

## **Retrieved from the Journal of King Deus IV**

*The Jaandar finally spoke to me. His words amounted to the apparent intelligence of a lunatic, but it would take a much greater fool than I to reflect upon such remarks as false. I should know, I paid dearly for His words. At last, the Warden lies slain, but Envyr disappeared upon his death. And Kasef... now he too is lost. As a king, I fear that I am undone. If only I foresaw the suffering I would bring about with my search for truth; I would have been content to wallow in unknowing for eternity.*

*I cannot bring myself to transcribe what I saw— what He told me. I can only bear to herald this warning to whatever unlucky soul holds this journal at the time the gods' Final Miracle is unleashed upon the earth: run. Scatter your towns and flee. Pray that the judgement of the gods overlooks you. To the Gifted One, I charge you. Nay, I beg this of you: accept your birthright.*

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## **Prologue: A Roar in the Dread Marsh**

"The first rains have at last subsided, and a storm yet nips at our heels."

The man speaking dusted his black cape, revealing the hilt of his sword and the barest hint of his gleaming armor. His heavily browed eyes were trained on the dull, grey clouds massing in the distance over the lonely mountains.

The air was humid, and smelled of smoke and pollen. An electric feel of anxiety permeated through the warrior, who seemed to be talking to himself. He wasn't.

The densely packed leaves and branches of the forest behind the warrior parted to reveal someone new. Heralded only by the crunching snap of twigs and branches, the newcomer strode confidently into the open. The warrior glanced over his shoulder at the man, eyeing the jagged white scar that split the serious mask of his face beneath his hood. His cloak was light and flowing, crafted from spiders' silk darkened to a charcoal grey and marked with golden, archaic symbols around the hem. He bore no weapons, nor did have need of them, the lord knew. He spoke softly, but the warrior still flinched as the mage opened his mouth.

"So it does. 'Tis a storm I fear the realm shall not survive."

The first man swiveled on his feet, so that he could better look at the imposing second figure. Suddenly, his cold, stern facade broke into a slight smirk.

"T'was a remark on the weather, Titus," he snorted, waving away the grim warning with a firm, noncommittal gesture.

"Tis no time to jest, my lord," Archmage Titus Tsuyo rebuked, solemnly folding his hands over the polished buckle of his belt. Gruffly nodding his assent, Lord Richard turned away from Titus and looked now to the vastness of the river valley.

Bodies lay sprawled over the rocks, punctured with spears, axes, swords, arrows, and all other manner of weaponry. They were all dead— rotting in their armor. The sickly-sweet odor of carrion was brought to the lord's nose by a sudden gust of wind, and he stiffened against it.

Even from up on his perch on the ledge over the valley, the flies could be heard swarming over their horrible feast. The men were pale, with deep, fatal gashes cut through their chain-mail, and puncture wounds oozing blood as black as sin onto their breastplates. Horses lay among the men. The great, noble beasts were reduced to mere piles of meat pin-cushioned with arrows and spears. Legs meant to run free would run no more, crushed to a jagged pulp by clubs and maces.

"Of course... Forgive me. I meant no disrespect. Shall we search the wreckage for survivors?"

"No."

"Beg pardon?" Richard gasped at the rejection of customary respect for the soldiers.

"You heard that call from the marshes, no?" Titus queried.

Richard drew his steel from its scabbard halfway with a metallic screech, testing the daunting, black edge with a gloved finger. It was dulled considerably from the recent melee, but it was still

quite usable. "You know damn well that every soul within a league of here heard that noise- that terrible roar," he grumbled, suppressing an involuntary shudder.

"You and I shall go check the source, old friend. We must. I have sent an acquaintance to search for survivors."

An uneasy pause. Then, the seasoned knight put forth an unsteady query: "What do you think it was?"

Titus tore his eyes from the carnage in the valley to study the plume of angry, black smoke streaming from the Dread Marsh. "Lord Richard, pray to every god you know of that the noise we heard was not what I think it is."

As if on a cue, the woods parted once more, and another figure approached. A solemn-looking man with a simple, brown robe held with string pulled out of the forest leaving a trail of muttered curses as the branches clutched at the fabric of that cloak. He pulled his hood back to reveal a tan, leathery expanse of skin under thin, grey hair, smile-lines, and eyes that usually seemed to twinkle like stars through his pouched eyelids. Now, they were dull, bloodshot, and brimming with water.

"Bryn," Lord Richard sighed, relaxing. "You frightened me. Have you found anyone?"

At this, the lines on Bryn's face sagged and deepened as he exhaled, "They were all taken by the time I got to them. They're all dead."

Lord Richard's eyes became hollow, but otherwise he showed no signs of emotion. Lords did not reveal their will— especially not him. So, he defaulted to his most familiar facade: cool fury. After all, it was not idly that this man was coined “Richard the Black”. "Are you sure, Bryn? Nobody at all?"

"No warrior has a beating heart on that cursed stretch of land," spat the priest.

Sparing no more time for the man, Lord Richard sheathed his sword and turned to leave, sweeping his long cloak up with him. Sir Titus followed, hands clasped within the sleeves of his robes, into the dense, green maw of the forest.

Bryn sat on the ridge, and tears filled his eyes as he looked upon the wreckage and destruction of the two armies.

"This did not need to happen, Uriel," he whispered, and took a bundle of cloth out of his robes.

Suddenly, the bundle began to emit soft noises, and a face appeared among the folds. Squirming, wriggling, and crying in that bundle of cloth, soaked in blood from the carnage below, was a small baby: male, with wisps of black down that rolled over its wrinkled, pink forehead.

"They were right. A storm is coming," Bryn choked out to Uriel. "Let us take shelter from the gales."

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## **Chapter 1: Of Knights and Valor**

I open my eyes. My body is tired, but I'm too excited to stay in bed. Raising my arms above my head, I stretch my tiredness away. Above me, as always, is the oak support beam of the cabin. I follow it up the ceiling with my eyes for a bit, chasing the grains of fiber in a never-ending cycle up and down the log, all the while coaxing myself to stay in bed. Was it too early to rise? I thrash restlessly against my covers, hoping beyond hope to restrain myself. No, it can't be so early as to make Papa angry. Abruptly tossing aside my favorite, scratchy wool blanket, I storm down the stairs and across the cabin floor.

When I open up the door with some effort, I run outside, flicking up cold, wet droplets of dew off the grass, and into the increasingly warm sunlight. Shaking with trepidation, I grip the guardrails of the cliff with both hands to look over Mountaintown.

The sun is really bright today, so I squint and hold my hands up to shield my eyes. Huge trees with dark needles shoot up like green arrows into the morning. A dirty path leads from the cabin down to a village nestled snugly into the forest. In a few hours, all of the village people would be clamoring around the central hall to hear Papa talk about the New Gods, and tell stories of the great King Alakai. People always love to talk to Papa, so if I am to get much time with him, it must be early in the morning. Unable to bear the distraction for a moment longer, I step back from the railing.

I try with all of my might to keep up a swift walk. Of course, I fail, and break into a jog. Then, with a burst of energy, I am sprinting as fast as my legs can carry me around to the other side of

the house. My bare feet slip on the grass just as I'm rounding the corner, and I feel a sudden drop in my stomach as I face-plant on the ground.

The pain shocks me and I feel tears well up in my eyes, but I do my best to shake them away as I hug my throbbing knee. I can't cry now, it'd be a distraction! And Papa wouldn't want to see me cry. Knights don't cry. After about a half-minute, the pain fades. I get up onto my feet to look at myself. My pants are soaking in the back, but I'm too excited to care.

I finish the race to the back of the house at record time, and slam headlong, never slowing for an instant, into the robed midriff of Papa Bryn.

I hear him go "Uff!" as I knock the breath out of him and make him stumble backward.

"Papa! Papa! Today's the day!" I squeal excitedly, hugging him as tightly as my arms can muster.

Papa Bryn's twinkling eyes beam down at me over the curve of his big belly as his large, dirty hands gently rough up my shaggy, black hair.

"I must be getting old," he remarks warmly. "What day is it again?"

I let out an exasperated *huff* and back away from Papa to stare up at him, hands on my hips.

"Papa! I'm nine years old today!" I whine, and tug on the sleeve of his big, soft robe.

He laughs his deep, jolly laugh and scoops my body up to hold me above his head and spin me in circles. I end up giggling too as the world turns into a blur of color before my eyes.

"Ah, how could I forget! You only reminded me a hundred times yesterday. I should send you back to bed, impatient little pup!"

I adjust my grip around his neck with my arms and open my mouth in indignation. "Nuh uh!" I protest, outraged. "You only said I had to wait 'till three hours past sunrise!"

Papa just smiles and looks me in the eyes, and I'm forced to smile too. I can never help it when he beams at me that way.

"So what've you been hiding for me this past fortnight?" I ask, biting the inside of my cheek to relieve some of the restless energy flooding throughout my limbs.

"Hiding?" Bryn scratches his chin as he sets me down. "Hm... I have no clue what you're talking about."

"Papa!"

"Do you mean those new pitchforks I got so we can muck the horse stalls together? Surprise!"

"No, I mean that package behind your back!" I whine, dragging at the edge of his robe.



"Oh! You mean this?" He says pulling an oblong object wrapped in white tree bark out of the back of his robes, holding it in his hand for me to see.

*Yes!* With a gasp, I snatch it from him and hop down off his arm to investigate.

"What is it?" I ask him, turning over ideas in my head.

"Why don't you find out for yourself?" Bryn replies, kneeling down to watch me unwrap his gift.

Shaking, I lay it down on the grass, forcing myself to carefully undo the neat wrapping.

Excitement builds up until I think I might explode as I undo the last of it. When I see what is in there, joy wells up irresistibly in my chest, and I get up to squeeze a chuckling Papa Bryn even tighter than before and squeal my endless thanks.

Because, lying there on a nest of wrapping, is a shiny, polished, wooden sword.

It is as long as my arm, and tapers to a blunt point. The blade is even, and there is a long, wide gash down the middle of the blade to keep it light. The hand guard is a simple bar, making the sword look like a cross. It has a ribbed grip that fits both of my hands stacked on top of each other. But the pommel is the best of all.

Shaped like a smooth, wooden triangle, the pommel is inscribed with two golden words, but I can't tell what they are.

"Papa Bryn," I ask, hoisting the precious gift in trembling hands. "What does this say?"

"Why, every knight's blade must bear its knight's name!" exclaims Papa Bryn. "It says *Sir Uriel*."

My cheeks stretch with gratefulness, and I hug him again.

"Uri," Papa announces as he gets up off the ground. His voice is deeper and more commanding now, like it is whenever he is saying something he really wants me to listen to. "You must never forget that this sword is as much a part of you as you are of it. Take care of it and it will take care of you."

I nod excitedly, only kind of listening, and run off back around the cabin. A sword! A real sword! As I sprint away, I swing a couple of times. A trill of delight escapes my lips as the blade *wooshes* through the air. As I'm rounding the corner of the cabin, I hear Papa yell after me,

"And whatever enemies you face, make sure my garden does not become a casualty of war!"

I make a quick mental note not to play near the garden, and then plow open the gate besides the trail. A sword! An actual, real-live knight's sword, all for me! The ache to test it out flares deep within my chest, and tingles down my arms all the way to my fingers. I race frantically down the street leading into the forest, and I see the trees become taller and taller as I gallop across the gravel trail.

Sweating, but still not tired, I circle a small tree menacingly, with my sword in hand.

"Time to pay for your crimes, filthy coward," I spit. And, suddenly, the sapling grows arms and legs, covered in filthy rags and greasy film, with a bag of gold coins clutched in his fist— a robber!

I bravely lunge forward and stab with my sword, only missing by an inch. Luckily, the robber dropped his coins in fright, and went to pick them up, scared as a mouse.

But I'm not scared. I am Sir Uriel, just like my sword says! I transition the stab into a mighty downward strike, slicing through the filth and grime, and knocking him back: vanquished. In his place, the sapling quivers and shakes.

Suddenly, I hear it: the silencing of the birds followed by a rumbling of the gravel at my feet. Then, a sudden noise scares the birds from their nests around me like a clap of thunder across the mountain: the roaring of wheels and horses.

It turns the corner, on the road to my right.

Chestnut mounts, tall as the clouds, strain their muscles as they gallop directly at me, moving at impossible speed. The rumbling of the chariot hurts my ears, and I stand still, like a stone with wobbly legs and wide eyes.

*It's going to hit me*, I realize, and then it's upon me, casting its dark shadow over my head..

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## **Chapter 2: Shadowed Will**

The carriage driver's saggy eyes finally catch onto mine, and shock lights up his face. He yanks the reins to the side with a cry of alarm, and the horses clammer to respond. The carriage creaks and groans as it veers to my right. I see the sky shatter between the branches of the forest as something jerks my body into motion. I twirl like a maple leaf on an autumn wind, and then land chest-first in the ditch. The musty aromas of the earth cloud my nostrils, and the thundering of hooves above my head fills my ears as the carriage rumbles past.

Once the danger races away into the forest, I notice a stinging both hot and cold on my shoulder, and sharp needles shoot up my arm as I look at it.

Tears fill my eyes, blurring the sight of the long, bright red scores along the arm.

This time, I can't stop them; I hardly even slow them down. The world melts away as stinging, hot water floods my eyes, and I am swallowed by the pain. My sobs echo the rhythm in my shoulder, but the shoulder is only a little of the reason for my tears.

I want to go home. I can hardly believe what just happened—I want my head to stop spinning. I want Papa to pull me into his lap and tell me that it will all be ok. How many times had he warned me never to play by the road before? He's going to be so upset with me! A wave of shame washes over me, heating my cheeks as I try and fail to squeeze my eyes around a fresh wave of tears.

Knights don't cry.

After a while, I force the tears back down. What was I crying for anyhow? I wasn't even hurt! If anything I should be grateful that the carriage driver saw me when he did, otherwise I'd have been squished flat. When I prod my shoulder with a tentative hand, I wince at the dull throb that emanates out. It would be sore for quite some time. With some resolve, I wipe a stray bit of cloth over my eyes and nose to rub away the tears and snot still clinging to my face, scolding myself quietly for my weakness.

Once I get a hold of my breath, I walk back up the road and to the cottage, pushing my sword into my belt with trembling, snot-covered fists. I idly clean myself as I walk up the pathway, leaving my head free to think about other stuff. There's no need for me to get into trouble— Papa doesn't need to find out about anything that had happened. It should be easy to come up with a story to tell— maybe I just tripped and fell down? No— I've walked these woods for as long as I can remember. I could walk blindfolded down the mountain and never fear losing my footing. Unless maybe I was running. Maybe that's what I was doing.

When I arrive at the cabin, my heart chills in the face of what I see. In front of the cabin is a white and green carriage, with watery designs splashing the rounded doors. It is shaped like a weirdly squashed, giant loaf of bread. The gleaming, chestnut-colored horses stand pawing at the ground in front of it. "I'm dead," I whisper as my stomach drops to my shoes. "So, very dead." They are tangled in black leather and gleaming steel chains. A long whip lays curled in the driving seat like a sleeping snake. Suddenly, my dread is washed over with a sudden jolt of

curiosity. Just who are these people, who almost kill me and then show up at my home? I rush around to the back of the house, sword at the ready... and almost crash headlong into somebody.

I skirt clumsily to the side and land on my bottom. Again. I can't help but get angry, and I almost say something really naughty, but one look at the girl above me and I think better of it.

Especially when I see the silver leaves of royalty wrapped around her forehead.

"I'm sorry!" I scramble to my feet and bow deeply, feeling my ears turn red and rubbing at my sore buttocks. She giggles in an embarrassed sort of way and covers her mouth with a pale, dainty hand. She looks my age, maybe a little younger.

"Thank you, you're very kind." She recovers from her smirk, and holds out her hand palm down, her fingers naturally arching downward. For a second, I wonder why she was doing that, and then I remember. Wiping my dirty knuckles on my trousers, I shake her hand, just like Papa Bryn said, to be polite.

She looks at me funny. "What was that?" she asks, withdrawing her hand from mine.

"It's... a hand shake, m'lady!" I answer, wrinkling my nose in confusion. Hadn't she heard of a hand shake before?

"Is that how you folks greet each other up here?" She wonders aloud, hiding her shiny teeth behind her palm once more as she giggles.

"Well," I explain, feeling my ears redden beneath my hair. "Papa says that people do it when they say hello, but I guess I've never had to do it before. Whaddya want me to do instead, my lady?" I ask, trying my best to use my best behavior.

"Well," she huffs, calming down from her laughing. "I saw my father greet Princess Agatha by kissing the back of her hand, but maybe that only counts for big princesses."

"You look an awful lot like a princess," I offer shyly.

She smiles again and holds out her hand— sideways this time. But I take it in mine and press it awkwardly to my lips. Quickly, I let go of her hand, and sheepishly scratch some twigs from the back of my hair. "Sorry," I mumble. "That didn't feel quite right."

She just giggles and shakes her head. Then, her tanned brow knits together as she looks at me.

"Have you been crying?"

"Nuh uh!" I retort, rubbing furiously at the corner of my left eye. "I just— a bug flew into my eye is all."

"Both of your eyes are all red and puffy though."

"I... never mind, okay?!" Letting loose a short puff of breath, I glare at a blade of grass to my left to hide the rush of heat that flies to my cheeks.

"What's your name?" I ask to change the subject.

"My name's Lily Nestor of Ocean Province. What is yours?" She answers in a singsong voice. With the grace of a swan, she plucks the hems of her skirt up and extends her knees in a curtsy.

"My name is Uriel of Mountaintown. I'm going to be a knight one day." I brush the smooth pommel of my sword proudly as I answer, and puff out my chest a little. Then, suddenly remembering my manners, I bend into a hasty bow.

"Really? You must be awfully brave."

The compliment hits me in the chest, making me puff out further. I open my mouth to respond, but Lily starts as a rough voice barks out her name from the garden.

"I am sorry Uriel, but I must go. Father is calling, and I'd best not keep him waiting."

"Ok!" I answer as Papa's voice calls for me from the back of the cabin.

"I gotta go too. See you later, Lily!"

And I sprint around to the backyard, where Papa Bryn is standing with another man. I have enough time to see his tall height and long hair before I am met with a solid force in the center of my chest. The hit squeezes the breath from my lungs and knocks me down again.

I try to get up, but a worn, black boot stained with mud steps on the middle of my chest, stopping me. My attacker's dark face hovers over me, and I gasp.



"He is slow, Bryn." The scarred lips above me form the words. The sound is low and scary, like a wolf growling, and I shiver in fear.

"We are going to have to change that."

I risk a second look at my attacker's face. He looks kind of old, but not as old as Papa. His face has a lot of lines on them, and some of them are scars. One of his bushy eyebrows is cut in two by one of those lines. The eye under it is covered by a patch of dark cloth that makes me wonder if he is a pirate from the far south. I don't ask him.

His greyish-blackish hair hangs in a curtain around his head. He gives off a smell like meat left in the sun for too long and raw metal; it makes me want to gag. I am immediately terrified of the man, whom I'd never seen before in my life, who already has me under his boot.

I squirm away and rise to my feet, scrambling backward a couple of steps and gulping at the air.

Papa Bryn walks toward him with a look of scorn on his face, and says, "He is but nine years of age— still a boy! What did you expect on the first day, Isaac?"

Isaac's good eye glares at me as he spits, "More, Bryn. I expected more." Then, he turns and stalks away, leaving a trail of downright nastiness behind him.

"Who was that?" I ask Papa. Emotion roils in my stomach like a storm cloud. Lightning bolts of anger and shame and curiosity flash through me, and it's almost too much to contain.

"That," Papa Bryn wearily replies. "Is your trainer, Sir Isaac. You are destined for great things, Uriel, and your greatness starts today." He grins his most familiar grin with a little too much gusto, and ruffles my hair.

I search for words in my head, but the only thing that I can choke out is,

"I don't think I like him too much."

Papa just grins as we make our way towards the cabin side by side. Then, he turns his head to train his twinkling eyes on my ruffled, dirty clothes. "It looks like the tree bandits were playing rough today, hm?"

I nod sheepishly as the music of his laughter fills my ears.

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### **Chapter 3: Deals With Snakes**

The Warden sat high on the rooftops beneath the shadow of the ancient, withered tower. Aided by the full moon filtering through the narrow slit in his helm, he laid his eyes upon the ancient, broadsword clasped within his fist: Envyr, the Blade of Heroes, Bane of Terror, and for his target, the last thing. Silent, he perched—just another statue upon the walls. Stiller than stone, and quieter than death, his eyes never strayed from their mark upon the cobbled street. He watched,

patiently waiting for the right moment, subduing the fearsome energy crackling up and down his limbs.

The mules rumbled into sight upon the Warden's left, dragging along a wagon of rotted cabbages for the dump heap to the southeast. The armored shadow shook his head, and rose to his feet, perched with the elegance of a cat upon the ledge of the tiled roof. When the time was right, he flew.

For an instant, the wind searing through the steel greathelm drew a tear to his eye, and the shifting momentum inside his body roiled with anticipation before his inevitable landing. The weight of the falling man and his armor should have broken both the Warden and the cart, but the driver never even felt the cart shift under the warrior's weight.

Envyr's pommel made quick work of the driver, cracking across the man's temple with painless precision. His soft gasp was never even heard as his body was thrust from the seat and into the gutter, knocked out cold. A small amount of sympathy for the body sprawled in the excrement lining the street nagged at the Warden, but he dispelled it just as swiftly, donning the driver's ragged, brown cloak about his own armor. After all, now was no time for sentiment.

Thick, lobstered gauntlets now gripped the reigns, urging the oblivious pack mules away from their normal path, down past streets of mud and rivers of filth where the hopeless sat in squalor. Now, the castle walls loomed ahead, guarded by a great, iron portcullis and two Scarlet Cloaks bearing crossbows and sabers. These were very important guards, the Warden knew. They would not be here, at the entrance of this abandoned citadel, by accident. Neither one of them so much

as batted an eye as the hunched, cloaked man driving the mules creaked and rumbled his cart inside.

The tower loomed right ahead, stone made solid from ages past mortared together to form an impenetrable fortress— for a lesser man. The Warden lifted the cloak from his armored form, and fixed his gaze upon the light emitting from the top floor— a hundred cubits straight up. Again, not an issue. The Warden withdrew a longbow and two arrows from the cabbage cart, drew the first arrow, and aimed it at the window.

He took a deep breath and released, relishing the twang of the oiled bowstring as it hurled the arrow high into the night. The spinning, writhing device on the arrowhead clicked into place, biting its metal teeth securely into the stone, far above the ground. He stopped to loop a rope around the next arrow before drawing it back to his cheek. The weight of the bow's pull strained at his back and shoulders, but all of his focus was poured into the tiny, minuscule loop that had been lodged into the windowsill. With a short exhale and the whispering vibration of release, the arrow caught through the loop, creating a secure cord to climb.

Hand over hand, the Warden began the journey upward at a steady, alarmingly fast pace. Before long, the city laid before his vision like a tapestry unfolded, all shadows and stars and candles. Faster and faster the warrior prowled up the building, until he finally swung himself up onto the windowsill. As swift as a summer breeze, he ducked inside the gigantic room. The only witnesses to the Warden's entrance were the ancient murals glaring lifelessly down upon all who set foot beneath their ceiling. Gigantic, golden chains knifed into the walls, supporting a colossal,

ornate chandelier. It was here that the warrior paused, finally settling enough to pay heed to the voices far below.

"No, this is not possible, Arwick! The King would never condone the murder of an entire town to find one boy!" The portly man clad in furs and fine pewter nervously stroked his beard as he spoke.

"This is preposterous! The mere implications of what you suggest would throw the kingdoms into riot!" Another man— devilishly thin with greedy eyes— looked toward the speaker, who was tall and regal looking in his expensive, brown silk cloak, and replied.

"I agree wholeheartedly, my liege, and this leaving out the fact that he is but a child! What harm could he possibly do that scares you so?"

The pale snake of a man sitting at the head of this table snarled and rubbed his bejeweled hands. The target. "My lords Barchau, Pietro, and Marlus: do not act so naive. We all know the threat that this child is to our king. We must act now, before the little brat has the chance to accept his birthright!"

"Is your heart as black and cold as your castle, my lord? Or have you simply had too much of this piss you call wine?" Called the man in furs, knocking aside a goblet filled with said wine.

"We have heard only rumors. The... incident... in the Dread Marsh occurred almost ten years ago,

and our King has been equally silent. Now, out of nowhere, you expect us to believe that he orders us to raze an entire town in search of one boy? You must be sorely mistaken."

"Lord Arwick, there must be a better way!" piped in the man with the shifting eyes. "Perhaps if one knew where the child dwelt?"

"Silence!" roared the serpent, slamming his bejeweled fist into the table.

There was silence.

"You have grown weak and faithless, and we all know our master is not as forgiving as I. I have told you what our King demands: His Grace will never tolerate the Heir living free. We know that the child and the princess both reside in Mountaintown, therefore Mountaintown must fall."

There was more breathless silence.

The lord in silks leaned back in his chair, arching his neck to relieve stiffness accumulated from long hours of pointless discussion. Suddenly, his eyes widened as he caught a glimpse of the man in the chandelier. He parted his lips to shout a warning.

Too late.

The lord could barely utter a choked squeal before the gigantic, metal chandelier crashed down upon him, crumpling him instantly beneath its weight. A storm of gore and glass shards exploded outwards from the mangled ornament, causing the other two lords to snatch their cloaks about

their forms to shield themselves. The candles tipped and scattered, igniting a small, orange conflagration beneath the fallen chandelier.

“Pietro!” bellowed the man in furs, tearing a deadly-looking six sided mace free of its loop.

“He’s here!”

The Warden emerged from the wreckage untouched, drawing the naked steel of Envyr menacingly. Shadows danced across his armor in the dim light of the flame, giving the man a ghostly countenance, but the palms of the Warden’s hands on the sword glowed with heavenly might. This same white light spilled righteously from the gaps of his helmet, and every man in that room felt the impact in their bones as the Sword of Heroes was drawn. The lord in silks hastily plucked a rapier from its sheath, but his hands quaked like autumn leaves as he stood to defend himself. He knew what was coming, as sure as the man in furs did. As Pietro gazed into the blinding fire of the gods, he tried without success to accept his fate. They were finished.

The man in furs had a very different reaction, however. With a defiant howl, Lord Barchau hurled himself across the table to meet his foe, but his foolhardy blow was merely brushed aside. Lashing again with a back-swing, the lord attempted to balance himself. Ducking elegantly beneath the whistling edge of the lord’s mace, the Warden promptly plunged Envyr between Barchau’s fourth and fifth rib— into his beating heart. A ringing roar like thunder soared through the hall, reverberating deafeningly off the walls as the blade and Barchau’s chest collided. The remaining lords winced audibly at the din, and at the heavenly glow spilling from Barchau’s

chest, as bright and immense as a sunrise. Grimacing, the Warden withdrew the sword as Barchau gasped his last, quivering breath.

Now the man with the rapier lunged towards the Warden. The strike was precise, and full of poise, but lacked any real strength; the Warden simply let the blade's energy sink into his armor. With a swift motion of his upper body, the Warden's blade crashed into the hilt of the brittle, thin rapier, shattering the sword into a million pieces in another blinding flash of righteous power. The sound of the traitor's steel skidding across the floor warmed the Warden's heart over the crisp report of his own blade's power.

Lord Marlus stumbled backwards, casting the hilt of his sword aside. His eyes shown with an inner glow, shining a deep, volcanic red as he reached deep within himself. Grasping power from beyond the void. Summoning the courage to utter a Word that was not his own. His jaws parted, and an inhuman sound wrenched itself forth from within the man's gullet. The Warden could not comprehend the sound itself, but every soul within that room heard the meaning echoed within their chests.

*"Back!"*

The dust and rubble at the Lord's feet scattered, soaring through the air in haste. Planks on the floor tore themselves free of their bindings and whizzed by the Warden's face like arrows. Even the air itself raced away from the man with the glowing eyes, and a great wind buffeted the Warden, whose feet remained planted firmly on the ground.



*“Back!”* the Word thundered through the corridor once more, aimed directly at the Warden... and nothing happened. The hilt of Envyr glowed a deep, volcanic red to match the lord’s eyes as the Warden took a step forward into the mage’s storm. The Lord must have been either daft or desperate to invoke a Word of Power against the Warden, but the Warden could not have cared less.

With a savage jerk of the Warden’s upper body and a deafening blast of sonic power, Envyr sent the head of Lord Marlus rolling across the table. The Warden stepped carefully over the body of the twitching, leaking corpse to fix his eyes— finally— upon his true target.

Lord Arwick remained seated, unfazed at the head of the table. His thin lips peeled into a smile, and he rose slowly with his arms spread wide in greeting.

"How rude of me! Did I forget to invite you, Caasi of Kil'desh?"

As the Warden began to stalk closer to his target, he let the tip of his sword drag upon the table. Let the screech of the heavy, two handed blade answer the jeer for him.

"I assume that you've come to kill me, and that means I must've been right about you. You've finally chosen your apprentice. Isn't that right, Dawn Warden?"

A faint burst of annoyance breached the coolness in Caasi's mind as he strode purposefully across the table, speaking not a word. It was no matter that he was correct— this was the foaming of a dying man. When he reached the head of Lord Marlus, a nudge of the Warden’s

steel boot sent the severed head rolling off the side of the table to squish unceremoniously to the floor. Flames danced and swirled within the Warden's eyes, burning with the merciless anger of justice.

"It matters not what happens here tonight. For if you kill me, I have given orders for my men to carry out the wishes of my King. Strike me down, and another will take my place. The child must burn."

This caused the Warden to pause, and finally to speak in a gruff voice. "A bit more work, I suppose. But once they see your head, your men will bow beneath my sword. How easily you forget the meaning of my blade, snake. As you say, I am the Dawn Warden."

"True. I realize that you indeed could do that. Or, I have a different proposition for you, if you were to sheath that cumbersome sword of yours. Let us settle this dispute like gentlemen," the snake offered, gesturing to the chair beside him with a revolting grin.

Ignoring him, the Warden gripped his sword tighter and stalked across the table until he was right in front of the now sweating Lord Arwick. "What do I care for your propositions, Arwick? You are a liar and a traitor." Envyr was level with the lord's neck now, hungering to sever head from shoulders.

"I was afraid that you'd respond in this way," gulped the serpent "Because of this, I have already taken initiative to send a bird to my King explaining the details of the little shit's whereabouts. If you kill me, I shall never be able to stop the message, and the might of the King's Miracle will

wash over the Principalities like a storm. It shall burn a scar into the Province deeper than the Rape of Baelik; even you, with all your power, would not be able to stop it."

Another pause.

"Come now, Caasi, you know that I speak truly."

When the Warden again spoke, it was in a feral snarl nearly as frightening as the bloodstained edge of the sword at his side. "Fine. I shall hear this deal of yours, but that is all I will promise to do. And Envyr remains unsheathed. Now speak, serpent, for your life hangs in the balance."

He licked his lips, and scooted away from the sword's edge before answering. "'Tis simple. If you agree, the boy shall live, and you have my word that I shall never alert the King of his whereabouts."

"And what would you want in return, you traitorous son of a-?"

"Careful now. I believe that there is a seat open on King Maximus's small council, regrettably left so by the disappearance of King Nestor?"

Caasi growled, and tensed his shoulders beneath his armor. "This is true."

The snake smiled, and beckoned with his hand. "Procure it for me, and we shall save the boy."

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## Chapter 4: Training

Three years after I had met Sir Isaac, here I am, climbing a crooked pine tree on his command.

"Higher, boy!" Sir Isaac's voice is bitter and commanding, with feral undertones.

I immediately snap my arm upward despite the burning fatigue pounding against my core. My fingers brush the rough bark of the branch I aim for, and circle it securely. I let out another groan as I muscle my aching body upward, into the depths of the uppermost limbs of the tree.

"Now, pull into position!" The order reaches me and my body reacts automatically.

I raise my body into the shape of a flag, using the tree and my abdominal muscles for support in defiance of gravity. It takes about ten seconds for my body to start screaming in utter agony, but I hold. Out of sheer stubbornness, if I'm honest with myself, I hold. I can't give Isaac the satisfaction of breaking me. I just can't. And yet...

"What does this have to do with swordplay?" I hollar down, quaking like a leaf under the immense strain of gravity.

"It has everything to do with swordplay, fool!" he snarls, slapping the trunk with the flat of his palm. "Control of the body and of the mind is something you must master completely if you ever

hope to master a lance or sword. When you are lancing someone, it is your core that you must use to aim your heavy spear! Strengthen your mind and body. On the field, this could be life or death!"

*Everything is life or death*, I mutter to myself resentfully. The thought becomes a mantra as the screaming in my muscles turns into shaking, and it becomes nearly impossible to keep the position. I turn my focus away from the pain, and into the details of the branch. I see the sticky sap of the tree clinging to my fingers in pale chunks. I spy a red beetle scurrying across the inconsistent terrain of the trunk and into a hole.

But then, a bead of hot, salty sweat drips into my eye, and I lose focus. Muttering a curse and shaking my head to blink away the stinging droplet, I don't have time to see the stick come flying at me from the below.

I feel it though. The projectile finds its mark tip-first into my groin.

A dull urge to vomit springs upward through my stomach, and my grip weakens. Then, I am falling. Another branch catches me in the stomach, and it sends me into a dizzying spiral downward as my lungs heave for a breath. If I could breathe, I would be screaming for pain.

I brace for impact on the earth a moment too late, and as I land on my back, what little breath I had fought for on the way down is forcefully expelled. My lungs wait for air, but my muscles,

having been relieved of their struggle, send waves of pleasure through my limbs and core, as they finally rest.

As soon as my lungs taste their first gulp of air, I notice a flash out of the corner of my eye and another stick comes flying in my direction, away from Sir Isaac. I flinch involuntarily, and it hits my forearms and tumbles to the ground.

But, before I realize that the "stick" was actually my sword, Isaac is running in my direction, with his clothes flapping like flags, his hand grasping his own wooden sword above his head, and his stubbly lips parted in a fierce battle cry.

I force my muscles into motion, and dust clings to the sweat on my tunic like a pasty cloud. I rise, sword in hand, to deliver a fierce stab that would have gutted him like a fish had it landed. But, as it was, he deftly swivels around my attack and catches me under the jaw with a looping underhand blow that knocks me back onto my shoulder blades and blasts my eyesight into a red haze.

Gasping, I just manage to raise my blade across my chest before Isaac is above me, with his strange scent clouding my nostrils and the tip of his blade lightly pressed against my Adam's apple.

He coughs out a mirthless snort, and withdraws to let me stagger to my feet like a drunken man, fresh bruises thumping all over my body. Anger floods my vision in a black mist for a moment, or maybe I am just close to passing out.

Isaac draws his hand to his hip and idly picks at the hem of his trousers as he remarks, "Better, but you are still weak. You should have dodged that stick in the tree like I taught you to, and your stab wouldn't have hit the side of a house, but at least you managed to grab your damn weapon when you fell, and you lasted about a minute this time before I knocked you out of the tree."

A furious retort selected from words of forbidden vocabulary springs to my lips, but I bite my tongue and look away.

"You are to put on the chain mail today, as you make your laps around the course. And make it snappy, I must run a few errands in town later on."

For an instant, curiosity pokes its head up from my stomach, but I of all people know better than to question the motives of Isaac.

As I turn away to drag myself toward the shed, I hear him holler, "And, if you're to improve at all, you must move your ass a little faster! My mother has more life in her, gods rest her soul!"

I make half an effort to move faster, and stumble. My legs burn as they catch themselves, and I wonder how I'm going to make it around the course.

The musk of rotting wood stabs into my nostrils as I step into the gloom of the shed. As my eyes adjust to the dim light, I drag my weary shell over to the dirty links of metal mocking me from the hook on the wall. I grasp a cold length of the heavy folds, and exhale—defeated.

Then, I loop my arm through the corresponding hole in the hauberk, and slide my grimy head into the other armhole, before realizing my mistake and correcting it. Once it is on, I secure it around my waist with a thick leather belt.

Perhaps once I had thought that the armor of a knight was something romantically beautiful. One couldn't have a knight without shining armor, after all! But, that was before I first tried on these links—these cold, crushingly heavy shackles.

My legs are shaking considerably now, just standing up has now become a strenuous task. But, I breathe another sigh, straining my shoulders as my lungs struggle against the metal on my back, and head outside to the course.

The course is roughly an oval shaped path that is about a quarter mile in circumference, and peppered with various obstacles. With spinning turbines armed with wooden sticks, ropes to climb, deep pits to watch for, and bars to hurdle or duck under... It actually would have been considered fun if Isaac didn't throw things at me the whole while I was running it, and yell at me to move faster.



The rule was, if Isaac hit me with a stick or stone, I had to do another lap. It used to take me going eight or nine times before I missed my mid-day meal, whereas I was only required to do one lap.

Usually, this isn't a problem anymore, and I stick to around three laps, but now that I'm wearing chain mail... I'm not so sure.

I take my mark, tentatively placing my hand to my belt and adjusting it higher, so that the links of metal hang around my thighs instead of my knees.

Sir Isaac sits astride his ancient mare, with a bundle of sticks and stones in his hand. He tosses me a round disk of glazed planks and a metal rim.

A shield. Great— more baggage. The belt slides lower, and the metal links tinkle maliciously over my kneecaps. I loop an arm through the leather straps, and my bicep wails in agony as I attempt to hold the disk at waist height.

Suddenly, Isaac whoops and throws a spear of wood my way, spurring his mount into motion. I manage to duck under it, and I take my first step forward into a frenzy of motion across the dusty track. I keep my eye on the figure galloping across the track ahead of me, watching for obstructions with my peripheral vision.

Just when I think I can't possibly take another step, I hit my second wind of energy. I push a little more, savoring the cool, sweet wind against my brow, as I plow forward. The air hisses to my

left, and I turn to deflect another projectile with the rim of the shield. "Faster, you worthless lump!"

The shock ripples across my torso, and I turn to keep going. I have to keep going. I clear the first obstacle with ease, dodging in between the pits and holes in the road. A stone whizzes in my direction, but it is off its mark, so I ignore it. It soars off to my right.

The spinning wheels come to meet me, whirring and clicking at high speed. I knock away one bar with my forearm, leaving my shield arm bent across my torso to guard me against more missiles. The chain mail rattles as it absorbs the shock. I step to my left and bunch my legs to leap over a bar at my feet, but the armor on my back pulls me back to earth faster than I anticipate and I end up landing on the bar, which sweeps my feet out from beneath me.

Just as well too, because a stone flies into the space where my head was just a moment before I begin to fall. "Weakling! At least make this interesting!"

The ground rushes up to meet me, but I loosen my body, and tuck my head to my chest. My shoulder absorbs the impact with a shock, and I drop my shield, but I successfully transfer my momentum into a roll.

I clear the obstacle as I rush forward to the part I had been most dreading— the climbing rope. The dangling length of cord whips to the side as a stick hits it, and I jump to meet it. I feel a

sickening crack as my wrist explodes with my weight and the chain mail, but I grunt and pull myself upward in the twenty-cubit climb.

About halfway up, a stone flies in my direction, so I kick outward towards the wall, and swing outward into the wind, away from the small, grey object. "Put your back into it!"

I muscle my way upward slowly, in defiance of every nerve in my body screaming to let go.

When I get to the top, I've expelled most of my energy, but the finish is almost in sight. "Boy! I told you to run!"

I only have the hurdles yet. I duck another stick, and fly on winged feet towards the hurdle. I clear the first unsteadily, and look to my right. Isaac is riding up, arm cocked back with a stone, so I hit the brakes.

The stone comes flying in front of me, and snaps apart one of the hurdles, so I step over it and keep moving. I take a chance with the last hurdle and duck under. Sure enough, the next stone goes flying over my head. My energy is fading fast, and I worry if I'll make it to the finish. But, just out of sheer muscle memory, my legs propel me over the line, and I immediately collapse onto my back. I was not hit. Not once.

Sir Isaac trots up beside me, appraises my heaving form, plastered to the earth, and drops a stone on my chest. As he speaks, I cough out a weary groan. "I'm not done with you. How do you perform a two-handed counter?"

"You asked me this same question yesterday!"

"I did not ask you to refute me, child."

"Against an opponent who is bigger and faster, when you are both armed with broadswords," I recite, pushing the rock from my chest with a hand shivering in fatigue. "Catch an up-down blow on your crossguard, and swing your blade up across the flat of his. When he shoves into you, follow, and push the tip of his blade into the dirt."

"Then?" Isaac prompts, crossing his arms across his lanky chest.

"Then switch your grip on the sword and catch him with an upstroke."

He nods in agreement, and then asks, "And why must you never use this move?"

"Because it leaves the chest and stomach open, the blades can slip, and the floor is not always dirt or soil," I deadpan.

"And?"

"And because you said so, Sir Isaac," I sigh, shaking my head.

"Good." As he turns his mare about, I think I can see the hint of a smile playing across his lips.

"Now go name that gods-damned colt of yours."

In response, I roll over and groan once more.

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## **Chapter 5: The River**

After an eternity of lying on the grass, letting the wind tease my dirt-streaked hair, I pry my aching body from the ground. I feel a rush of heat as blood flows back into my body in correct proportions. My immediate reaction is to note the weight of the chain, still on my back. So, after a lot of straining, grumbling, and hairs yanked from my head, I hold the accursed armor in my hands. The greasy links jangle maliciously at me as I stumble back to the shed and replace them on the hooks.

I shiver, cold against the crisp, autumn wind. My sweat-soaked tunic sticks to my body like its very existence depends on clinging to me, but I finally manage to tear that off too, and I stand half bare in the sweet, cool breeze.

Then, I stumble across to the branch where I had strung the upstart, black colt Isaac had charged me to train. He glares at me with a rueful, mischievous eye as I approach, prancing defiantly around the tree.

The colt had been gifted to Isaac, described as one of the worst-behaved foals the rancher had ever seen. I'd have to agree. Only after two years had he stopped biting and kicking me every time I approached him. More than once, I had wanted to drive an arrow through its eye, but Isaac

had insisted that I maintain my care for the stubborn mule. Now, after hours upon hours spent in the horse barn, I've become fairly comfortable around him, and him with me. The only problem is he positively refuses to be ridden, and therefore cannot be named lawfully named before the eyes of the gods.

"What do you think?" I ask, keeping my voice and eyes low as I cautiously approach. "Is today the day you'll finally let me ride you?"

His only response is to nicker and rub his nose on my arm, leaving a slick trail of horse-snot. Scolding him gently, I wipe the extra grime from my arm and flick it to the dust. Then, gripping the bleached leather horn at his back, I rip my leg from the earth and wrestle my foot into the stirrup. I center myself, gather my energy, and push myself onto the horse with an almighty heave. He gives a short, disapproving bray, and immediately bucks. For a second time, the wind flees my lungs, and my shoulder blades crack down to earth. "Blasted jackass," I curse beneath my breath as I stand and dust myself off, but I can't say that I'm surprised at the colt's reaction. I grip the reins and prepare to walk the beast back up the hill.

The trip back to the house is spent savoring the steady wind at my back, carrying the scent of apples from the orchards to the south, and keeping the colt from stopping every four paces. When the sight of my sturdy, polished wood house swims into view, my legs have almost returned to normal, but the nagging feeling of filth combined with a parching, simmering thirst keep me from complete comfort. So, I pull off the beaten path and to my favorite spot, by the old willow tree that runs by the mountain creek.

It isn't much to speak of, just a small clearing carpeted in brownish grass with an ancient, withered willow tree that hangs over a runoff of swift mountain water. However, this is the spot I go to whenever I get the chance, because it is full of genuine peace. The flowing mantra of the river calms my mind and relaxes my body, and if I come at dusk, the sunset showers the towering mountain that this place is set upon in an ethereal, red glow.

But, as it were, the sun is a ball of fire above my head, casting the world in bold light. I tie off the colt to an overhanging branch, and promptly ooze to my backside. Then, blowing a stream of relief through my nostrils, I crawl down by the edge of the water and submerge my head into the dazzling cold. I inhale vast quantities, savoring the clear, clean taste that floats down my throat. Then, I rub my hands through my hair and across my face, releasing layers of dirt and grime to be carried downstream.

Once I am finished, I take a good look at the quivering reflection, willing the water to soften and become clear. First, my jaw comes into view, sharp and angular. Then, I can make out my nose. My hair is plastered to my head as of right now. Once it dries, it will return to the wavy, black locks I am accustomed to seeing in my reflection. I look at my eyes last, and my reflection's eyes shine hazel at me, with golden flecks around the pupils. Utterly ordinary. Something sad creeps into my stomach, and my reflection frowns.

Suddenly, I am fully submerged. The river swiftly steals my body heat and makes me shiver. Struggling to retain my air, and planting my feet against the current, I rise to take a breath. As soon as I breach the surface, a flash of gleaming gold crosses my face, and a force hits me in the

stomach like a cannonball. I submerge again. Suddenly, I know who it is. Bubbles tickle my face as I struggle to regain my balance and smile to myself.

*Damn you, Lily!*

I reach around with my arms and find the vertical trunk of her leg. Then, I bend my knees into a powerful coil, and release against the mud, springing into my assailant and throwing her over my shoulder like a sack of potatoes. A shower of droplets turn the world into a kaleidoscope of fiery color and a mist like a child's dream hangs across the sky.

Then Lily's indignant cry of "Lemme go!" can be heard, as she playfully beats on my back with her fists.

"If that is what you wish!" I reply joyously, and toss her off my shoulder into the river. She resurfaces and I finally catch a good look at her.

The first thing one notices looking at Lily of Ocean Province is her eyes. They shine like fire caught inside twin sapphires, deeper blue than the sky in summertime. Then, there is her hair, which cascades down her shoulders in wavy, dark, golden locks, that shine through with streaks of white, from time spent in the sun. Her face is elegantly tanned, and her nose is small, but somehow dignified. Her mouth, sheathed in petite, pink lips, is currently growling at me in tandem with her eyebrows which are just a shade darker than her hair.



"Oh, piss on you, Uri!" She kicks at the water, sending a jet into my face. I laugh, and wipe my eyes clear.

"Well you're the one who kicked me into the stream, you ninny!"

At that, she doubles over in mirth, clutching her sides for support.

"Ninny?" She finally chokes out.

"It's the first thing I thought of!" I grumble, indignantly splashing at her.

"How adorable!" She remarks sarcastically. Then, she prances in a quick circle, hiking up her worn, brown housedress to mock me. "'In the name of the King, lay down your weapons, you ninnies!' Oh how your enemies will quake and run from you, Sir Uriel!"

"Fine. I could call you a base, filthy wench if that so pleases you, *princess*." I bow for emphasis, and to hide the smile on my face. I am met with another jet of sparkling cold in my face. Some gets up my nose, leaving a slight measure of discomfort. I stagger backward, blinking to get rid of the sensation.

Lily mockingly snickers and then straightens out her face in a dark stare. *I've touched a nerve*, I think with glee rising irresistibly in my chest.

"What's the matter, princess?"

"I told you not to call me that!" she warns, reddening at the ears.

"But princess, it's the truth! Your mom's a queen and your dad's a king, so that makes you a pretty, pretty princess!" I snicker, lowering my stance in preparation to flee.

"Say it once more and see where it gets you," she growls, hiking up the sleeves on her dress with white fists.

"My apologies... princess,"

"That's it!"

Before she can get a gain on me, I turn around and clamber onto the bank, dashing through the curtains of the weeping willow.

Muttering incomprehensibly, Lily is in hot pursuit behind me. I skid to a stop and turn around to dodge around her and into freedom, but my foot catches a gnarled root sticking out of the ground, and I land in the soft grass. Then, Lily falls on top of me. My lungs painfully collapse as she lands on them, and her face looms over mine. Curtains of her wet, shadowy blonde hair fall around my vision, and her scent hangs around me. It is sweet, but wild too, like a meadow of strawberries after a thunderstorm. Her bright, unnervingly cerulean eyes bore into mine as she catches her breath and immediately starts smiling. I am smiling too, but I don't know why.

She rises to her feet and tries to stifle a rising laugh, but fails, snorting and reddening her face.

"What's so funny?" I inquire, trying to act serious.

"You are such an *idiot*!" She finally manages to say.

"As you've told me many times, Lily," I concede, wearily rolling my eyes. I knew better than to push the point with her. Suddenly, she starts blushing, and hides her face behind her hair.

Confusion traces winding paths along my torso, and I open my mouth to pry for more answers, but before I can speak, there is a great noise from far below, explosive and vocal. Then, a horn reverberates up and down the sides of the mountain.

"That's the third time this morning that this has happened!" whines Lily, grating at her ears.

"What the bloody hell do you reckon those folks in Mountaintown are up to?"

"Probably not swearing as foul as you, Lily!" I mock, trying to ignore the mounting tension in my stomach. "Papa will have your hide if he hears you speak like that!"

"Oh! That's what I forgot to tell you. Papa wants a game of chess," she grins devilishly, as she lays down on the soft grass.

Sighing, I roll into the dazzling sun to dry off. "He can wait a while, can he not?"

"Nope!" she cheerfully replies. "He said to make haste!" Groaning, I throw my arm over my eyes to blot the sun from my gaze. *Great*, I say to myself. *Chess*.

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## **Chapter 6: The Blood of Knights**

"Focus, Uriel!" The gentle chide reaches me as Papa Bryn deftly slides his rook across the board to seize my bishop. "Chess is what separates an average soldier from a true knight."

"You said that about courtmanship, reading, dancing, and writing, Papa," I dully remark as I fondle the rounded head of a pawn I had previously taken.

"Yes, but chess decides what type of leader you are, in the courtroom and on the battlefield. Check."

I groan as I see that my king is in danger, and move a knight to intercede the path of the rook.

With finality, Papa slips the black queen across the board to steal the knight, placing me in checkmate.

"You should have moved your queen. Then you could've taken my rook and gotten out of that corner."

"I know, I know," I reply dismissively.

Papa frowns, and cocks his tan, bald head to the side to peer at me. "So. I think it's time we had a talk."

Startled, I look away from him, burning a hole in the black queen with my eyes and biting my tongue.

"Come now. That was the worst game of chess that you've played all week, and don't think I haven't noticed how reclusive you've been lately. You must give voice to your thoughts and see them heard."

"Papa, I don't know if you would understand-"

"Understand? Pah! I don't pretend to understand your workings, boy. That being said, there is nothing in this world that you could say that would make me stop loving you. So please tell me, and let me help you if I can, out of this same love."

Remorse instantly floods into me, and I reconnect my eyes to Papa's big, caring gaze. He has done nothing but show me warmth and kindness, and yet here I sit, clammed up like a toddler who hasn't gotten his way. So, letting my vision fall again on the ivory chess pieces, I attempt to gather the words to describe my predicament.

"I— I think that I need to hear the story now."

His smile beams down on me like sunshine as he replies. "Oh! I realize that I have not told you a tale in quite a while, what with your training and everything, but I shall do so now if you wish. Which story do you wish to hear?"

"I wish to hear the story of my birth. I want to know about my parents."

Something dark flashes across his vision, and his voice is melancholy when it brushes my ears.

"And why do you wish to know about them? Have I not raised you like my own son?"

Instantly, I reach across the table to grab his hand. "Bryn, you have been my father in all but blood for as long as I can remember. I shall never be able to tell you how thankful I am for you. It is not for lack of love that I ask, so strike the thought from your mind."

"Then I repeat. Why do you wish to hear? It is a very sad story, and I do not know if you are ready to hold the knowledge."

A spirit of frustration races into my palm, slapping it upon the table. "Because I can feel it, Papa. Whenever I gaze upon myself, I can see that I do not belong. I need to know, so that I can be sure that my blood is the blood of knights, and this is not all for naught."

Bryn pauses for a second, stroking his grey, pointed beard with one hand. Then, his eyes light up and he looks at me with full force. "Uriel, tell me again why it is you want to be a knight."

Instantly, I get the thrill of joy that dances along my stomach whenever I imagine being a knight. I imagine the stories that will be told to future generations about the brave, daring deeds of Sir Uriel. I can taste the sweet flavor of the honor that comes with knighthood, and the respect that comes with being best of the best— for only the best are anointed with oil and knighted by the

king's own sword. These thoughts swirl in my head, along with the applause of the masses as that sword touches my shoulders.

"I want my name to be written in history, not a tombstone," I reply, with some difficulty. "I want to be different and useful. I... I want to be a hero."

"I see. What if I told you that not all heroes were of noble blood? That some heroes, the best, at that, were completely common-born?"

My mouth gapes open and useless, not knowing what to say.

"See here, blood makes things easy, because that is the way things are. Some people have friends in high places, and have their futures set before them on a silver platter. But if you look at all the heroes of old, they all proved their worth in deed, and it was their people who raised them up. That is the way I would prepare you for. I want you to forge your own path, write your own story.

"You are still young, and may not yet understand, but know this. The harder it is for you to rise, the sweeter the taste of victory shall be on your tongue when you defy the odds. It is not up to your lineage to decide who you become, and I believe that with all of my heart."

I pause, soaking through the words. Then, I shake my head and exhale, letting relief and pride beam in my chest. Papa always knows what to say to lighten my mood, but the question still lingers in my head.

He smiles, seeing the change in my demeanor. "My boy, one day you shall know everything I do and more. There are so many great things planned for you in your future... but you shall be able to experience none of them if you don't do your chores! Off with you, boy."

I sigh, and begin arranging the pieces on the table. *Chores. Why must all good things end with chores?* I wonder, exasperated but still beaming. "Papa?"

He turns back around, from the doorway he had walked through. "What is it?"

"I love you."

"I love you too."

*Tomorrow*, I conclude, tidying up the chessboard with deft hands. *I shall ask him again tomorrow.*

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## **Chapter 7: Tales by Firelight**

I lie in bed, chasing those fibers in the oaken log for what seems like an eternity. No sleep comes—the night is too alive. Downstairs, the tantalizing murmurs of conversation tug insistently at my ears, and my body is shot through with a heady mixture of soreness from the day's labors and a restless energy stemming from the silver light filtering through my window.



I toss in my bed, and every lump seems to dig into my back. I flip one way and the light from the moon fills my eyes. I throw the covers over my head, but they are too warm. Even my wool blanket is no comfort to me. Frustration gnaws at my stomach, and finally I fire upright in my bed, huffing in anger with the resolution to fetch a glass of cold water prominent in my mind.

The stairs creak softly as I make my way down them, and to my surprise, I find Isaac and Bryn conversing softly by the fire. Isaac seems angry with Papa for some reason, hissing sharply at him while his gaunt form paces the floor. Bryn reclines, sipping quietly and letting the quipped jibes wash over his face in the same manner as the firelight softly playing across his round features. I can't hear what they're saying though.

Praying to be as quiet as a mouse, I slip across the floor behind the counter in the kitchen, and am immediately tugged down by a soft hand at my wrist. Lily's magically blue eyes beckon reflectively to me, alight with impish frustration at my sudden appearance.

"What are they saying?" I ask, barely moving my lips.

"I don't know. Shut up!"

And so I do, straining my ears against the pounding of blood and the cackling of the fireplace to capture Isaac's gravelly growl to no avail. Suddenly, Lily lets out a soft sneeze, and before I can withdraw my head behind the counter, Isaac's wolfish eyes snap onto mine and freeze me into place.

"Uriel, what the hell are you doing down here?"

Fear takes hold of my limbs at the ferocity of his stare, and my face tingles softly as the blood there flees. "I-I-I wanted to get some water," I stammer.

"Do not lie to me. You were hiding back there boy. You too, Lily."

Instantly, she stiffens at my side, and rises slowly, quaking as she pokes her blonde hair above the stone countertop.

"What were the two of you doing," Bryn sighs, beckoning the two of us toward the hearth. His crinkled brown robes hang overtop his body as he gives us each an exasperated half-smile.

"Couldn't sleep," Lily answers, and Isaac huffs at the inadequacy of our eavesdropping.

"We're sorry," I quickly amend, grabbing Lily's hand and taking a hurried step back. "We'll go to bed now."

"No, wait," Papa beckons to a spot on the floor as he speaks. "The two of you will never sleep as riled up as you are," he pauses to shoot Isaac a reproving glare, to which Isaac snorts and seats himself, shaking his ragged head.

"I will tell you each a story to help rest your minds. For the first, though, I must ask you a question: what do the two of you know about the Fellowship of the Lions?" He smirks a little as he draws to our minds the famed warriors.

"They are a band of warriors set in place by the line of Alakai to protect the Middle Kingdom from the barbarian tribes of the Hoarfrost Mountains," I dutifully recite.

"You're right!" exclaims Bryn, clapping his hands. "And Lily, can you tell me the most notable of these defenders of Castellan?"

She scratches her head as she ponders, and then replies. "Well, there's the Stormborn Twins, Lumere and Rumere, there's the Eagle-eye, Tesha, and then Daniel the Lion," she finishes proudly, allowing herself a satisfied nod.

"Nuh uh!" I leap to my feet. "How could you mess up David's name, Lily?! He's only the best knight in all of the kingdoms! He's *David* the Lion."

"Uriel, hush," quips Bryn, causing me to sink, cheeks simmering, to my backside and Lily to stick her tongue out at me in a very un-princess-like manner.

"You're right though, Uriel. David the Lion is the hero of our first tale." I can't help but feel Isaac's presence darken slightly as Bryn says this, causing me to shrink slowly away toward Lily.

"Once upon a dark eve, the Barbarian tribe of Chat'thakka crouched among the muck and mire of the Dread Marsh. They had a plan, you see, to steal the food from Mountaintown's orchards to feed their own.

"Our hero David stood atop the cliff with Lord Richard the Black and Archmage Titus, Master of Seven, with hundreds of lethal soldiers at his back making camp in the valley. He had brought

his wife, Ella, who is as beautiful as the stars above the heavens. They were inseparable, the two of them, and madly in love with one another. Alas, little did David know that the barbarians had crept behind his ranks under the guise of dusk, until they attacked.

“As the two forces clashed, great feats of magic were spun through the air. Some say that the dragons rolled in their earthen graves at the thunder of this fight. The knights of the realm fought bravely, and repelled the barbarians, but the cost was heavy.

"David walked among the dead and dying, and some say that he wept at the sight of his brothers, gutted dead into the ground. He then came to the spot where Ella— his lovely Ella— lay cold and unseeing.”

Bryn paused to observe our enraptured faces with a devious smile, daring us to speak out and break our patience. The image of the godly knight, lofty and strong, coming upon the corpse that was his bride makes me shiver as it works its way into my mind. I envision Ella’s twisted mouth, still shaped around a word she would never finish. I imagine how the world stops as the hero’s eyes fall upon the tragedy. I can hear the scrape of steel on stone as his sword falls from a shaking fist.

"He cried out so loudly then that it echoed across the continent of Malechon, from the sandy palaces of Kil'desh to the Giant Fortresses in the far north. It is said that David’s heart broke so fiercely that in that instant he unlocked a Word of Power within himself. Every barbarian who heard wept and fled, for fear of David's vengeance.

"After the battle was over, he simply walked away. From that day forward, no letter or rider could reach him in his forest stronghold, and the barbarians have not taken so much as a step out of their mountains again."

"Papa!" huffs Lily, "That's a terrible story! Where's the happy ever after?!"

"Hey!" I retort, leaping to Papa's defense. "Not every story needs a happy ending!"

"All the good ones do," she grumbles, crossing her arms and pouting.

"Happy is hard, little one," Papa smiles softly, caressing her face with his big, calloused hand. "I hope that you will find happiness one day as I did with the both of you."

"What's a Word of Power?" I ask, tasting the electrifying phrase for the first time. Lily scoffs and rolls her eyes at my ignorance, and I do my very best not to stick my tongue out at her. I almost succeed.

"Uriel," warns Bryn. "Mind your manners."

"Yah, Uriel" echoes Lily, grinning like a cat with a belly full of milk. "Mind your manners."

It is all I can do to grind my teeth behind a polite smile and bow in apology. "Papa, what do you mean, though?"

Bryn pauses a moment, searching for an adequate response. "Well," he begins, folding his hands over his belly. "You know that when the gods speak, the world must obey them. Every tree,

every rock, every person, every action, every idea... everything obeys the gods. When a man speaks the name of something in the language of the gods, he has invoked a Word of Power. And, just like for the gods, the world obeys his Word."

"Bryn," grumbles Isaac, shifting in his seat. "These children need sleep."

"Let them be, Isaac. They are old enough now to stay awake for another few minutes. Now, onto my next tale!" Brynn claps his hands and beams at the two of us sitting beneath him. Pride traces lines down his face at every facet. I feel an overwhelming sense of security looking into Brynn's face, like the world could go mad and that smile would never change for me. I smile back in earnest, thirsting in silence for his next tale. Wasting no more breath, Bryn begins his story.

"Now, I shall impart unto you the tale of the Dawn Warden."

"Bryn," growls Isaac, a hint of warning in his eye. Papa shakes his head, and Isaac slumps back into his chair, rubbing his temples to soothe his frustration.

"It all began long ago when the kingdoms were young. King Alakai was growing old on his throne, and knew that it was time to pass on the rule of the kingdoms to his sons. To his eldest he bestowed the western part of the south ocean and the choicest portion of land along the coast, which became Ocean Province. His second son was given the Northwest, which became the Principalities. His third was given the North Kingdom, which has remained all these ages. His fourth was given the territory which in that day was called *Sylvathia*, which fell to plague and anarchy in the third dynasty. Where it used to be is the Blood Plains and the Wolfswood, as far up as the Watering Hole in the Eastern Moors. His fifth was given *Baelik*, which was in the midst

of a revolution when the mountainous tribes gathered and crushed them all in the Rape of Baelik. They are the Barbaric Mine Lands today. His sixth received the Middle Kingdom, which had in those days included all of the land east of the River Castellan."

I let loose a sigh of ragged exasperation. "Papa, you have told me this story before!"

Bryn winks patiently at me then and replies, "Ah, my boy. But I have never told you about Alakai's seventh son."

This causes both Lily and I to jolt upright and me to spew my confusion into the air. "What? You told us he had only six!"

"And he did. Six legitimate children. Alakai had not always been faithful to his wife, and gathered a base-born child from one of the serving girls in his palace. He had named the child Kil'dar, and raised him away from his wife's eyes."

My jaw drops at this, truthfully and utterly cowed into silence. *Alakai, the hero of the Kingdoms... unfaithful?*

"Now, when the time came to divide his kingdom, Alakai consulted the gods' prophet— the Jaandar— who gave him very specific instructions. In an ancient ritual beneath the great Bloodwood Tree, the prophet bound the life of Alakai to his sword: the Sword of Dawn, Envyr. After this, the old king took that sword and gave it to Kil'dar, telling him these exact words.

*Take my sword. You are now the Warden of the kingdoms I have failed.*

*The sole Star to burn against the night.*

*Do not burn out, lest the realm perish in your wake."*

"That all sounds very nice and all, but what does that mean?" Lily impatiently demands, scooting closer to Papa Bryn on the polished surface of the Maplewood floor.

"Kil'dar was now the Dawn Warden. With the King's sword, he had the power to dispense justice as he saw fit over *all* kingdoms— to be a law unto himself. Words of Power will never touch one holding the Sword of Dawn, and so the Dawn Warden need not bow to the power of magic. With the Blade of Heroes, he took it upon himself to answer the call of the people. With the blessing of the Jaandar, he took upon himself responsibility to fulfill the prophecies and will of the gods. The Dawn Warden takes upon himself the mantle of Alakai the Hero— to be the rule of justice against which Royalty must bow."

"But, that's not very fair!" I protest, leaping to my feet once more. "I mean, what if he was a bad person? He could go around doing as he pleased with nobody to stop him!"

"Ah, but child! This was the exact reason he was given the sword. What if a *king* stepped out of line? What if he was unfair or unjust to his people? The Dawn Warden is the people's' protector, bound by life-oath and ancient magic to serve his people. However, you are correct— no king likes to have a ruler. So, the legend goes that in Kil'dar's later years, Kil'dar's half-brothers



forged a sword fabled to rival the power of Envyr: The Twilight Blade, Kasef. Then, in an act of foul treachery, they slew their half-brother to become truly free. But Kil'dar had trained an apprentice, and passed Envyr down to the apprentice in the same manner his father did unto him."

"So was the new Dawn Warden ever caught and killed?"

"Time and time again! That is why it has always been important for the Dawn Warden to pass on his skills and sword to an apprentice. The Dawn Warden is a friend to all and enemy of all, running forever from kings and saving their subjects from tyranny."

"What about the other kings?" I wonder aloud, tugging my legs up to my chest. "And their sword, Kasef?"

"Each of the sons laid claim to Kasef and squabbled over it to their last breaths. That sword was the object of every king's interest for generations," sniped Bryn, spitting over his shoulder. "No fewer than six wars have been fought over possession of the Twilight Blade. The last known wielder of Kasef was King Deus IV of the North Kingdom, over four hundred years ago. Nobody has seen the blade since, or heard of its whereabouts. Some wonder if it ever even existed."

"Awesome!" gawked Lily, "What about the Dawn Warden now? Where is he these days?"

"That's enough, children." Isaac's cold voice rings out from behind us. "Straight to bed, the both of you!"

We look to Papa, and he shrugs, overridden. Lily and I spare a quick look to one another, and then scurry off to our respective rooms.

My head spins as I sit down upon my bed, filled with new thoughts to chase each other around my skull. *I don't think I'll get any sleep tonight*, I have time to tell myself, before the softness of my pillow overtakes me and I plunge into slumber.

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## **Chapter 8: Ashes**

*In the meadow*

*The wavy green sways to a mountain breeze, and pollen dances in the wind.*

*Twilight falls*

*The stars watch over me from above*

*'Danger!' they whisper in their unknowable tongues. 'Run—find your birthright!'*

*A sudden shadow casts the stars into silence*

*Great, powerful*

*Wings flay the very sky*

*Its head, oh its head!*

*Terrible, scarred*

*Armored in scales blacker than despair.*

*An evil, slit eye pries bare my soul to its infinite hatred.*

*Its maw splits, and its screech I hear within my spine.*

*I tremble, willing myself to flee, to obey my most basic, animal instinct*

*I cannot run.*

*A spark of light appears in the back of the beast's throat-*

*I watch the red of his mouth and the yellow of his fangs painted white with pure light*

*And I know what's next:*

*Certain death*

*'Accept your birthright' cry the stars! But I cannot hear them-*

*Not over the terrible wrath of dragonfire*

"Uriel! Wake up!"

I am shaken awake in a daze. An acidic scent tickles my nostrils, and I can feel the dampness of urine seeping into me from my cot. For a moment I can only shiver, and try to unhear that awful screech that burns into my soul.

I hear a dull roaring in my ears, but there is another noise. Faint, but urgent. Papa's voice.

My eyes snap open, and I am greeted by a fresh wave of heat that shakes sweat from my pores.

The first thing I notice is how dry my mouth is; it is like I had taken a mouthful of spice and tried to swallow.

*"Move! The house is coming down!"*

Papa is shaking my arm again, as my world swims into focus. My eyes fixate on the beam above my head, tracing the fibers along it... when bright orange tongues of light creep into my line of sight. *Fire!*

The roaring reaches a deafening volume, and I thrust myself up into the ghostly light of the blaze. A sob reaches my throat, as I see my whole world being consumed by the conflagration, with the roof hidden in a hideous, black sheen. All the memories...

But there is no time. I roll clumsily off the cot as Papa waves urgently at me. The heat and smoke are so intense, the pain forces my eyes into narrow slits.

My first coherent thought is one of horror. I scream their names. "*Isaac! Lily!*"

But the cries are swallowed greedily by the deafening howl of the flames.

Bryn tugs at my arm and I stumble after him. I am almost at the door, when there is a sharp "*crack*" and my face comes in contact with the floor. Hard.

I feel a hot rush of blood reach my nose and spurt into my face. But I hardly notice, as the scream that escapes my jaws is one of terror.

I can't get up!

A timber of burning oak had fallen across my back, refusing to let me up. I hardly felt the pain, as adrenaline and fear course through my veins loaning me strength. I attempt to scream, but it is drowned out by the flames. Bryn had already escaped outdoors into the safety of the world.

My breath catches as I inhale smoke, and sputters out painfully.

I am scratching, clawing anything I can reach. A sharp pain strikes my forearm, and I feel the sizzle of my flesh as it is wreathed in fire. I scream once more, helpless against the might of the timber. I cry as the fire devours me, searing deep into my arm. I cry like a small child, and the tears evaporate on my face. Smoke wheels around my vision, invades my lungs. The luxury of air is stolen from me. I squirm as hard as I can to no avail. Blood wells beneath my fingernails,

and I don't care. A thousand splinters of wood beneath my fingers would be a joy if only I could be free.

Suddenly, I am released from the bondage of the wood and crawl away, patting my arm out against the floor.

My world swims back into focus, and all the pain becomes sharp as white-hot knives made from suns. I convulse, harshly forcing the smoke from my lungs in gritty, bone-dry breaths. The first choking breath inward is agony, and wheezes from my lungs all too quickly.

I force my steaming eyes backward to see my savior, struggling to lift the immense timber of burning wood. They connect with Papa Bryn's gentle, brown orbs for one, final time. Then the roof caves in.

I see it all develop slowly, like some sort of sick, twisted nightmare. First, a spark of fire splits the darkness of smoke above Papa's head. There is the sound of a great wind pushing and pulling against the roof of the dying cabin. Then, a smoking hunk of blackness accelerates from the gloom, striking Bryn on the head. The crisp snap of his neck drowns out even the dull throb of the flames.

And the eyes, still holding onto mine, go dark and still.

My jaws part in an unearthly howl of sorrow as I make a move toward him, but I am thrust backward by a strong, wiry hand that grips my shoulder.

"We have to move, lest you die as well!" Isaac's voice floats to existence above my right ear, and I swallow another wail of agony that threatened to steal more of my fading breath.

It sticks somewhere along my throat.

The heat is unbearable, savaging my senses like a pack of rabid wolves. But my mind is still stuck in that room— imprisoned within the memory that burns worse than my flesh.

I stumble out the door, and the cold, night wind instantly makes me shiver, despite my burns. My every nerve is on edge, but I feel sickly. Weak.

"Never trust a snake," mumbles my trainer, letting go of my arm. The harsh, red glow of the cabin catches a tear on Isaac's grizzly cheek, transforming it into a drop of blood. I stumble away from him and vomit onto the grass, expelling the contents of my stomach in a fierce jet of acid and smoke.

Far away, the jubilant screech of an evil being rocks across the Northwest Mountains. And then, my consciousness gives, and I slump forward into oblivion.