arm into the water up to my bicep before that same voice spoke up, "Wait! I am not supposed to speak to contestants before the trial except to prevent harm."

"We don't even know what the trial is," I said. "Your nation was destroyed and forgotten, and I can only speak to you because of a gift from Darkness. The images below show the same Beasts we fought only two weeks ago. Can you tell us about them?"

"No. I am forbidden," it said, and then a ghostly image of an elf appeared above the pillar. "Even stronger than my ban on speaking with you. Two weeks after the opening of the M'Zee Trial Grounds, the Tower of Trials will open. Climb as high as you can. Each level will test you in a different way." She looked at both of us. "You will climb alone. Your strength, your intelligence, your talent, and your luck will all be required, and each level climbed will bring with it a reward. Reach the top to receive the legacy of the M'Zee, our elders and my creator."

"And what is the pill and how do I get more?" I asked.

"You cannot get more. Your friends may attempt to discover the reward themselves, if you do not tell them what they seek or how to get it," she looked sternly at me. "The pill is called Kipaji Uboreshaji Pill, and will increase your cultivation speed permanently."

"Thank you," I said, bowing to her. "Can any number of people seek pills from this location? There were three teams of four sent from my nation, and seven others from allied countries. Could I guide them here and simply say 'you really need to explore the bottom of the pond?'"

"After four pills, my rewards here will be spent for the next five years," she answered, frowning. "Do not ask more, I cannot push against my limits much more. Now, cultivate, the Qi Array will fill this area once you have taken the pill." She glowered at me, then vanished.

Vaya looked at me expectantly, "So, what did she say?"

"The pills will help us gather faster, though she called it cultivation," I said, frowning. "Which is what it is called on Earth, at least in stories. Why? No, I'll ask Darkness sometime, for now, no."

Vaya took me in her arms, "So, let's take the pill, process it properly, and then get back to the others."

"Oh, if we don't tell them what they're looking for, they can get pills here too," I said with my head on her shoulder. "But only two of them, unfortunately."

She pulled away from the hug slightly, then kissed me lightly on the lips. "Shall we gather?"

"Sure," I said. We separated, moving about ten meters apart before I nodded at her and we both popped the pills into our mouths.

It burned on the way down, and seemed to explode in my stomach.

I dove into my center, focusing on controlling the explosion of energy in my stomach. "Move through the meridian," I commanded it, forcing my will upon the energy. *It's like Aether, but not*, I thought while pushing against the strange energy. *It's more powerful, I think? It feels different. I'm not sure what this is.* "Cultivation technique, cultivation technique, gathering technique. Okay."

I quickly built the Runic Spiral Gathering Technique, pulling in some of the Aether from around us. The density had increased yet again, allowing me to pull as quickly as I possibly could without disturbing it in the slightest. *Well, that's a big letdown on my capability*, I laughed.

The Aether flowing in met the pill's energy, but only slightly. Most of it was still sitting and burning in my gut, slowly getting more painful. The mixture seemed to explode, multiplying how much Aether was there and changing it slightly. The changed Aether mixed with what was in my pool, slowly spreading the delta throughout. This was fine until the first bit reached the edges of my pool.

It burned, my pool's edge dissolving under the change. I gasped, in too much pain to do anything else, but I heard Vaya scream from the other side of the underwater room. "*Aiden, what is happening?*" Sia asked, panic in his mental voice.

"*We found something, and got instructions to take the reward now. It is supposed to help,*" I gasped.

"*I am coming,*" he said.

"Bring Lampart," I told him, then focused back on my center. The burning in my stomach had spread, moving into the rest of my digestion tract, while growing in intensity. "Why isn't the gathering technique working?" I shouted to the spirit, then turned and vomited everything in my stomach out. Well, except for the pill. It didn't so much as twitch, slowly dissolving and exploding in energy every second.

No answer came, the spirit either unable or unwilling to answer. "Alright, it's supposed to change me, to make me gather faster permanently," I panted, scooting my way towards Vaya while trying to be loud enough that she could hear me. "That means it's changing my center and body." I looked in my center. The mixture had spread, filling my Aether pool with bubbles as the edges dissolved. "It needs to get everywhere. But I don't want to."

"Tempering," Vaya wheezed, just loud enough that I heard it. "Tempering."

"Okay." I started the body tempering technique without specifying an Aether type, focused on my stomach to start. The energy burned but flowed slightly into the technique, and I felt the pain stabilize. It didn't go away, but the flatlining of it almost felt that way.

The detente lasted all of thirty seconds, then the flow increased again, and I was behind again. The pain ramped upwards, slowly but steadily. Frantically, I built more tempering runes, using them to direct the flow out of my stomach into other organs, and put yet more on the edge of my pool. The technique pulled the changed Aether towards the sides, making a dip in the center, and on a whim I forced it to spin. The energy flowed higher, searing an area above my meridian line, but the damage to my pool lining slowed.

The tempering runes started to rebuild the surface, only to have it boiled away the next instant. Over and over again, and I kept building more runes, spreading the energy around my body. "Not enough," I said, opening my eyes and seeing Vaya now lying on her side. "Vaya!?"

I leapt to my feet and sprinted to her. Once I got to her, I reached out and grabbed her hands, trying to project my mental presence into her. Her mental wall was far thinner than normal for her, and I felt it part as she trusted me to help. Her system was a mess, and I went to her center to find her mental projection. In my mind's eye, her avatar was sweating blood. "Vaya."

"I cannot hold it," she cried.

"Use the tempering runes to guide the energy," I said. "Spread it out. Send some down your arms, and give it to me."

I spasmed, my inattention losing my grip on some of the runes. "You cannot deal with more either," she told me. "I will not kill you to save myself."

"And I would rather die than lose you," I said, "but I have no intention of either. Give some to me, and then I will pass it back. By bouncing it between us, we will gain time. Sia and Lampart are coming and can help."

"Okay. I trust you," she said, and I felt the spread of runes and Aether move through her arms. The energy in her gut and body spread down the meridians in her arms, flowing outward to damage and heal her muscles, tendons, and bones. I moved my point of view back into my body, setting up a double helping of the guiding runes.

Thirty seconds later, while I was reinforcing the tempering setup around my intestines and fighting through the upsurge of pain that threatened to overwhelm me at any time. A burst of the energy almost destroyed my hands, and I could hear the sizzling of my skin as it

dissolved. I felt my teeth crack as I ground them against the pain. *If I falter now, Vaya will fail too. I will not fail her.*

I split my attention, forcing the previously drawn runes to stay while making more, deeper into my arms. The energy kept flowing, burning and rebuilding. I would have dropped her hands, my fingers physically unable to grip anymore, except that her hands were locked in a fist of pain, preventing my hands from dropping. I could feel the tendons in my fingers regrowing, slowly gaining the ability to deal with the energy flowing in, but then the flow slowed as Vaya reached her limit.

I couldn't keep my hands reforming without the influx, so I had to push the energy from my center out to my hands, which was harder. I was on the edge of losing control. Vaya appeared, "Send it back," she told me. "I am ready."

"Okay. Together, right?" I asked.

"Together," her projection kissed mine, then vanished as she rushed back to her body. I brought the energy to my palm, my fingers flexing as hers loosened, and then it flowed back out of me into her. The pain in my body dropped, still excruciating but not overwhelming, and I was able to make some progress moving the energy away from my gut. I fought the urge to throw up again, forcing everything to stay down.

Vaya's hands tightened, her face tight with pain. I gripped back, my hands feeling stronger. After a few minutes, I accepted the outflow back from her, trying to keep the grimace off my face. The energy flowed up my meridians, burning through all the layers of my skin up my arms to my biceps. My muscles dissolved, burning away and reforming each and every second. Every cycle hurt more, every reformation stronger than the previous but not strong enough.

The pill didn't seem to be running out, and we kept passing every bit we could back and forth, overwhelming and recovering in turn. Slowly, though, we both were failing. Each round got shorter before one of us was overwhelmed and had to pass the majority of the energy back.

"Give me everything and then run," Vaya said, her eyes wide as I tried to spread the Aether-like stuff through my bones.

"No," I said. "I will not give up on you." *"Sia, really need you buddy."*

"There is a barrier. Lampart and I are attacking it, but it is not budging," Sia answered me.

"Spirit, let my and Vaya's Bond in please," I pleaded, then coughed up a spattering of blood as the energy worked on my lungs.

With an explosion of steam, a burst of Fire Aether shot into the ground, followed by Lampart held in Sia's clutches. The Bonds rushed over to us, with Sia landing on my shoulder while Lampart threw herself into the middle between us.

Immediately, I felt Sia's presence pulling the energy away, and I was pulled from the brink of destruction. Sia absorbed some, Lampart the rest, and that left Vaya and I to only deal with the new waves flowing from the pills.

Sia's wings burned all the colors of Aether, flipping between them almost too fast to see. Lampart's fur seemed to join in, changing to an icy purple then a fiery red before returning to her dappled brown. Both Bonds whined, pain slamming through the Bond between me and Sia and seemed to magnify the pain I was in.

"We will not fail!" I screamed to the others. "I will not lose any of you, and you will not lose any of us. Now push against it, temper your bodies and centers, just like we have beaten every enemy thus far. Fight!"

Lampart roared, and her aura flared. Her coat became spotted with every color, with the area in between the spots sinking into a white brighter than the sun. She flexed her paws, her claws popped out, and dug into the stone of the ground, easily cutting through the reinforced material. She kneaded her paws, ripping the stone around them into chunks.

The pressure we were under dropped during Lampart's transformation, then dropped again as Sia shimmered, flashing through all the colors of the Elements before he formed a stronger form. He grew a meter in height, and his feathers changed to have a rainbow of all the Elements at the same time. A flash of the energy from the pills flowed through our Bonds, reinforcing and strengthening the runes in our centers, before enveloping my body.

I screamed as everything burned, and I barely held onto consciousness. After an indeterminate amount of time, the pain dropped to a dull roar, and I collapsed. "Vaya," I panted, "are you okay?"

I felt her hands, still in mine, tighten. "Yes, you brave, stupid, loving man," she whispered, then pulled towards me. My right hand found the back of her neck, and in seconds we were kissing. After a minute of holding tightly to each other, I collapsed backward.

"I was scared I was going to lose you," I said, panting.

"Me too," she said. "Sia, thank you for bringing Lampart, and Lammy." She pulled the leopard into a hug. "Whoa, you advanced and evolved!"

I felt the Bond's aura. *Sure enough, she's level five now!* Sia was stronger as well, though still level five. It felt deeper, almost. "Sia?"

"*I am a Rainbow Zarorzel,*" I heard the awe in his voice. "*The first in a long, long time. When we return, we must seek out the Fire Monarch.*"

"Of course, my friend," I smiled, reaching over with a shaking arm to stroke his head. "So, uh, I'm all for laying here and recovering for the next, um, day or so, but I'm sure Jon and Bridget might be freaking out right now."

"Sia, can you speak with Zimnodlot and have him tell Jon we are okay? Or with Kami?" Vaya asked.

"Yes I can," Sia told me, and I parroted his answer.

"Good, thanks Sia," I said, then laid my head back on the ground. At some point, I fell asleep, my body and mind exhausted from the ordeal we'd just gone through.

CHAPTER ELEVEN

When I woke, I felt light. The pain and exhaustion were but a distant memory. I was about to sit up when I realized there was pressure on my stomach and legs. My head lifted up, and I snorted. Vaya's head was on my stomach, using me as a pillow, while Lampart was laying across my legs like the giant cat she was. *Heh, guess I'm not getting up for a bit*, I laughed in my head.

"Finally awake?" Sia asked.

"Finally?"

"You have been asleep for six hours. Zimnodlot says they have set up camp and found some edible tubers and berries. Bridget is cooking dinner now. They are all getting anxious about your health."

"Sorry for worrying them and delaying you," I sighed. *"That sucked, but it gave you a great power up as well."*

"It helped you and Vaya as well," Sia landed next to my head. He smacked me lightly in the face with his wing, almost causing me to sneeze. *"Feel your own aura. You've grown stronger, your aura deeper. We need to find two more of those pills for Jon and Bridget. Maybe four, so they can catch up."*

"Can only use one, but yeah. We should see about getting some extra benefits to Jon and Bridget so they do not fall behind." I spoke one of my main worries to Sia, that I would grow faster than my friends. In that case, I'd either have to leave them and journey alone to keep them safe, or they'd join me in a fight that would get them killed. *"I don't believe that what is coming can be solved alone. At the very least, having all eight of us as strong as possible is the best thing we can do."*

"So you think you will have time to grow stronger than Librarian Narwan or King Craesti? Maybe you are just supposed to be a catalyst to change that will help everyone, like your crystals or the printing press. I doubt you will have a century to grow," Sia asked.

"I don't know," I replied, shaking my head. *"I wonder about that myself. Is this relentless rush to push myself and grow stronger the right thing to do, or should I be sitting in a lab somewhere, redesigning the technology that I can remember? How do I trust the ones in power with some of my knowledge, when they could use it to kill cities or level continents? If I disrupt the political and social structure enough, will the defenses of the kingdom break down and let the Illyrians invade or prevent a strong enough response to a Beast Wave? Or even the Topraki, since our relationship is so complicated."*

"It is only with personal power that you can effect real change," Sia said. *"So pushing yourself will help with your other goals, regardless of the need. Samantha seems like she would know much of the same science and technology, so you should work to keep her on your side and help her create the right ones. If she joins your house, since you are a noble now, you would be in control of her inventions and could prevent the dangers that you fear."*

"But," I paused, trying to articulate why I didn't want that.

"You do not have to marry her to make her a part of your house, nor does that make her your property," Sia told me, smashing my worries with a sledgehammer. *"You could make her a retainer, or adopt her as a younger sibling."*

"Heh, she'd probably kill me if I tried that," I laughed. "She confessed her love to me before the trip through the portal."

"I heard. I was a level six Beast then. I am sure Knight Kaminski, Librarian Narwan, and half the people with you heard it."

"Oh, great," I banged my head against the ground, then frowned. I picked my head up again, and let it drop. It didn't hurt, it didn't even sting a tiny bit, like I would have expected. That's new, useful.

Vaya sat up with a yawn and a very distracting stretch. "Good evening," I said.

"Evening? How long were we out?" She asked, then blushed as she realized where she had been laying.

I told her what Sia said, lightly shifting my legs until Lampart stood and arched her back. Finally, I stood and shook my arms and legs out. "I'm glad I don't feel anything from that, that, rotten fish of a pill," I grumbled.

"That was very bad, but if it managed to make Lampart and Sia evolve, what did it do to us?" Vaya said.

"No idea," I shrugged. "I feel lighter, like I lost a ton of weight, so I'm probably stronger than I was. Other than that, the spirit did say it would help us cultivate, which I thought was similar to gathering."

"It seemed to be more about tempering," Vaya said, "But different too. There was definitely something we were doing with it that was not right. I do not believe that the spirit thought we would be in danger from the pill."

"That is correct, Lady cultivator," the spirit spoke, somehow, in the Craesti language. "All of me apologizes for the damage and danger you were in. It should not have been dangerous, as the pill was carefully calibrated for your capability. I do not know what happened."

I described what we did, "These methods are all we could think of when you said cultivation techniques," I told it. "Gathering Aether into ourselves and tempering our bodies with it."

It paused for almost a minute, the spectral shape flickering while its power was sent into processing something. *Huh, it's just like an AI or something.* "I cannot give you a cultivation technique. You may be able to earn one in the Tower of Trials. You are now fully recovered. As compensation for your ordeal, you may instruct your teammates on how you absorbed and processed the pills, but not how you received them. Do not tell them what else you found down here, as that will invalidate the test. An additional benefit will be provided if they succeed in their trial. Now, please leave, and good luck in the trials." The spirit vanished.

"Well, I guess it's time to head back," I said, turning back to Vaya. She nodded, and we moved to the stairs leading to the water. Sia just flew up and left us. Vaya and Lampart leaped into the bottom of the pond, swimming upward quickly. I just shook my head, since my Aether vision didn't show anything actually stopping the water. "This place is, I just can't. Light. I want to know how." I took a deep breath, then leaped into the water.

"Hurry! We are under attack," Sia sent.

"Coming!" I sent back, pushing Aether into strengthening my limbs to swim faster than Phelps ever could. The water was fairly clear, and as I rocketed past Vaya I gestured upwards urgently. Her eyes grew wide, and she pushed her speed as fast as possible as well. Less than

a minute later, I burst out of the water to see Kami tank a Lightning bolt while an icicle shot towards one of the dozens of flying forms in the air.

They had a bird's body with light blue feathers, streaked with a light pattern of brown and yellow, but their neck extended like a snake's, with bright yellow scales. A snake's face ended the necks, with large fangs sticking out of its lips, but a set of antlers adorned its head. Two of them circled, and another bolt of Lightning shot at Kami. This time I noticed the tube of Air that tried to blow her away.

I sent a Fire Aether Blast flying at the closest Beast, causing it to hiss in pain as its feathers on the closest wing burnt off and it spiraled towards the ground. *I love not needing a weapon, but Light, they help. Especially with Core-level Inscriptions*, I whined to myself, *with my trisula that would have blown that thing apart. Guess I need to really train without weapons for a while sometime.*

Two of the creatures turned towards me, and another bolt of Lightning slammed into my chest. It tingled slightly, my primary Affinity absorbing the vast majority of the damage from Beasts that were below my own strength. The follow up Air Blast, however, picked me up and sent me tumbling back into the water. It didn't hurt, but my mass was still only around eighty kilograms, and I hadn't braced or used a technique to stop my movement. Newton's third law still applied in this world.

With a grimace, I blew two Air Aether Blasts into the water under me, lightly cutting my fingers but shooting me into the air. I landed behind Jon, who was armed with his weapons but not wearing any armor. "Where are my weapons?" I yelled, then gestured to send a Metal Aether Slash off the end of my fingers. A diving Beast was decapitated before it could react, the majority of them only being level three.

"Leftmost tent!" Jon yelled, blocking three more bolts on his shield. "Darkness, these things are annoying." He slashed his sword upwards, but his target dodged. He grinned and pulled the Aether backward, a thin streamer of Air attached to the Ice, cutting through the bird thing's wing.

I collected Metal Aether around my right hand while sprinting towards the tent. One of the Beasts dove in front of me, only to take a spike of Metal into its face. I pinned it to the ground, giving easier access to harvest it later. A bolt of Lightning slammed into my back, but only succeeded in making me step forward slightly. "Huh, that tingled," I said, turning back to see Vaya get knocked sprawling from a bolt. "Vaya!"

I turned and ran to her, forgetting about my trisula. On the way, I made another Metal spike but extended it over a meter long. As another Lightning bolt shot from three of the birds, I reached forward with the spike and my will, almost sucking the attack into the Metal. The Lightning was a bit stronger this time, making my hand spasm, but the Metal spike didn't drop, held in place by my mind.

Vaya stood, a whip of Wood and Water Aether forming in her hand. She struck out, the flexible attack wrapping around one of the nimble Beasts. Dozens of thorns sprouted from the end and cut through the snake-like neck. Sia dove into another group, flames exploding from him and burning away their feathers.

I focused on sending out more Metal spikes while shielding Vaya from her weakest Affinity so she could focus on ripping more of the Beasts from the air. A few more minutes left us

panting and singed, with two dozen dead lizard birds splattered around us while the remains of the flock fled. "Everyone okay?" Vaya asked, looking around.

"Yeah," I said. Jon nodded, though he was shaking his right arm like it was numb. Vaya moved over to him, and a flare of green, brown, and blue Aether flowed into his arm.

"Thanks," he said.

"I never thought I'd see Piasas," Bridget said, looking at one of the corpses.

"Piasas?" I asked.

"These things. My dad told me stories about them. Hopefully we don't run into any adults, if his stories were true," Bridget answered.

"Adults?" Jon asked, moving over to her.

"Yeah. Dad's stories put mature Piasas at level six, with some going all the way to eight. One legend said there was a Piasa Primordial. These were only level three," she grimaced.

"So we just fought off a group of babies. Go us," Jon laughed. "Either way, they were dual Affinity, so their cores should be useful. Smoke the meat too."

We spent the next hour cleaning the clearing, defeathering and skinning the Piasas, and cutting the meat off the bones. I collected a pile of Cores, swirls of yellow and light blue showing the Lightning and Air Aether in them. Only once we were done did Jon and Vaya sit us down with questions, and dinner.

"I can't tell you much," I said. "We found something really interesting that you two, and your Bonds, should explore. There is a reward, but I cannot tell you how to get it, or you won't be able to. You'll want the Bonds there, as processing the reward was much easier when shared between them."

"And with each other," Vaya said, grabbing my hand. "I was having trouble, and Aiden helped me through it."

"How?" Jon asked.

"I held her hands and pulled some of the energy through them to me, and then when I started to get overwhelmed, she did the same," I said. "By alternating back and forth, we were able to be strong for each other, and successfully process the reward. No idea how beneficial it was, though I definitely feel stronger. It was supposed to help us gather better, so while you explore we'll take some time to test it out."

"Sure," Jon said. "We will go for a swim in an hour or so. We should have mostly recovered from the Piasa battle by then."

"At least they taste pretty good," Bridget laughed, her hand up to keep fried fowl from spilling out of her mouth.

We joked a bit through dinner, then spent the first ten minutes or so of the hour Jon wanted talking about the fight. We had started to get into the habit of speaking one or two things that we noticed about someone else, so they could improve. "So, Vaya, you should probably temper with Lightning again sometime soon," Bridget said. "I saw you go down from that strike, and I am worried we might run into more of them."

"Yeah," Vaya frowned. "The Lightning seemed to set my Wood Aethers on fire. I will work on shielding against lightning better, but it will take a long time to get there, unless I skip it by tempering. Librarian Narwan did say to temper from highest Affinity to lowest, but I almost want to do the opposite. I will speak to him when we finish here." She took a deep breath, then turned to Jon. "Jon, you should work on accuracy at a distance. You were having a lot of trouble hitting

the Beasts, and took more damage than you needed to because of it. Maybe form a few smaller attacks and spread them out, or set a distance to make them explode into icy shards?”

“I like explosions,” Jon laughed. “I will look into that, and practice some more. Those Piasas were fast. I will also try to extend my slowing aura upward more. I was not able to do it this time. Aiden, you should not go into battle without your weapons. Both you and Vaya should have kept them with you, even if nothing had happened. We are not in a safe area, even if it is supposed to be a trial.”

“Good point. I probably could have done a lot more damage to the Beasts quicker with my trisula. I will make sure to keep them with me at all times while we are here,” I patted the weapons, now adorning my belt. Vaya and I’d gotten changed after the fight, drying off and reequipping our armors. “Um, Bridget. I didn’t see much, but I did notice you getting tripped up by some of their Air Blades. As your primary Affinity, you should be able to feel and dodge them. It looked like you were too focused on attacking them, and neglected your own safety.”

“I have gotten used to relying on Jon to keep me safe when we are close,” she said frowning. “I will endeavor to dodge more attacks. His efforts to protect me made the battle take longer. Good spot, Aiden. Thanks.”

The rest of us thanked each other, then split apart to gather. “*What about me?*” Sia’s voice chimed in my head.

“You are too used to your old power,” I told him. *“Diving into the middle of the flock was more dangerous than you think it was. You should have stayed back and just flamed them.”*

“Maybe. I do need to adjust, but I think that was the right call. They were unable to channel their Lightning Bolts individually, so I split them up. The Air Blades were not enough to get through my Flame Shield,” Sia responded haughtily.

“Even so, it worried me. We will have to work hard to get stronger,” I smiled up at him.

He flew over and landed on my shoulder, *“Lampart and I are going to watch, so I will not be gathering with you. We will have to make time when Jon, Bridget, Kami, and Zimnodlot get back.”*

“Hey, why do you always call Zim by his full name?” I asked.

“Because he prefers it. I like Sia, instead of Siarczysty, simpler to say, unless it is a formal occasion, but he seems to hate Zim,” Sia told me.

“Huh,” I said aloud. “I didn’t know Zimnodlot didn’t like his name being shortened. I will endeavor to use his full name.” I stopped then turned to where Zimnodlot and Jon were sitting. “I will use your full name, unless we are in a fight and I have to yell a command quickly. Is that acceptable?”

The Snowy Owl turned his head towards me, arcing it sideways a full ninety-degrees. I felt something but couldn’t make it out. *“He accepts your compromise, and says thank you,”* Sia told me. *“I am going to see what is around us. Gather. Lampart and I will keep you safe.”*

“Thanks,” I said, then dove into my center. Nothing looked different, maybe a bit shinier, which was weird as there wasn’t really any light here. With a mental shrug, I built the runes and spirals for my gathering technique, barely thinking about it after doing it so many times. The rush of Aether shattered my technique almost instantly. “Light, what in Darkness happened?” I wondered to myself.

Over and over again, the amount of Aether I pulled in broke my technique, before I stopped putting the runes up, downgrading to the Spiral Gathering Technique from the Runic

Spiral Gathering Technique. The rush then was barely stable, and I felt dozens of locations where the spirals were misaligned by the tiniest fraction. "Light. That pill must have tripled, maybe quadrupled my ability to gather. Everyone needs one. After Jon and Bridget find them, we should try to find Aleks and Jamila so their teams can get some too. Have to find another two locations as well. Two more at least, anyway."

I gathered for a bit, spreading my senses throughout my center and my meridians. I could not tell what was different, beyond a sense of completeness. Once I was fully recovered, I spent another hour cycling my Aether, pulsing and pushing to expand my meridians by the tiniest bit. Each gain, each new expansion, each step forward, made it more likely that I would thrive in this world, and keep my loved ones safe. Hopefully without dying this time.

CHAPTER TWELVE

"Are you sure they are okay?" I asked Sia while staring at the pond.

"Yes. *Zimnodlot* says they are merely resting after successfully processing the pills. Their methodology was very different and more effective than yours. Why did you two not," Sia started to say.

"Nope, not going there again," I said, reaching up to pinch his beak shut even though he wasn't talking out of it.

"Going where?" Vaya asked, walking over from where she was examining a plant at the edge of the water.

"Sia was about to describe how Jon and Bridget gathered together after taking the pills," I grumbled at her, giving the bird on my shoulder a stink eye. Of course, I ended up marveling at his new plumage, the swirl of colors signifying his evolution catching my eye.

"How did they?" Vaya asked.

"Dual gathering," I said, blushing.

"Ah. I am not surprised they learned a gathering technique like that," she smiled happily.

"Jon plans to betrothe her as soon as he can. They are already planning their joining ceremony," I said, reaching out and taking her hand.

"Good for them," Vaya smiled at me. "So what shall we do while we wait? Lampart is stalking a bunny of some kind."

"Sia, can you see if you see anything interesting from the air?" I asked. "What was that plant you were looking at?" I turned back to Vaya while Sia leaped off my shoulder. His wings elongated as he increased in size rapidly, the change coming easier and faster now.

"I think it is related to Watercress, but I have never seen it this color before," she told me, leading me by the hand. The bundle of greens growing out of the shallows of the pond waved merrily at us. Unlike normal Watercress, at least for this planet, it didn't have a streak of deep blue in the center of each leaf. Rather, a pale lavender color lined the veins of the leaves.

"That is weird. Nothing about it in the book?" I asked.

"Nope. I am not sure how we could harvest it and keep it alive," she frowned.

"Probably not worth it, but cutting a few leaves and drying them out should let us at least ask Librarian Narwan once we leave," I said.

She nodded, then bent over and separated a fifth of the fronds. She released my hand and pulled a small sickle from her pack, then carefully cut the stems about a third of the way from the bottom. A portion got separated out, "I am going to wrap those in waterproof fabric and see if they will last wet," she explained, then laid the others on a small Formation plate that pulled the water out of whatever was placed upon it. "Can you feed some Fire Aether into this?" She gestured at it. "It will work faster that way."

"Sure," I said, grinning at her. "Happy to be able to help." I sat next to it, the slightly soggy ground making my bottom wet, but I'd long ago grown past tiny inconveniences.

"Slowly though," she cautioned. "Too fast and you will burn them."

I nodded before leaning forward to place a finger on the activation rune of the Formation. Falling into my center, I quickly guided a tiny stream of Fire Aether up through my blood vessel meridian, following each split until it reached my pointer finger. I peeled off even smaller snippets of the line, almost like a string cheese stick, until I got a line only three motes thick.

Probably going overboard here, but whatever, I laughed internally, then gently pushed the Aether through my skin into the Formation.

It absorbed it hungrily, the runes throughout lighting up with a bright red glow. They flickered, the flow not quite enough, so I pulled slightly more out. The color stabilized, and two of the runes on the far side started to fill in the deep blue of Water Aether. A channel carved into the Formation guided a tiny drop of water away from the cuttings to drip onto the ground. I watched the interplay of Fire, Air, and Wood Aether, the Formation pulling Air into a rune, heating it up with Fire, and then running it through the plants cushioned by a thin layer of Wood. Water Aether and drips of physical water were pulled out, the other types converted as they flowed.

It took twenty minutes before the two runes filled in fully. "Thank you Aiden," Vaya said. "They are done."

"That was really neat," I said. "It seemed to transform the Wood and Fire Aether into Water. I wonder if there is a way to do this with other Aethers, or maybe some combined ones."

"I have another Formation that uses Water and Wood only to pull the water out," Vaya said. "But it is not as effective. Fire and Air help pull the Water out of the plant's cells more effectively. The Wood is to prevent the cuttings from burning. I am unsure why the Formation does not use any composite Aethers."

"Might be harder to create, so these are done cheaply," I shrugged. "Or it could be that the Ashkhas got the best ones and we got simpler Formations. Or maybe we just need to feed in a composite Aether to get it to work with composite Aethers."

"Good point," Vaya nodded. "I will look to see if there is a good composite to try." She moved off to the side and started to read. After only a few minutes, though, bubbles rose from the pond, followed closely by Jon, Bridget, and their Bonds.

"How are you?" I asked, moving to check on them.

"I feel amazing!" Bridget shouted. "Is this what gathering was like for you all the time?"

"Not quite," I laughed.

"Did you know that pill would open meridians?" Jon asked. I turned to him as Jon continued explaining. "Yeah. I think I got three more open, all connecting to individual organs. I feel stronger and more complete. It is so weird and awesome!"

"I'm glad," I grabbed his proffered wrist. "Now you'll be able to keep up even better!"

"Now that we are all rested, shall we move on?" Bridget asked.

"In a bit," Vaya said. "I want to explore the pond a bit more. Did you see any useful or interesting plants or fish?"

"I was not looking," Bridget said, then she shrugged. "Let me look." She turned and dove back into the water.

I burst out laughing, then followed. We spent an hour looking for things to harvest, though a good portion of that ended up being used to roughhouse and splash around instead. I found one neat Water herb that had a small spiral of Aether leading into it, and Bridget found something like an underwater tomato that we pulled all the fruit off of. At the end of the hour, I dragged Jon out of the pool and we collapsed in the sunshine. "I wonder if that is our sun," I said, pointing up. "It looks the same, but how, why? There are so many mysteries here, and I can't wait to find out some answers."

"Well, we need to explore some more if you want them," Jon said.

I held my hand up for a high-five, and he obliged, then I hopped to my feet and pulled him up. Vaya and Bridget were walking out of the pond, chatting about a large fruit they'd found, so the two of us boys took a second to appreciate the view. The girls caught us, and Vaya put her hands on her hips and gave us both a glare. "What?" I asked innocently.

"You know what," Bridget said, mimicking Vaya's glare. We laughed, and after a few seconds, they did too.

"Fine, we should get dry and then leave," Vaya said, a fond smile on her face. A few applications of Air, Fire, Water, and Ice Aether later, and we were all dry. We then quickly geared up, putting on armor and weapons, and packed up the bags. We decided to head inward more while still traveling sunward around the circle. Lampart, Zimnodlot, and Sia were exploring ahead while Kami and Bridget led the five of us moving into the trees. After fifteen or so minutes, we reached a line in the dirt.

Sia was the first to cross into the demarcated area, and exclaimed, *"Whoa, the gravity increases again. Aether is thicker too."*

"Thanks. Be careful," I responded to him. I told the others, while Sia and Zimnodlot turned around and discovered exactly where the change happened.

We hurried to that location and found the line. I looked closely, but couldn't see any Aether moving in the lighter brown dirt. Vaya and Bridget moved to either side of me, but couldn't find anything either. "Well, at least the Aether is thicker," Jon said after we all shrugged. "Even if we do not find any more useful harvests, we can still gather faster."

"Knight Kaminski did say that getting closer to the center had more interesting items," Vaya said, "though no one has ever been able to get to the true center. There is a boundary like this one that cannot be crossed."

"Probably where the Tower is," I said with a shrug. *"Sia, did you see anything interesting up ahead?"*

"There is a clearing half a kilometer ahead," Sia told me. *"I did not see anything in it, but you might want to check it out."*

The others agreed and we moved forward. Twenty meters ahead, Lampart faded out of the undergrowth with a very large bunny in her mouth. Delight danced in her eyes when she dropped it in front of Vaya. "Ooh, nice," Vaya said. "We'll skin it once we get some more, okay?"

The large cat huffed, then faded away again. Another fifty meters later, and Kami moved off after hooting at Bridget. "Kami smells something," she told the rest of us. We followed her over, and the pangolin dug into the ground at the base of a tree. She quickly unearthed a small patch of truffle mushrooms that were solid black with tiny glitters of green and brown throughout their surface.

"Ooh, Black Green Truffles, but they have Earth Aether too. That is rare, great job Kami!" Vaya exclaimed. "Let me harvest half of this. Jon, can you mark it on your map?"

"Sure thing," Jon said, pulling the large parchment out of his backpack.

Bridget took the time to skin the rabbit, its light brown fur soft and smooth. "Huh," she said. "First time I have ever seen a level three Core from a bunny." She laughed. "Weird Aether though."

I walked over and picked it up. The Aether was the same light brown that the bunny's core was. Nothing about it shouted to me what it was, even with my Aether Sight. I extended my

Aether senses into it. The feeling of Earth came from it, but it was softer, more diffuse. "Dirt, Sand maybe?" I said. "Not sure."

"Neat," she told me. She returned to butchering the meat, setting aside a large portion to give to Lampart as a reward.

Ten more minutes passed before we moved on. The pattern continued, with Zimnodlot or Lampart returning with hunted Beasts or Sia, Kami, or me spotting something interesting every couple dozen meters or so. We followed Aether trails I spotted several times, but there was such a plethora of higher level items that nothing created massive streamers to guide us. This made the five hundred meter trip to the next clearing take almost three hours instead of a few minutes. Finally, we reached the edge of the clearing.

It was mostly full of hip high bushes covered with a rainbow of berry colors. All of them were shaped like raspberries, but only a few of them were red. The full spectrum of Elemental colors except black appeared, including a single bush at the center whose berries were glowing so brightly white that it was almost painful to look at. "Wow!" Jon exclaimed.

"Some of each plant," I said. "Stay close to each other, though. Bonds, you're on watch."

Kami grunted at me, and Bridget translated, "Kami says she can harvest some of them with her claws and tongue."

"Okay, fine," I laughed. "You just want to eat some." I reached over and scratched her shining scales. "Sia, Zimnodlot, Lampart, can you scout around? We've gotten a great harvest so far, so let's not take any chances." I looked over to Vaya and winked. "Also, save the Light bush for last. You know, in case there is a watcher who will object to us stealing their berries."

"Really? You know, if I had not gotten us chased by that Two-faced Bear, we would not have found that Dungeon," Vaya said. "So really, it was because of me that we got the pseudo-Seed Cores." She sniffed, putting her nose in the air.

"Yup, sure is," I said. "Still scary."

Vaya and I went to our left, while Jon, Bridget, and Kami went to the right. I reached the first bush with bright green berries and dropped my bag on the ground. From it, I dug out a dozen small white jade boxes with preservation Inscriptions on them, each able to hold about two fists worth of stuff. I carefully plucked twenty berries that gave a feeling of growing and life from their Aether and moved on. Fire, Air, Water, even Lightning raspberries were all around, and I quickly filled up the boxes I'd allocated without reaching the other side.

"There is too much," Vaya said.

"Well, fill a bag instead of a preservation box," I said. "We'll eat them over the next few days." I looked over to see Jon had smears of purple and blue juice on his cheeks already. "Looks like the others are already partaking." I laughed, then pulled an extra helping of the glowing yellow fruits from the plant I was harvesting.

They tasted tingly, extra tart, but still sweet. The fruit was easily a level three, if not four, and I could feel the Aether in my chest rise up to meet the Aether of the berries. A tiny rush flowed through my digestion meridian, leaving it feeling the most miniscule amount stronger. I ate some more, and the effect strengthened slightly before plateauing. I tried to move the Aether from the berries elsewhere, but it refused to be guided away from my center, mixing into my personal Aether and losing whatever effect it had. Except, my center felt sturdier as well.

I moved forward and pulled some silver berries off the next tree. They tasted more bitter, the tang of iron almost overwhelming the sweet flavor entirely. Again, my center and digestion

meridian felt a bit stronger, though now a feeling of being off balance came as well. "Make sure to eat berries of each Aether type," I called out.

"Well, duh," Jon yelled back.

"Eat means to put in your mouth, not smear on your cheeks!" I shouted across the clearing. He laughed, then threw a brown berry at me. It missed by almost a meter, not being particularly aerodynamic.

"Why wasn't this on the map?" I asked him when we met at the other edge of the clearing.

"No idea," he said. "It might be new. We are right here," he pointed at the spot he'd just marked. "This has been explored before, but the notes said there was only a single berry bush here with fruit that was Fire aspected. All the rest of the plants were empty, and there were only a few in total. The note is from almost sixty years ago, though."

"Guess people avoided it for a while and it became overgrown," I shrugged.

"Or something has changed," Vaya said. "The Aether is thicker than I thought it would be. No one has ever mentioned finding caves with carvings in them. Something feels different about this time."

"It might have to do with the presence of the Chaos Beasts," I said. "Considering the person who made this whole place fought a war against them, it might be reacting to their presence nearby by ramping up the Aether density. That could have caused the explosion of plant growth here as well."

"Either way, more berries!" Jon said with a laugh. "We can worry about weighty topics when we get out of here."

We slowly ate through a third of the berries available, enjoying the varied tastes and tiny increases in power each of them gave. We didn't approach the single bush at the center, though. Finally, I finished the last berry I'd picked from an Ice Affinity plant and watched as the Aether from it finished strengthening my digestion meridian and center. The feeling of being out of balance, which had gotten stronger at first and then started to diminish as time went on, vanished as equilibrium was restored. "That was so good," I said. "Though I do wonder what will happen when we have some of those berries."

"I want to do some stretches and warm up exercises before we even try," Jon said. "I am sure something is about to go wrong."

"Really? You really had to say that?" Bridget asked, frowning at him.

"What?" he gave her a quizzical look.

She just shook her head in disgust. Vaya and I were looking around nervously.

"Oh come on," Jon said, exasperated, "just because I said something does not mean it would not have happened anyway." He did some jumping jacks and active stretches.

With a shrug, I joined him, moving through a martial form for my trisula. Bridget dug out a few Inscriptions from her bag, and Vaya stocked up on healing pills. My belt and pockets already had a couple of small bottles with a single healing pill in it, so that I could swig it down quickly if necessary.

After a few minutes, I said, "Okay. Let's fill a preservation box each, it looks big enough for that. Afterwards, we'll grab a few handfuls to eat. Let me go first, with Vaya and Sia watching out for me just in case."

"Sounds like a plan, boss man," Jon laughed.

I moved through the bushes, ignoring the scratching of the branches on my arms and clothing. The bush was bigger than I thought it was when I got close, the ground subtly sinking downward until the topmost white berry was at eye level. I extended my Aether senses and pushed some extra Aether into my eyes to enhance my Aether Sight, but didn't see or feel anything off about the bush. A line of slightly-off feeling Earth Aether, feeling even thicker than normal Earth Aether, lined the ground behind the bush.

Vaya moved up next to me, and I felt her own senses envelope the bush. With Jon's untimely challenge to the universe on our minds, we spent almost ten minutes checking every tiny thing we could think of. I moved over to clear off the dirt over what I found was Stone Aether, and discovered a small pillar. "Looks like this used to be something," I said, gesturing to it.

"There might have been carvings on the pillar," Vaya said, looking beside me. "But they are unreadable now."

"Oh well," I said. "Anyone else find anything interesting or dangerous?"

Sia and Zimnodlot flew overhead, looking over the clearing as a whole, and both cawed a negative. Kami and Bridget were exploring the ground around the bush, and while they discovered another pillar nearby, it too was too eroded to determine what used to be on it. Jon and Lampart stood guard, and Jon gave me a shrug when I looked over at him.

After we found a whole lot of nothing, with some more nothing on top, I looked over at Vaya. "Go ahead. You're the best harvester of us all," I whispered to her.

She nodded, stepping right next to the bush. A preservation box appeared in her left hand and a small set of tongs in her right. She gently reached forward and gripped the stems right above the berry. A tiny blade of Wood and Water Aether snipped through the stem, separating the fruit and allowing it to fall a centimeter down, into the box. Her movements were swift but steady, borne of lots of experience and training. When her first box was full, I took it from her and gave her mine. Jon and Bridget gave me theirs, and Vaya quickly filled them.

After filling the boxes, I took out a large bag, and Vaya proceeded to empty the outside of the bush into it. No pulses of Aether, no alarms, no rampaging Beasts showed up to ruin our day. In many ways, this just made us more nervous. Once the outside was empty and the only berries would require reaching into the leaves, Vaya made the decision to step back. "I am done. This should be enough for all of us to eat the same amount as the other berry types," she said.

"You feel it too?" I asked.

"Yes. I do not wish to push our luck. Darkness is hiding us, but only if we do not step out of his shade," she smiled at me.

We retreated to the edge of the clearing. Nothing was happening, so I sighed, "Okay. Let me eat the first berry. Vaya, keep me safe." She handed me the bag, and immediately a loud roar filled the air.

"Told you," Jon said.

CHAPTER THIRTEEN

I gestured for everyone to move backward and spread out. Immediately, Vaya, Bridget, Lampart, and Zimnodlot vanished from my Aether senses. I pulled in my aura tighter, trying to limit what was able to be discovered by whatever was coming, but I'd never been good at it. I was only able to make it low enough to not cause problems for low level gatherers and not to broadcast my presence to everyone around.

Sia was even worse, not used to being weak enough to need to hide. Jon and Kami were in the middle, better than me but worse than the others. I moved over next to Jon and whispered, "I doubt we'll be able to hide from whatever is coming." I could feel the Beast approaching. It was a strong level five Beast, or maybe a weak level six. Either way, it was something we could win against. "You, me, Kami, and Sia will rush out and attack it if found, letting the others wait for a good moment to attack from hiding."

He nodded, and I repeated the plan for Sia to communicate to the other Bonds, and thus to Vaya and Bridget. Only thirty seconds later, and a massive Beast landed. It was a Manticore, with the head and body of a lion, the wings of a bat, and a scorpion tail. The Beast stood five meters tall at the shoulder, and its wingspan was easily fifteen meters. It landed directly next to the Light berry bush. "Thieves!" The Beast exclaimed, their voice deep and resonant. "Where are you?" A wave of Air Aether flew out from them, reflecting off the trees and bushes around us.

I ducked behind the tree nearest me, engaging my Unseen Walker technique, trying to hide from the wave, but it curled around and reflected off me anyway, its strength overpowering my inexpertly practiced technique.. *Okay, so not like light. It reflected straight back towards the Manticore instead of directly away from me. Crap. I really need to work on that technique more.*

"Found you!" The Beast turned towards Jon and I, seeming to ignore Kami and Sia, who were to my left a couple of meters. Over the last minute, I'd completely lost track of the others.

Jon rushed out from behind the bush he had attempted to hide behind. "I am sorry," he said, holding his shield but not yet his sword, "I did not know these were claimed." He held out a preservation box. "I can give you back what I took, if you let us leave without a fight."

"I as well," I said, stepping to his side. In my left, I held a preservation box, though mine held red berries. I wasn't sure what Jon's held, but I doubted it was the white.

The Beast seemed taken aback. "You would return what you have stolen?" They asked.

"Or we could trade," I said, gesturing back at where I'd dropped my pack. "Your berries will regrow, probably very quickly with how the Aether is in this area. I have a dozen Sand Bunny or Fuzhu cores and meat from the same."

"This does not have to be a fight," Jon said.

"Or I could kill you both, thus getting both my berries and the meat," the Beast said calmly. "Since you are both at Meridian Widening, and I am at Truth Seeking."

"Do not think it would be an easy or guaranteed fight," I warned, Aether surging in me and my voice hard. My Iron Bones, Granite Skin technique layered over my skin, with tiny sparkles of Lightning moving between my trisula's tines. "We have killed several Beasts of a similar strength to you." At that statement, Sia flared his power, and the Manticore looked up. "We are exploring this area to find harvests that will strengthen ourselves or our families back home. These fruits are awesome, but your core and hide will be good as well."

The Beast huffed, "As if you have ever seen anything like me. Now die!" Their tail flung forward, stabbing towards my chest.

Jon was there, a shield of Ice extending from his Inscribe shield and a pillar of Ice forming behind him to hold him in place. The spike slammed through the projected Aether, but stopped on the metal, held in place for a second. Just long enough for me to send the surge of Aether I'd been channeling through my right trisula as a Plasma Aether Slash that dug deep into the Manticore's tail.

The tip drooped as it was brought backward, the Beast roaring in pain. A blast of Fire dropped onto their face, charring the inside of their mouth. They slammed their mouth shut, whining through the burns. Kami rushed up next to us, a sheen of brown Aether forming between the Beast and Jon. Jon groaned, squished between his pillar and the tail attack, but he recovered quickly. A sheet of Ice Aether formed under the Beast's feet.

I sprinted forward, the Aether Strengthening Technique flowing through me with both Air and Lightning, enhancing my speed several times in exchange for not changing my strength at all. I didn't need it. Both of my trisula stabbed into the Beast's wing joint, a Metal Aether Blast digging deep and ripping apart the muscle and bone in the area.

"Is that all you got?" The Beast laughed, then a gust of Air threw me backward. Their left wing hung, damaged enough that they couldn't fly away. It clawed at Jon, an Aether Slash that was almost fifty centimeters wide.

Kami and Jon joined their techniques, two walls of Ice and Earth forming. The Beast's attack smashed through both, but each impact weakened it, letting Jon and Kami block the remainder. I simply ducked it, recovering quickly from being blown backward. I rolled forward, leaping to my feet once the attack had passed, and responding by forming a Wrath of the Lightning Herald, slamming the runes for Fire and Air around the Lightning to turn it into Plasma.

Right before my attack would have hit, the Beast rolled sideways, and instead the pillar of Plasma sizzled out of sight into the distance, leaving a train of burned leaves angled upwards in its wake. The Manticore roared again, this time sending a wave of noxious green out that covered Kami and Bridget, who was stealthing nearby to get a sneak attack in. After a second, Jon sent a stream of Air to blow it away, showing both of them collapsed to the ground and spasming. "*The Beast is injured but still dangerous!*" Sia sent, growing to his current full size and raking the top of the Manticore's head with his talons.

Vaya sprinted into the clearing, then grabbed the two poisoned fighters and drug them back out of sight. I felt her Aether spin up as she started to purge their systems.

Lampart lept out of a tree to maul the side of its massive face, then dodged around to the lion-bug crossbreed's other side. They growled and turned towards her, limping from their injuries.

I used the opening to send a Metal Aether Slash, slicing open their rear leg. The Manticore stumbled, then Sia slammed into it again. A flash of Fire came from both of the Beasts, though Sia's Affinity was high enough that he almost ignored the attack. All it did was lift him up into the air faster.

Jon sent a combined Air and Ice Aether Blast into the Manticore's face, causing them to roar in pain again.

The Beast leapt forward, but stumbled slightly from the onslaught of injuries as they tried to bite Jon.

Jon extended his shield out with a layer of Ice, preventing the Beast from getting their mouth on him, though the impact did send him tumbling.

Lampart jumped forward, raking the uninjured bat wing, and the Beast turned towards her.

While Sia, Jon, and Lampart were distracting the Beast, I channeled a massive surge of Lightning Aether into a Wrath of the Lightning Herald, deciding that I wanted the possible stunning effect more than the pure damage of Plasma. Just before Jon was going to get attacked again, I let it erupt from my combined trisula, and the beam slammed into the Beast's back.

The Manticore seized up for only a split second while processing the Lightning Aether. Once they froze, an Air Aether Slash slammed into their side, cutting into the Beast's neck enough to make blood start oozing. Bridget moved into the clearing, stepping around a concealing berry bush to send another Slash at the Beast. *She's okay!* I exclaimed mentally.

A massive Icicle from Zimnodlot fell onto their skull from the sky, only missing an eye by a centimeter or two and slamming their head towards the ground. Vines tangled up their rear legs, aggravating the injuries I'd inflicted earlier and preventing it from dodging a Wooden Spike that shot out of the ground into the Beast's side. I sent another Lightning Blast at them, then rushed forward to slash through the tendons on their front left leg. I was worried the others would start running out of Aether and get more injured, and wanted to cripple the Beast faster.

A massive burst of Air ripped apart the skin on my arm and sent me flying again. Bridget and Vaya cried out in pain once as the untargeted burst hit everyone. The two birds used the airflow in front of the wave to pull themselves away. Jon and Kami huddled behind their defenses, weathering the attack with aplomb. Jon collected the Ice he'd created around the Beast's feet, which wasn't doing anything to their stability, and sent the gathered ice upward as a spike into the Beast's chest.

The Manticore roared in pain, collapsing to their side. I recovered my feet and rushed to the side of the Manticore's head. Their head was wide enough that the side of it was at my waist. "It didn't have to be this way," I told them softly. "We could have traded and been on our way."

"Finish it," the Beast growled weakly. "You lying, cheating..."

Before they could finish their complaints, I stabbed my trisula into their temple, destroying their brain with a Lightning and Metal Aether Blast. Their body twitched, the flailing muscles sending me sprawling for the third time while fighting the Beast.

The fight was over, and almost everyone was injured. I had dozens of scrapes along my arms and some cracked bones in my arms and chest. Vaya had some lacerations on her arms and legs, having mostly avoided the attacks. Jon and Kami were covered in bruises from deflecting the Beast's attacks, with Kami also having some damage to her meridians and blood vessels from the poison. Sia, Zimnodlot, and Lampart escaped relatively unscathed, the former using the attacks against them to gain distance while the latter hid behind trees and used the ground cover of the forest to block the Beast's Aether. Bridget was the worst off, having rushed back to the fight before Vaya could finish healing her.

Vaya walked out, grimacing at the destruction that we and the Beast had both inflicted on the clearing. "Were you serious?" She asked me.

"Yeah," I said. "If the Manticore had taken the Sand Bunny cores, I would have given them up rather than fight. I don't really want to kill Beast's that can talk. That seems ... wrong." I paused for a few seconds before finishing that sentence.

"I feel the same," Vaya said. "It is different when they are sapient. I would rather hunt a lot longer to find true Beasts."

"Especially when we won this easily only because they were stupidly arrogant," Jon said. "I felt the last couple of attacks the Manticore used. If the first one had been at that level, I could not have blocked it. They were treating us as opponents that were beneath them, rather than near-peers like they should have."

"Hey, I won't complain about that mistake," I said with a laugh. "I would rather we be underestimated and not take serious injuries rather than fight all out from the get go and have some of us be hurt badly."

"True," Jon said.

"Alright, you all should harvest the Manticore's core, its claws, teeth, and hide," Vaya said. "We will eat it, like it would have eaten us, for dinner tonight. Bridget, Kami, get over here so I can finish fixing you."

We spent the next two hours harvesting the Beast. Vaya was able to join in to help after half an hour of focused healing, and Bridget after ten more minutes of recovery. The Beast's sheer size made it more difficult, the Manticore being almost eight meters in length. The wing material, Bridget informed us, was a useful base for making stronger Inscriptions. In respect for the Manticore's strength, we harvested every single piece of it, bones, organs, meat, everything. Whatever we couldn't keep we buried. I stared down at the grave a little longer, then sighed and shook my head to disperse the melancholy of the moment. Some Water and Earth Aether later let us clean up the clearing.

That left us finishing up a couple of hours before sunset. "I guess we should set up camp," I said, looking at the sun and the torn up ground, only partially fixed. "Since we don't know how long it'll take to process the berries. Uh, let's cut some of the bushes in the undergrowth at the edges so we can set up our tents."

It took ten minutes to set up camp. Superhuman strength and speed let us clear a four meter square area of the forest from undergrowth and get two tents set up. Jon looked at me, then said, "Bridget and I are taking this one. You and Vaya have that one."

"Don't want to share with me anymore?" I asked with a laugh.

"Sorry, Bridget is a lot sexier than you are," Jon said, grinning at me.

"I don't know," I shook my head, then licked my finger and gestured at my body, "Can you really beat this?"

He reached out and smacked me upside the head, "Yeah. One word, boobs."

"Touché good sir, touché," I laughed while the others looked confused. "Oh, really, that is untranslatable? Really?" I grumbled then looked up, "Seriously Darkness. I can hear a language clearly that hasn't been spoken in a thousand years, but touché can't be translated. Argh!"

Vaya laughed, clutching her belly, then put her hand on my shoulder. "It is okay," she said, giggles hiding in her words, "we got what you meant."

I crossed my arms, extending my will and setting the pile of felled branches alight with Aether, before softening my expression as Vaya drew my head sideways.

She kissed me softly then said, "Should we try the Light berries now?"

"Yeah," I shook my head in self-deprecation. "Stupid Beast, dying to arrogance."

"Just make sure you do not die the same way," Sia said, fluttering to my shoulder.

"True," I said. "We need to not get too overconfident. That battle could have gone poorly and left some of us severely injured."

"True, but now we are richer," Jon said, dropping onto the log Vaya and I were sitting on. He held up the Manticore's Core. It swirled a light blue, the Air Aether dominating any other type, and gave off the slightly unsettling feeling of a weak level six.

"It's still amazing," I said. "That we can defeat the equivalent of Seed Core gatherer."

"There are eight of us," Bridget said, drawing Jon to a separate log.

"True," I said, "but outside of Sia, we are all only midway through Condensation. Counselor Taiga said ten Beasts of level four would be at a disadvantage against a level five, yet there are less than ten of us against a level six."

"You and Vaya defy explanation," Jon said. "Sia was a level six until he got here, and the rest of us are better than we should be. Light, you and Sia might have been able to beat the Manticore alone."

"Not without significant injury," I said, not denying the statement but qualifying it instead.

Jon laughed, then shook his head, "Exactly. I am just happy to grab upon your lines and let you drag me to glory. Seems simpler."

"Even if my path puts us at odds with a being that is at the same level as Darkness or Light?" I asked him.

"I can either sail early, giving a large catch to my progeny, or I can sail safely with a small catch," Jon said. "As long as Bridget and our kids make it through what is coming, I will be happy."

"Our kids?" Bridget asked. "And how many do you expect me to bear?"

Jon's eyes got huge, and he looked at me in panic.

"I think he said he wanted six," I told her, grinning at his discomfort. "Three boys and three girls."

"Uh, that depends," he said quickly, stammering slightly. "We will have to, uh, discuss, uh, what we, uh, want." He gave me a pleading glance.

Vaya and I just giggled, falling against each other while the Beasts looked on in exasperation and Bridget smirked. Jon finally sighed and sat next to Bridget. He put his arm around her shoulders, then drew her into a kiss. "I would like a bunch of kids," he said, "but I will defer the number to you, except I really want at least three."

"Three is doable," Bridget said, "maybe four. I do not know if I will want to bear more than that." They smiled at each other sweetly.

"Alright, let us eat the Light berries before I die of sweetness," Vaya grumbled.

"You just want a sweet kiss," I said, then leaned in and gave her a soft peck on the lips.

"Yup," she leaned into me, "but I still want to see what the Light berries do for us. And at least two kids."

I froze on the last part of her sentence, then grinned at her. "Well, let's eat up," I laughed. "Gotta be healthy to have kids, and got to get stronger to make it out of here." Vaya handed me the largest bag of Light berries. Jon was frying Manticore meat, it being the highest level meat we'd come across in our expedition so far. I pulled out one of the dozens contained in the bag, looked over at Vaya, then threw it down.

CHAPTER FOURTEEN

I followed the bite, from the actions required to chew it up to the Aether that flowed down my esophagus before it entered my digestion meridian. The Light Aether, glowing brightly in my internal sight, burned everything it touched. My meridian flexed in agony, and I found myself collapsing onto my side. I ignored my physical body, focusing on the Aether system inside me. I guided the Aether away from my stomach and into my center, feeling something change as the brilliant white energy soaked into them.

There was no sense of imbalance, only a feeling of completeness. I felt whole, even as it felt like my center was dissolving in acid. I held on, the Aether buffeting my consciousness, leaving me feeling lightheaded and dizzy. I held on, knowing it was strengthening me, and refused to fall to whatever the Aether was trying to do to me.

After an indeterminate amount of time where my mind was consumed by the pain, a wave of Wood and Water Aether flowed through me. It brought a wave of relief to my center and reduced the pain I was under to a more manageable level. A few subjective years later, I came to. I was laying on the ground, Vaya had her hands on either side of my face and was looking at me with a worried expression.

"That was very, uh, interesting," I said, smiling up at my girlfriend. "No idea what happened, but." I focused inward, and felt the tiniest boost to my center's ability to accept Aether. "I think it made me stronger. Hopefully it'll compound as I eat some more. The other berries took ten before we hit diminishing returns, so hopefully this one will reach the same point."

She looked at me with a stern face. "Are you sure?" She asked.

"Yeah," I took a deep breath and let it out. "One more." I sat up, then threw another of the berries back. The pain didn't lessen at all. Another wave of burning, cleansing Light shot through my center, ripping apart any impurities or mistakes I'd made when expanding it. My pool grew stronger, more elastic, and tougher, and my Core's facets seemed to glitter more brightly. The surge of agony stilled after a few more minutes, and I was able to focus on Vaya's horrified face.

"Please, stop," she said. "That seemed horrible."

"It was," I said with a grimace, "but it's making me stronger. The pain wasn't any less, but I'm sure that I can gather faster and hold more now than I could before taking these. It's a tiny change, but anything we get now will compound as we grow. We need to go back and harvest every single berry from that bush, and then eat them until we get no more benefit from them. I want to save some to try and plant, even if no one has been able to do so before now, but we need to give them to our friends too. I don't want to leave any of them behind."

"And we need to grow stronger," Jon said tiredly from beside me. "Should we take a healing powder first?"

"Might help," I said with a shrug. "I've got plenty, and we found enough herbs to make more just on the walk here. This territory is chock full of Aether-filled plants."

"I'll watch over you three," Vaya said. "We will finish tempering ourselves before we collect more berries, unless we run out."

"Thanks," I said. I dug out a healing powder and poured it into my mouth. A swig of water, soothing my aching throat, helped wash it down. After a few seconds, letting the powder

kick in, I ate another one of the berries. This time, I chewed it slowly, letting the juice and pulp dribble down into my belly, rather than gulp it down quickly. It didn't help. The healing powder seemed to amplify the pain, making the cycles of destruction and renewal happen even quicker. This did make it so that the end of the pain came quicker as well.

I looked over to see Vaya crouching over Jon, who was laying with shoulders and hips touching the ground but the rest of his body was arched in agony. Bridget was still as a statue, but sweat was dripping off her face. Her teeth ground together, but she stayed sitting. Vaya shifted over to her and performed a quick scan, then noticed I was struggling up. "Any better?" she asked.

"No. The powder made it hurt more, but it took less time, so I guess it's a wash," I shrugged. "Probably need a dozen more for full benefits. At least."

She gave me a worried look, "Should we split it up then? Take five then give everyone a break to recover?"

"I don't know," I said, looking down at the box of berries in front of me with a shiver. "I'm not sure I'll have the courage to keep going after a break." I took a deep breath, then picked up two. "Go quicker at least."

"Wait," Vaya said, but I threw them back and swallowed them.

The burning didn't become more intense, and the pain stayed where it had been. I was able to successfully process both of them. Eating more just increased the amount of time I was in pain, not how much pain I was in.

Vaya occasionally sent a burst of healing Aether, giving a few moments of sweet relief. When I came to, the others were all watching me. "Did it work?" she asked.

"Eating more, well eating two, only increased the amount of time the process took, not how strong it was," I said. "So I'm going to take another ten and see where I am at that point."

"We are all going to watch," Jon said. "Bridget will have a healing pill ready to shove down your throat, and I will attempt to keep your body cool, since you seem to be almost radiating heat right now."

I felt myself, and realized my body temperature was significantly higher than it should be, though it was quickly dropping. *Huh, I guess a massive fever won't kill me anymore*, I thought. *Well, nothing for it*. I picked up a handful of the berries. *Maybe once you don't hurt so much, you'll taste better. Thought I might be traumatized away from sweet things for a while*. I ate quickly, then lay down on the ground.

The white fire seared my insides, and I lost track of time for a little while. I focused on trying to guide the Light throughout my center, sweeping over each section multiple times before the pain lessened immensely. *It's done with my center! But there is so much left. Aw, this is gonna suck*. I directed the Aether through the openings of my meridians.

My muscles cramped up as the waves of energy flowed through my meridians and into the rest of my body. The cleansing Light burned away the innermost layer of my meridians, directly increasing their size in the most painful way possible. Hundreds of tiny blood vessels were annihilated in an instant, and then immediately healed. Unconsciously, I turned my head to the side and spat up the blood, my body ejecting it in the quickest way it had. I was just happy it all went up.

I vaguely heard noises, but I couldn't afford to move my focus outward at all. The energy flowed up, tempering and recreating my heart and lungs, then my esophagus. It was the worst

pain I'd felt yet, but I couldn't scream even if I wanted to. *It's almost to my brain. This is gonna be bad!*

The Aether reached my brain, and there was no pain for a bit. A sort of white noise, buzzing through my thoughts like a mosquito around my ear, engulfed me for a bit. Then the Aether drove ice picks through my eyeballs. After that, I truly lost track of time.

Finally, the Light petered out. I opened my eyes with a frown. "Aiden!" Vaya exclaimed, sending another wave of healing energy through me. "Are you okay?"

"I need another two berries, please," I said softly. "I'm almost done, but I can't move my arms very well right now."

She looked at me sadly, but pressed her lips together and nodded. I ate the proffered berries, then focused on the last bits of my legs. It was done. I came back out of my center, and just lay there shivering for a minute.

Vaya crouched over me and gently used a wet cloth to clean my face. It turned red from the blood I had vomited all over myself. Her soft touch helped me move past the pain.

"I'm not so sure I want to go through that," Jon said after Vaya sat back to hold my hand.

"If you think you can keep going after a break, you don't have to," I said. "I didn't think I had it in me."

"I promise, if I do not eat them myself, I will not complain too much when you and Bridget force me to eat them," Jon said solemnly.

"What is too much?" Vaya asked with a laugh.

"Uh, for an hour?" Jon said questioningly.

"If I could reach up, I would smack you," I said with a mock glare.

"Yeah, not making me excited about this," he shook his head. "But fine."

"Take a healing pill," I said. "It'll make the pain worse, but it should hopefully make it work so much faster. That was the worst part, I think. That it just seemed to go on and on." I shuddered again. *Blarg, don't need to have an aversion to powerups. It sucked, move on*, I told myself, knowing that it didn't work that way.

Jon nodded, and Bridget pulled him into a hug. "We will all be watching you," she said. "Vaya can show us how she helped Aiden, so you will be safe too. Got it?"

"Yes dear," he said, only slightly sarcastic. She whacked his head, then gave him a kiss on the forehead. I handed him a healing pill, and he threw it down before dumping fifteen of the berries down his throat. He sat, then lay back.

It took ten minutes before he arched his back in pain, and Vaya put her hands on his chest. "Watch me, first," she told us.

I forced more Aether into my eyes, enhancing my Aether Sight to observe as she sent just a wave of Wood and Water Aether into his center. She deliberately targeted areas just behind where a line of Light Aether was scrubbing away at his Core. "Healing doesn't really do anything useful, but supporting the recovery of the damaged areas with Aether reduces how much must come from him," Vaya said. "I tried several different techniques, but they were not helpful. This is all I have figured out."

"What about using other Aether's?" Bridget asked.

Vaya paused, then focused on Jon some more. Rather than just Wood and Water, now Earth and Ice joined in, and Jon relaxed some more. He was still obviously in pain, but it had reduced a bit more.

I reached forward and joined her, pushing in Metal, Fire, Lightning, and Air Aether. It helped a bit more, reducing his grimace to a bit more than what he wore last time we tempered with Fire.

Fifteen minutes later, Vaya had to pause, "I am down to less than half of my reserves," she said. "Bridget, can you take over?"

"I'll take over Earth and Wood," I said. "Bridget can take Air and Lightning from me."

"That fits my Affinities better, sure," Bridget said. I switched up what I was using, and checked my reserves. *Ten more minutes, then I'll be down to a third. Probably should stay over that, just in case something attacks,* I thought. *Wait, what about Sia and them? "Hey, Sia. Do you think you'll be able to help out with this?"* I detailed what we were doing.

"Yes, I can do that. For every Element too," he told me smugly.

"Ask the others? I'm going to run out of Wood and Metal Aether in eight minutes."

"Yes." He paused for a few minutes, while my reserves dwindled. "*Kami and I will replace you. Gather back to full. Lampart is on watch.*"

"Thanks buddy," I told him. He flashed down, landing on the ground in front of me. He hopped onto Jon's chest, and I felt a small flood of Aether spring out of him. The amount varied wildly until it stabilized just below what he started at.

I stood and stumbled a dozen steps away and crossed the edges of the Aether pull I felt from both Jon and Vaya, then plopped to the ground. I was too tired to try and use the Eight-by-Eight to speed up my gathering, so I threw down a gathering powder and fell into my center.

A surge of Aether flew into me. Whatever the berries had done compounded with the pill we'd won, and my gathering technique felt even more powerful. I put out the runes for the Runic Spiral Gathering Technique, and didn't immediately lose control this time. *Nice!* I thought, then scrambled to steady everything again. My pool filled quickly. Well, relatively quickly. It still took nearly ten minutes to reach the entrance to my meridians. Once it started to spill into my meridians, the enhanced size provided by the berries and my advancement meant it took another twenty minutes before I was approaching full.

I opened my eyes to see Vaya, Lampart, and Sia crouched around Jon, who was still in the throws of the berries, while Kami and Bridget were gathering. Zimnodlot flew overhead, watching over us. I stood and walked over. "Who can I replace?" I asked.

"Take my spot," Sia said. "*I am providing Ice through Fire.*"

"Got it," I told him mentally. I followed the others, who were healing an area in his left leg. *Almost done,* I thought.

I was right, and he finished not five minutes later. "That sucked, but not as bad as you said it would," Jon said. "Guess I am just tougher than you."

I poked him in the chest, "Nah, we just figured out how to help better."

After a few seconds, though, he got a frown on his face. "I feel something is off," he said. I looked worriedly at him, but he was looking internally. "The changes do not feel like they are mine yet." He grimaced. "I need one more, but you cannot help me this time. I think. I hope."

We stood back, and he took a deep breath before eating one last berry. *I wish I knew what these are,* I thought. *And why they do what they do to us. We need to harvest everything from the plant. Light, maybe we should figure out how to take the whole thing with us!*

It took him only a few minutes to finish processing the berry, his jaw clamped shut to hold in the scream he had building in his throat. After he relaxed, he turned his head to look at me. "Five minutes, then Bridget?" He asked.

"Twenty," Vaya said. "Let me get full first."

We took a break to gather, Sia taking over for Zimnodlot on watch. I could feel the difference in Jon's gathering, the barely perceptible whirlpool of surrounding Aether flowing into him much bigger than it had been even that morning. When he finished, I asked him, "So, was it worth it?"

"Yeah," he said glumly. "I just wish it was easier."

"Me too, my friend, me too," I pulled him into a side hug, then looked over at Bridget.

"I am ready," she said stoically. "Fifteen to start, then one to solidify." We set up, Vaya and Jon taking the first shift. Forty five minutes later, Bridget was ready for the last berry.

I looked over to see Jon flexing his right hand like it hurt. "My meridians are getting strained a bit," he said. "Too much Aether flowing through too quickly."

"There is very little I can do to help meridian injuries," Vaya said. "Rest and recover."

"Okay, but I will be ready to assist if needed," Jon said determinedly. "We will not let you suffer either."

Bridget cried out at that point, her back arching in pain. Vaya rushed to her side and pressed her hand to her forehead. "I wish I knew why our assistance prevents full assimilation," she whispered, a stressed look on her face.

"It is almost like the berries are a trial, and we have to succeed on it to get the full benefit," Jon said.

"This place is a trial ground," I said with a shrug. "I wouldn't be surprised if the berries were designed this way."

"Well, it is my turn next," she said, taking a deep breath and visibly steeling her nerves.

"So far, no permanent damage done," I said. "Just a lot of pain, and then a massive increase in gathering capability. Plus, who knows what other benefits?"

"We will have to ask Librarian Narwan to look over us when we get back," she said. "Okay. I am ready."

Vaya's tempering went as smoothly as Bridget's did. Afterwards, she took the one berry to finalize the effects, laying down and holding in a whimper right before she ate. I held her hand, and almost immediately she attempted to crush it as her body tightened in pain. Two minutes in, she screamed once, and then closed her mouth, teeth gritted, determination shining through her expression.

"*Something is coming!*" Sia's alarmed mental shout made me leap to my feet. I turned in the direction he had indicated, our mental connection showing me a picture of bushes being disturbed as a body shoved through them.

"Get ready!" I yelled, drawing my weapons.

CHAPTER FIFTEEN

"Is anyone there?" Jamila's voice called out from the bushes.

"Light, you scared us!" Jon yelled back.

"Jon!" Xiao shouted, then he and the rest of his team burst out of the bushes.

Sia's mental laughter in my head made me glare up at the shining bird, "*Ha, ha, ha,*" I enunciated clearly the fake laugh back to him.

Jamila took one look at Vaya lying on the ground and immediately sprinted to her side, almost seeming to teleport she moved so fast. *Wow, that is a new technique,* I thought. "Wait, it's okay," I said aloud. "She's just processing a natural treasure we found. You can't heal her while she is doing that."

"But why was she screaming?" Jamila asked.

"Because it hurts like your insides are being flayed," Bridget said. "At least at the end."

Vaya took that moment as the time to sit up, "That was the worst experience of my life. Oh, Jamila, where did you come from?"

"Uh, we were heading inward and south from our starting area," Jamila answered, "We saw Aiden's attack blast through the sky, so we turned this way. When we heard screams that sounded human, we came to investigate. I was afraid it was you."

"She means she turned our path to immediately come and heal whoever was injured," Ming said, a fond smile on his face. "Since she would heal anyone, even our competitors, if they were injured in front of her."

"Not true," Jamila said with a pout, "I would not heal any Illyrian." She turned to Vaya, "Can I do anything to help?"

Vaya shook her head, then looked over at me. "How many berries do we still have?"

"Enough, but they should use all the other Elements first," I said. "Come on, you all need to eat up." Ming just gave me a questioning look. "The berries. Start with your main Element, then go through the clearing and finish off all but the white ones in the center. You'll know when you're done."

I stood and watched as my friends followed our directions, nomming upon the sweet and Elementally pure berries. After a minute, I moved with Vaya to the center, and we proceeded to pluck every berry we could from it, only leaving a small section for the others to enjoy. *If enjoy is the right word,* I thought to myself.

"I hope we can figure out how to grow these," Vaya said. She took out another of our limited supply of preservation containers, and filled it with the soil around us. "Can you write out what you sense in the Aether around us?"

"Good idea," I said, chagrined. "I should have thought of that." I set down my bag and dug out a notebook. With a thought, I channeled more Aether into my senses meridian, engaging my Divine Senses technique to the utmost. Massive swirls of Aether, always visible to me now, became clearer, both more transparent and easier to see the details of. A whirlpool of every Element, generated and guided by the plants around us, led into the center, where all eight colors blended and shone through, gradually turning white with brilliance. There were a few spots where the whirlpool wasn't quite perfect, and I noticed the plants there produced fewer berries. The locations corresponded to the collapsed pillars, making me believe the columns helped smooth the Aether flow out.

I suddenly knew that the other plants were just as important to the thriving of the Light Berries as the soil around us. The bushes formed a natural Formation, directing and corralling the correct Aether through a massive rune sequence, creating Light Aether out of every other kind.

My hand flew across the page, drawing quickly and clearly everything I saw. One overview sketch followed by individual runes drawn out. *"Sia, lift me up please? I need to see from the top."* I asked in a fit of inspiration.

Massive claws wrapped around my waist, gently lifting me into the air without interfering with my arms. I saw more, the runes driven deep into the soil, twisted around themselves over and over again. In between the plants, every forty-five degrees across the perfect circle I now saw the bushes made, metal spikes had been driven into the ground and covered with dirt. I could see the Inscriptions running down the closest side, each spike a square pyramid. Cords of Aether flowed deep underground, only visible to me due to their intensity and the angle I was looking at. Again, tiny snarls flowed off the cords, showing the effect of the missing pillars.

The complexity was beyond me. I strove to write down everything I saw, every bit of detail I could get onto the pages, even if I had no idea what each part could do. Sia felt synced up with me, flying to and around the edge of the clearing, giving me a good look at each spike and different angles of the massive Formation that allowed these wondrous berries to grow. Finally, he set me down in the center again, and I realized that I was just about out of paper. Off to one side, I saw Ming laying on the ground, surrounded by Jamila, Vaya, Lampart, and Fluffy. Just beyond him, Xiao was being seen to by Bridget, Jon, Kami, and Lea.

"How long was I sketching?" I asked.

"Nearly two hours," Sia said. *"It is good I am still strong enough to carry you all day, though your flapping about did make control difficult. Did you get what you wanted?"*

"Yeah, I think I did," I looked at the notebook. "Maybe with this we'll be able to plant more of the berry bushes. Though we do need to make sure we have enough of each kind."

I went through what we had stored, counting up berries and comparing to the overview drawing I'd made. "Okay, we have three berries to get seeds from for each position in the Formation in addition to what is needed for Aleks, Lilianna, Milena, and Hanna. That should hopefully be enough."

"Berry bushes like this can also grow from cuttings," Lea said from her crouched position nearby. "I can help make some cuttings later. My uncle had a large berry patch on his farm."

"That would be awesome," I said with a grin.

Over the next two hours, we helped the other team fully temper themselves with the Light Raspberries, and then Lea and Vaya made some cuttings of each bush, taking extra from the Light one after determining that it wouldn't hurt the ridiculously valuable item. I looked on with pride, and said, "Hopefully this area will still be around in five years when the Territory opens again."

"Not that we will be able to enter then," Ming said with a grin. "I expect you, at least, will be well on your way to Perfect Core."

"True," I laughed. "But we can instruct the Craesti contingent in the next tournament where it is, and further strengthen the next generation of youth."

"Now what should we do?" Xiao asked.

"Did you all discover the hidden history alcove under a pond?" Vaya asked. A stunned silence responded. She described the location, though without giving away exactly how to get the rewards.

"That one does not have any more rewards," Bridget said.

"The guardian told me there were more, so you all should explore in the opposite direction," I said. "Since they are all between the starting locations. Did you find anything similar to this?" I gestured to the field.

"There was a small orchard of apple trees," Jamila said. "We harvested all of them, though. They did not cause tempering like these berries, but they, uh, work like a natural refilling powder. Eating one after our fight with the Beast guarding them refilled a third of my pool. You can have some." She looked down and blushed, realizing she'd given away some of her team's gains without asking.

"We have over one hundred," Ming said. "How about we give you thirty six, one for each Element of berry eaten?"

"That sounds more than adequate," I said with a laugh. "Not that we expect anything."

"Keeping all of us alive and capable will improve our nation's odds in the coming war," he responded. "We are among the strongest Condensation gatherers, and are the strongest of our age group. I firmly expect we will all be sent to war sooner, rather than later."

I nodded, and Xiao helped pass out apples to all of us. I looked into the sky and the false sun was dipping below the horizon. "Do we want to wait for tomorrow to split? Spend the first part of the night gathering. I feel close to advancing, but it'll probably still be a while."

"Yes," Jamila said exuberantly, then blushed again.

"We should set up a gathering formation," Ming said. "But not here, since we will need to clear away some of the berry bushes."

"Over here," Bridget said from the side of the clearing. "There is enough space between these trees. We will only need to rip up a few of the bushes here."

We all moved to that side, and Sia sent a wave of carefully controlled flame that burnt through every bush in a five meter radius. The Fire was nearly white, it was so hot. "How?" I asked him.

"You practiced combining Air, Fire, and Lightning. I figured out how to make Fire, uh, more. Combining two groups of Fire Element motes together produced this Flame Aether," Sia bragged to me.

"That is awesome! Can you put a third in? Is it hotter than the Plasma I made? What happens if you add Plasma to Fire, or to Flame? So many questions now!" I asked

"You should practice later then," Sia laughed. *"I cannot just give you the answers, now can I?"*

"Fine. Gather with me, once we're ready? I think with your help I might be able to advance tonight," I asked.

"Of course," he said. *"My level is now equal to yours, so you advancing makes me stronger too."*

I sent him a feeling of agreement and thanks. Over the next hour, I helped the rest of the group flatten the dirt in a circle five meters in diameter, barely avoiding the closest tree trunks. Vaya cut off the few limbs of those trees that would have interfered with our Formation, a combination of Wood and Water Aether drying the large branches out to the perfect amount for

a cook fire. We roasted the few bits of Manticore meat we hadn't processed yet, combined with tubers and vegetables that Kami, Lampart, and Lea had found, made a delicious meal shared between friends and allies.

"I wish Lilianna and her team were here," Xiao said wistfully, then immediately went wide eyed.

"Yes, brother, you said that out loud," Ming laughed, sitting extremely close to Lea.

"Ooh, so Lilianna has her hook in you?" Jon asked, grinning deeply. "I guess I will have to inform her of your desire next time we meet."

"You will do no such thing!" Xiao jumped to his feet, before swaying slightly as the effect of the Condensation-tier rice wine they'd shared with our team made themselves known. "I will, I will, tell Bridget what you said about Milenna!" He declared loudly.

Jon winced, looking to his left where Bridget was now glaring at him. "Milenna huh?" She said, her tone icy with wrath.

"You are the most beautiful, capable, and forgiving young woman to ever exist," Jon said hurriedly. "Forgive me for stupid comments made under the influence of too much drink?"

She wrapped her arm around his shoulders with a grin, "Of course." Her biceps tightened, pulling Jon into a sideways chokehold. "Once you have paid the price of course."

Jon struggled a bit, but then relaxed, giving up and letting her smack his head a few times before she pulled him into a kiss. "You can look, but no touching," she told him. "Or else."

"I know," he said. "You are the one for me, forever."

"So sweet," Lea said with a grin, only for Ming to put his arm around her.

Xiao pouted, "Everyone here has a girl but me."

"What about Lilianna?" Lea teased Xiao, "I thought you wanted to catch her?"

"Uh," Xiao said, "Yeah, but I do not think she feels the same."

"Okay, we should spend time gathering now," Ming said, shaking his head at his fickle brother.

"Sia, Zimnodlot, Lampart, any Beasts nearby?" I asked aloud. After a series of negatives, I nodded. "We can all gather. I'll put down some of the alarm Formations we brought. Just in case, but we should all be safe to push as hard as we can towards advancement."

Sixteen Formation plates were set out, eight for the Alarm formation to alert us to any Beast within fifty meters, and eight to contain my Aether from the Beast Core, or Cores, we'd place in the center of the area we'd made.

"Let's push as hard as we can," I said, then held up the Manticore's Core. "Friends, allies, more, we are united in the defense of our home and our world. Together, stronger, united and ready to destroy our enemies."

"Aiden, that," Lea started, unable to continue.

"Yes, a level six Core of a Beast of at least three Elements. All of us are a minimum of a High Affinity with at least one of them. We could sell this for almost a platinum, but I'd rather we all use it now, and emerge from this forest stronger than we've ever been."

"Does everyone have a strong gathering pill?" Ming asked. A chorus of nods answered him. I held one of my Air focused pills, knowing the Beast was focused in that direction, then threw it into my mouth.

Once everyone else had taken their pills, I gently slapped the Core down into the Beast Core Processing Formation. A flood of Aether, Air, Wood, and Earth most prominent, exploded

out of the half-meter square piece of metal with dozens of rune Inscribed on it. I leaped backward to my spot, equidistant across the edge of the artificial clearing from every other person in our combined group. Vaya on my right gave me a tight grin, Jamila on my left a brilliant smile, before I dove into my center and focused on gathering in the massive quantity of Aether the Core had spawned.

The Aether density in our new clearing shot skyward, quickly reaching enough concentration that it rivaled the shattering of the Dungeon Core. Of course, we were all significantly stronger than we were back then. This time, the flood of Aether poured in, dozens of times faster than in the Dungeon. Supported by the pill, my technique, my new sturdiness, and most importantly Sia's mind and willpower, however, I was able to handle it. More than handling, I accepted the Aether and cycled it, pushing through and expanding my meridians.

Pulses shot through me, incrementally increasing the diameter of the channels that controlled and stored my power, each one an experience of pain. I squeezed every tiny fraction of a percentage increase that I could, feeling the free expansion that I had received from the Light Berries. After the first two full cycles all the way to sixty-four times the amount of Aether my meridians could process normally, where they expanded like balloons, stretching outward with the sensation of tearing muscles and stabbing neurons, I grabbed a chunk of Essence. My Core was pulsing with the Essence of the Manticore, the Fuzhu, and every other Beast we'd taken down while here. The Manticore's was the main culprit of my Core being uncomfortably full.

The wash of Essence was excruciating, but not as bad as the pain the Light Berries had put me through. I pushed past it, letting it flow through me and vanish from my mind as I controlled and corralled the Essence through each meridian, keeping it away from my connection to Sia just in case. I watched, amazed and horrified yet again as it basically dissolved my physical and spiritual flesh and then rebuilt it in a continuous wave.

After using Essence, I did another full cycle through Librarian Narwan's technique, then repeated myself. On the fourth round, the Beast Core of the Manticore having been replaced by Xiao with one from a level five Ice and Water Beast, something clicked. *"You are ready to advance,"* Sia told me. *"Do you remember how?"*

"Yeah. Fill up my center, then squeeze as much as I can into my meridians and hold. Hold until the Aether almost explodes through my meridians into the rest of my body," I responded.

"Good. Remember, the more you can push into your meridians, the stronger the initial tempering is, and the better your starting point. Just, be careful. Too much can cause your meridians to break. This will require you to heal them and restart from the beginning of Circulation. I will assist," Sia said.

"No pressure," I said, taking a deep breath.

