

To whomever actually reads this:

First of all, thank you! I know this document is called "Twitter-Worthy", but like... none of my writing is actually 'good', per se. So any of it you read... sorry. Second, by no means should you read all of this, it's... way longer than I originally realised. This document is composed of six (well, so far) separate bits of writing that I wrote over the course of about a year, mostly prose fiction for classes. Also, I don't know why I decided to put this on Twitter, I just... thrive on external validation and am in constant need of attention. So here it is - my garbage! Any comments or critiques are highly appreciated! Also, I really love talking about my work, but I never know when to shut up, so... feel free to yell at me to stop talking!!

Thank you again!

Fox

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A Message to the Stars

Unless the Universe is infinitesimally smaller than our current models suggest, I am not from the same planet you are (though this format should render itself into your language as you read it, you're welcome). I know nothing about your planet, let alone about you... but perhaps that is exactly what I need. I may ramble or not make sense, and I'm sorry for that, but storytelling has always been cathartic to me, and I just have to tell someone. My name is Chasonni, and this is my story.

I was born on the planet Daerad, 227 moon cycles ago. Daerad is a relatively small speck of a planet in the grand scheme of things, but it has long been my home, and I've become rather attached to it. But see, here's where my problems began. I don't know how your planet works, but Daerad maintains certain... advantages within its governments. Well, okay, I guess I can only truly speak for the area I am from, but I have suspicions that these problems are global. But basically, there are different groups of people on Daerad, sorted in all manner of ways: race, appearance, gender, religion, and sexual orientation, to name just a few. But these categories aren't cumulative; they're multiplicative, maybe even exponential. The effects of these categories affect each other, but math is not my strong suit. Regardless, the straight, cisgender Lauogs of faith control the majority of our government. Which is unfortunate for those of us who don't match that societal norm. And that wouldn't be a problem if the people in charge actually cared about people who aren't identical to them. But they don't, so here we are.

You're probably wondering where I fit into all of this, right? Well, you've already made your first mistake. I don't 'fit in' anywhere. I don't match any of the privileged groups. Racially, I'm part Lywytl and part Drorobol, so not only do I not fit in with the Lauogs, I don't fully fit in with the Lywytls or the Drorobols either. And on top of that, I'm very queer. You'd think that I could turn to other queer people, but no. I mean, they're definitely better to me than the straight people are, but... they worry that because I'm not a Lauog, my support would actually be a detriment to the 'rest of the community', because 'it's hard enough for us to get rights as it is, so we can work on you after we're accepted'. As though some marginalised peoples' rights are more important than others.

Despite all of that, I have managed to find two real friends, Sola and Xhau. Sola is pretty similar to me, except they are fully Drorobol. They still don't get recognition as an 'important' member of the queer community... but they're valuable to me, and that's enough for them. And Xhau... If there were ever a person to prove that you can't judge a book by its cover, it's Xhau. Xhau looks like the type of person who could kill a person at breakfast and have the body disposed of by lunch. So, basically, Xhau looks to be exactly the type of person the establishment supports, but looks can be deceiving. She totally appears to be a Lauog, but she's actually got just as much Lywytl blood as Lauog. And despite her tough appearance, she's more worried about everybody's well-being than killing people. And she's just as queer as the rest of us. Except the queer community actually recognises her existence, since she looks the way basically they (and society as a whole) want her too. So when we need something important, we usually ask Xhau to talk to the other queers for us. I mean, we could talk to our families, in theory, but... that isn't the best idea, usually. At least my family tries to be understanding. But as non-Lauogs, they have almost as much trouble with the system as we do. Xhau's father hasn't been around since before she was born. And though her mother is fully Lauog, but we can't ask her for much; Xhau is afraid of coming out to her, which I totally understand, after what happened to Sola. When Sola tried to come out to their family, they were first told that they must be seeking attention. Then a few moon cycles later, that it was just a phase. After a few more moon cycles without a change of their identity, their family finally accepted that they were queer. And promptly kicked them out of the house. That was five moon cycles ago. When Sola showed up at my door in tears, I knew it was time to do something. But what could three marginalised young people do? Well... not much, at the start. Sola stayed with my family for a while, and to avoid the heteronormative atmosphere of her house, Xhau frequently stayed at our house too. We all managed. But... does the expression 'nothing gold can stay' have an analogue on your planet? It's an expression here that roughly means 'if you have something good, hold on to it for as long as you can, but know it will eventually change or go away'. Anyway, even though what we had clearly wasn't perfect, we held on to it as long as we could. That didn't, however, stop the world from ripping it to shreds at the first opportunity.

Every 50 moon cycles, everyone on our whole island of an old enough age goes out and debates who should rule the island for the next period. It's a big deal, and people usually start discussing it 20 or more moon cycles in advance. Everyone gets to participate! Well, that's the theory anyway. This system used to work well, but the population has increased by a factor of more than 100 since the rule's institution. Now, not everyone's opinion has time to get heard. Because of that, many people believe that there is no point in attending the debates, because 'what would I be able to change?'. The thing is, only about half of eligible people actually participate. So huge amounts of people just... trust their neighbours to make good decisions. And that's part of how the establishment continues to rule; most of the people who don't come are us non-Lauogs. Anyway, about a moon cycle ago, we had one of our debates. It was pretty exciting for all three of us. This was the first debate where we were of the proper age. The two frontrunners were both Lauogs, because of course they were. The last 50 moon cycles, a Lywytl man named Eikandeb had been in charge. Being queer was socially acceptable. Life had been as good as it ever had been. Now, we were back to Lauogs. But see, here's the problem. One of them, Irisol, wanted to rule in pretty much the same way that Eikandeb had. She seemed alright, though no less shady than the average applicant to the job. But the other guy? His name was Lheor, and he seemed to be as shockingly against everything Eikandeb had stood for as he could be. He wanted to make our island 'better, like it used to be', whatever that means. Basically, he wanted to make our island a paradise for cishet Lauogs and a living hell for anyone else. You'd think a large group of rational-thinking adults would be able to recognise that he had absolutely no idea what he was talking about, right? The three of us sure did.

But no, of course not. We, the collective, made a hate-filled moron our ruler. Before Eikandeb had even ceded power, Lheor's followers were terrorising... everyone else, really. And on his first day as ruler, he declared queerness illegal again and claimed that he would be trying to send all non-Lauogs back to wherever they 'came from'. Never mind that this island was actually the ancestral home of the Drorobols, that bit of history was inconvenient for Lheor's crowd. Understandably, we were a bit worried at this outcome. My mother suggested that we try leaving the country, but there was no way we could afford safe passage for even our entire family, let alone the other people we cared about.

Well, almost no way. Without Sola and me, my parents might've been able to secure passage and a new source of income. See, my other parent, though she still uses the title 'father', is trans*. So they were in just as much danger as Sola and I, but they were both nearing the ends of their lifespans. So to Sola and I, it was only logical to stay behind to fight, since we were younger and more fit. They disagreed for a long while of course, but within a moon cycle, they were gone. I hope that they made it to whichever island they were trying to get to, but I haven't seen them since. That left Sola, Xhau, and I alone to... well, figure out what to do. It was Sola who first suggested it, though they later admitted that they were originally joking. We were going to assassinate Lheor.

Now, I'm sure you're asking yourself what a trio of younglings can do against a newly-installed fascist dictator, right? Well... honestly, we were asking ourselves the same question. Realistically, we were unlikely to succeed, or to even survive the attempt. But then Xhau pointed out that we were unlikely to survive either way, so we might as well have a chance at taking Lheor down with us. The plan was simple, at least as far as assassination attempts go. We were going to join one of his victory tour crowds and follow it back to his castle (yeah, he lives in a castle, for some reason) for the after-party. Once we made it in, it was simply a matter of hiding somewhere that we wouldn't be found. I mean, clearly, our plan had its flaws, but it was the best that we could come up with in such a short time.

Everything started off exactly to plan. No one even questioned us when we joined the group's celebration. We got a few strange looks, mostly directed at Sola and me, but no one stopped us. Although any queer person would've been able to recognise us as also being queer people, when you attack a whole group of people, not many of them are likely to think that your victory is worth celebrating... so none of 'our people' were here, except us. And most of the straight people live in a fictional world in which everyone is straight, so we had nothing to fear. We definitely didn't fit into the crowd properly, but nobody tried to stop us from celebrating. The speech wasn't as long as we'd thought it would be, and so the procession to the party began sooner than expected. We soon encountered our first issue. When the enthusiastic horde of people reached the castle, more than half of them left, turned away by the door guards. Included in that turned-away group was every single non-Lauog, so I knew there was no way that Sola or I would make it through the security measures, but... things don't always happen the way you think they will. When we reached the

door, Xhau confidently told the guards her name, and that we were her guests. She was actually on the list, somehow! Sola and I tried to hide the incredulity we were feeling from our faces as the guard looked us over, but we were let into the castle. Once we could, we turned to Xhau to ask what had just happened. As it turns out, she'd planned for this. Her mother was important enough to have been invited, but she had already had other plans for today. So Xhau said that she would go instead, on the condition that she be allowed to bring two 'guests'. Her mother had pulled some favours, happy that her daughter was 'finally becoming interested in politics', and blind to our actual plan. So anyway, we were in. All eyes in the room immediately turned on us anywhere we went. I guess we didn't really blend in, except for Xhau. But she whisked us off deeper into the castle, seeming to have an idea for this part of the plan too. She led us down the right wing of the ground floor, and...

As it turned out, her idea was 'hide in Lheor's closet'. Which, luckily, it was a huge closet, but... I don't want to talk about what we saw in there. This also meant that we had a long time to sit quietly. It was sunrise (and Xhau had fallen asleep) by the time we heard someone enter the room. Sola quietly woke her while I carefully peeked out through the door slats. We were in luck; Lheor had come back alone. We waited until we heard sounds of sleeping before carefully coming out. It was then that I realised that I had brought no weapon. And Xhau suddenly froze, clearly having made the same realisation. It was Sola to the rescue this time! They produced a somewhat large knife from who knows where and had it hilt-deep in Lheor's body before Xhau or I could even react. Maybe this isn't true of your people, but when our vital organs are destroyed, we don't die instantly. So Lheor had time to shout for his guards before he expired. Now, with minutes to escape at best, I was very glad that the bedroom had been on the ground floor. I opened the window and told Xhau and Sola to jump out. Xhau went first, but Sola still seemed to be in shock from what they'd done. I carefully helped them through the window and was halfway out myself when I heard the door open. I did my best to be out on the ground and out of sight, but I landed louder than I'd thought I would. I was glad to notice Xhau quietly leading Sola through the back gates as I sprinted in the opposite direction. I knew someone would have to take the blame, and I wasn't about to let it be the two of them. I had a bit of a head start, so was out of my pursuers' reach by the time they made it through the window... but not

out of range of the front guards' weapons. As *something* passed through me, I felt searing pain. They and I both knew I wasn't going to survive long without whatever organs they'd destroyed, so they went back to their posts. As I lay dying on Lheor's lawn, I began composing my thoughts and beaming them to the stars. These are the thoughts you now hear, listener: the dying words of Chasonni of Daerad. I know it won't accomplish much, but... someone had to hear our story. Do with it as you please. And... thank you for listening.

wilderness

i am a wild thing
the forest is my home
i hunt at dusk, i hunt at dawn
through the night i roam

the trees are my domain
my home goes on forever
i know where every pebble lies
i see the fall of every feather

i feel the woods flow through my veins
i hear the plants start growing
i watch the seasons change again
i taste the river flowing

i am a wild thing
the forest was my home
but things have changed, and now
through a new world i roam

gone are the trees of my domain
gone all the flora and fauna
in their place, a huge flat rock
with strange new things upon it

quite loud, a new thing growls at me
does it not know i rule?
i snarl at it, it charges me--

Upon the pavement there, she lay,
The fox I had not seen.

I didn't mean to hit her with my car...

The Forest has lost its Queen.

The Caravan

I was surrounded by fire, but I've become used to that. Violet fire, though? That's a new one.

I looked around, but nothing seemed familiar. How had I gotten here? Where even was 'here?' I seemed to be on some sort of path that ran through some trees. But a path unlike any I'd ever seen before. Well, beyond just the 'on fire' part. It was mostly small, smooth rocks, but it was significantly wider and deeper than seemed necessary. And where there weren't rocks, it was all... mud? Still wet? This was going to be a weird day.

That's when I became aware the voice behind me. I turned and saw giant, wooden wall and an old man speaking a language I don't know. He sounded very angry, and was shouting at birds, maybe? Or clouds? I wasn't really sure. He didn't seem to have noticed me yet, and despite my better judgement, I decided to try to ask him what was going on.

But of course, if I was going to get any answers, things had to get even weirder first. Because as soon as I started walking towards the strange man, something huge fell out of the sky behind me, the force of it knocking me down. As I stood up to investigate whatever had fallen, I saw the impossible. The monstrous beast before me should've been dead for hundreds of years, killed by Ignatius, an ancestor of mine, to end the Great War. And yet here Kahltok stood, in the flesh. Or 'scales', I guess. I really should've been tipped off by the purple fire, to be honest. Wyrmfyre.

Wait. I knew this story. Kahltok. The burning forest. The wooden wall. The riverbed I was standing in. I even knew the man behind me, and what he was about to say...

"CHILD OF FIRE!" shouted Ignatius.

Huh. That wasn't right. He was supposed to say the famous line, the one about justice, and then destroy the wall. Why didn't he do it right? I turned to see what was causing the hold-up, and noticed that, for the first time today, someone was looking directly at me.

"Yes, my child. I am talking to you. So listen to me," Ignatius said, more calmly. "Many lives are in danger once again, but I am no longer around to help. It falls to you to stop this rising shadow. So awaken, Wanderer! Awaken, and raise the Caravan!" And then he blew up the wall, letting the river flow through the valley once again. I stared, unable to look away, as the wall of water rushed towards us...



I woke with a start, sunlight coming in through my window. A dream! Of course, it had all been a dream. But , the sense of urgency and unease lingered. This dream was unlike any other I'd ever had; it felt more real than anything prior. And Ignatius had called me 'the Wanderer'. As in, the Wanderer from the Prophecy? Yeah, I mean the Prophecy of the Eleven. *Those* Eleven, said to be the only ones able to bring back the world from the brink of destruction. He expected me to be able to do that? I was barely done with my training. How could I save anything?

But if Ignatius himself was asking me to do it, even if only via dream; I had to try, right? He was the Hero of the West, after all; he had to know what he was doing... right? Well, there was only one way to find out. I would do my best to bring the Caravan together, just as the Prophecy required. And then... Well, I'll figure it out. One thing at a time. First, I had to get out of bed.



It was quite lucky for me that I was such a close relative of Ignatius. It granted me many things, even my life on one occasion. Though she was his great-granddaughter, my mother never liked the attention her connection to Ignatius brought her here in the West. And I likely wouldn't have been born had

that not been true, as she didn't meet my dad until she moved to the North. After my parents had both felt called to serve the Northern Royals, the Western Royals were happy to take in a young descendent of their greatest hero. That was when I was 3 years old. By the time I was 6, it was clear I had Ignatius' gift of magic. Good for me, but unfortunate for all the furniture in my room. Magic is hard to control without training, and doubly so when you're a small child. I didn't mean to set anything on fire, but it happened in my sleep. They moved me to a room with stone furniture after that, and put me into the Cult of Magic as soon as I was old enough. I was raised on magic, learning how to do it and hearing tales of ancient magicians like Ignatius. The Cult became like a family to me. Life was good.

But just over a year later, my birth parents were both lost in combat. I wasn't old enough to really remember them, but the loss still hurt. And had the West not had this great love of my ancestor, I would likely have been without a home to go back to. Instead, I was formally adopted at the time of my graduation as a child of the West, despite my father's Northern heritage. The Royals took me in as their Resident Magical Expert, bringing me into their court whenever magical stuff was happening. I was even given my own room in the castle. I truly owed the Royals everything.

And now, I had to ask them for yet more help. But without their permission, I was bound here; 'Resident' isn't just part of the title, it's truly binding. I wouldn't be able to do as Ignatius had asked. Surely they could understand this, right? As soon as I was prepared to go, I headed to the royal chamber. My future, and perhaps all futures, depended on this meeting.



I pushed through the large doors that led to the royal chamber, determined to seem as confident as I could. I had to show them that I truly believed I had a part to play in the Prophecy. My dramatic entrance drew all of the eyes in the room, but mine stayed on the pair of thrones. Unfortunately for me, the Queen didn't seem to be here. A shame, really; she usually took my side. But her throne was empty. Only her wife, the King, was in court today. No matter. I knew I could succeed. I had to succeed.

“What is it, Little One?” the King asked, her dark eyes piercing me. I guess I interrupted something rather important, but it was too late to back out now.

“My lady, I must ask you for something of the utmost importance. I need to leave the West and go out into the world. Please, will you allow this?” I replied, doing my best to meet her gaze without reacting to its intensity.

“Dear child, whatever could you want to leave us for? We’ve given you all that you have,” she started, before sighing. “I knew this day would come eventually. I will not try to guilt you into staying. But I would like to know your intent, should you have one. What purpose is calling to you?”

“My King, I thank you for all you have given me, and I will come back to the West if I am able. But I had a vision last night, a vision of the past. The great Ignatius himself told me that some great evil was coming. He commanded me to raise the Caravan to combat it. So I must go!”

Her expression changed from one of mild displeasure to one of bemusement. “You believe yourself to be one of the Eleven? A-”

“That is my name no longer,” I interrupted. “I am the Wanderer now, and I will only respond to that name. I must do this, for the good of everyone. Now, do I have your permission to leave or not... my lady?” I added, slightly too late.

She kept a calm face, but she started twisting the ends of her long, dark hair. Anyone who’d spent as much time in this court as I had knows that this was dangerous. This action is the King’s tell, it means you’ve nearly caused too much trouble. Any more prodding and you’re likely to find yourself imprisoned. But I was lucky today. “Fine,” she said. “Go, then. Seek your Caravan. You will return, child. I trust the magic in your veins to see you through whatever this is. Now, is that all? May I get back to work, or do you require something else?”

I took this blessing as my sign to leave, and quickly. I bowed, and then left the room as fast as I could. Victory number one for the Wanderer. And the Caravan.



It wasn't until I was outside the palatial grounds that I realised I had no idea where to go. I knew my way around the city, sure. But I hadn't been outside the city since my arrival, save for a few trips just outside the border walls during my magical training. Best to not set the whole city on fire should I have gone out of control. I was packed for a journey, but to where? I had no directions, no idea who the other Eleven were, or even where to look for them. Ignatius hadn't given me anything.

Or had he? A voice in my head was telling me to head towards the Northern Kingdom. Well, okay, not a 'voice' exactly, but like... a feeling? I don't know, but I had nothing else to go on, so I started walking north. It would turn out to be a longer walk than I thought, but relatively uneventful. Aside from a few farmers, mercenaries, and pilgrims, I met no one on my path. And only one of the pilgrims was headed in the same direction I was, so he was my only option for conversation. We talked for a while, primarily about the temple to which he was heading. Apparently one of the most important temples of the Followers of Ash is located in the northeast, atop a mountain. I learned a good amount about everything related to their deity, the Ashen Lady. While that wouldn't have been my first choice of topic, I was grateful for both the knowledge and the company. When we did finally part ways, I had half a mind to follow him; I didn't know where I was supposed to be going anyway. But the same voice inside me told me that I had to continue on the path I had started, and so I bid him farewell.



The first sign that I was nearing the border between the West and the North appeared on the second day of my walking. The temperature was progressively dropping. The second sign was the increasing amount of trees. The third was the sign that read 'Northern Territory'. Hey, sometimes signs

don't have to be complicated, okay? Anyway, shortly after crossing the border, the tree cover became even thicker. I had officially entered the Great Northern Forest.

Though, to be honest, I wasn't really seeing anything that great about it. There were a lot of trees, sure. But they were all different conifers; there wasn't much diversity. And I couldn't even really see the trees at first, because of... well, the trees. They blocked the sun's light, so I couldn't really see. I'm human; I don't have excellent night vision. But unlike most humans, I could do something about it. I thought for a bit, finally coming up with the best Elemental words for what I wanted. As I spoke, a small flame flickered into existence, hovering just above my hand. It didn't provide a lot of light, but I was afraid to use anything larger. Burning down a forest was not something the Wanderer should do, especially since first impressions matter. It was my first time here, after all!

Walking through the Forest proved to be just as 'interesting' as walking through the West had been. Which is to say, nothing really happened. There were a lot of trees, as already mentioned, and a good mix of Northern Forest creatures: deer, birds, and the like. But I didn't see any other people. The most excitement was the pack of wolves, but everyone knows how timid wolves are. Add in the fact that there was fire in my hand, and they never came close to me. Which is good, I wouldn't have wanted them to. I too am timid, and I might have overreacted. And that would've been bad, since one of the rules of magic is 'Don't cause unnecessary harm'. We covered that on the first day in the Cult, that's how important it is. Were I to defend myself, I would be breaking that law. Even using magic solely to frighten them could be construed as 'unnecessary harm'. No, it was good that they didn't approach. Debating ethics in a stressful situation never goes well.



Three days after leaving my home, I came upon the first real signs of civilisation aside from the winding paths I had followed thus far. In a clearing, I found a large building made of stone and wood. There were no doors on the side I'd come upon, so I circled the building to what I suppose was the front.

Upon seeing the far side, I discovered that the building was not nearly as large as I'd thought. A large block was cut out of the front, leaving space for the training ring that I now approached. There was only one person in the ring, a young elven warrior focused on a training dummy. The moment I entered the circle, however, that concentration was broken. She turned quickly around, both swords in her hands flashing in the light of the setting sun.

I guess the look on my face betrayed the fear I felt, because she pretty quickly lowered her swords. "You," she said, in a calmer voice than I expected. "You came from out of the dream. What are you doing here? How did you get out of my head? Who ARE you?"

"I... what? I'm the Wanderer. Who are you? What dream? How do you know who I am?"

"Three nights ago, you came to me in a dream. You said a darkness was rising, and that you were building the Caravan. And... you called me the Saint? I wanted to ask about that. My name is Aki, not the Saint. Who or what did you think you were talking to? Also, HOW DID YOU GET OUT OF MY HEAD?"

Three nights ago. Ignatius came to me three nights ago. Was he wanting the whole Caravan awakened at once? I suppose him using my face makes sense; how else are we going to find each other? And... I interrupted my train of thought when I noticed the face Aki was making at me. I had better start explaining things, and soon.

"Are you familiar with the Prophecy of the Eleven?" I figured that was as good a place to start as any.

"Of course, I- Oh. OH. You think I- OH! Give me just a minute to grab my things!"

Well. That was easy.



We talked some as we walked. Well, okay, she did most of the talking, especially at first. I mostly listened. It was quite interesting to hear about her life, and about the building she'd left behind. It turns out that it was Elvein College, which was basically the swordsman's version of the Cult from back home. She was surprised I hadn't heard of it, it was apparently quite famous in the Northern Territory. When I told her about my life, she seemed genuinely interested in both the Cult and life in the Western Kingdom. I'm usually a quiet person, but her fascination with everything made me open up more than normal.

Night came quickly, and it wasn't long before I couldn't see the path in front of us. Aki still could, of course; elves have phenomenal night vision, according to my studies in the Cult. But she still suggested we make camp for the night. We didn't have a lot in the way of supplies, but it was enough for a small camp. I began with setting up the tents, while she started the fire. Usually I'd suggest letting me handle fire, but she was adamant that she would do it.



When I came back from my search for fresh water, the fire still hadn't truly started. I watched her poke at the small sparks she'd created and mutter to herself. I couldn't make out exactly what she was saying, but I knew enough to realise that it wasn't in Common. "Are you... speaking in Fae?" I finally asked, curiosity having bested me again.

"No, not quite. It is an ancient prayer in a long-dead language. In theory, it helps the fire, and... well, I figured it was unlikely to hurt, right?"

I had to agree with her there, this fire really didn't seem to want to... do anything. "Will you teach it to me?" I asked.

"If you really want me to, I can. But it probably is just superstition, I doubt this is accomplishing anything."

I nodded and she began speaking more audibly. I listened to the sounds, hearing their repetition. But the moment I joined in, the fire erupted into existence, seemingly ignited by my words alone. She jumped back quickly from her crouched position, startled. She stared at the fire for a moment before looking at me. "How..." she began. She paused for a moment, seemingly searching for words, before starting again. "How do you have more magic in you than I have? I am an elf, we taught your ancestors magic! How...?"

She cut off again, returning to her crouch next to the fire. Apparently she didn't care about the answers to her questions, but I was going to give them to her anyway. "I didn't recognise that Elemental phrase, I'm sorry. I just assumed it was Old Elvish or something. But I've spent the last 12 years training in Elemental magic, especially fire; your inborn talent can't be any better than actual training."

Shocked, she looked up at me. "Humans train their younglings in the ways of the Elemental language? For... twelve years, you said? How old even are you? Your people age so fast, it can be hard for me to tell..."

"I'm 19," I responded.

"Well," she replied, with a new energy in her voice, "I am 49, and have been training in magic since I was 13. So I ask again... *How did you do that?*"

It was my turn to be shocked. I'd grown up on stories of the great Fae magicians, how could she have spent three times as long learning as I with only this much success? Also, I realised just how much older she was than I'd thought. Were she human, I'd have guessed her to be in her early 20s at the oldest, not the nearly 50 years she claimed. I thought about all of this for a while, before coming to one conclusion... Though, not one I really wanted to bring up. I sighed, and then began. "Magic among humans is uncommon; very few can even manage the simplest spells, no matter how good their pronunciation is. Perhaps the same variability is true of elves? Maybe some of you just can't connect with the words in the necessary way. Is that possible?"

She sighed, silently staring deep into the fire for a long time. When at last she spoke again, she had a far more serious tone than I'd ever heard her use before. She said, "Yes, this seems likely. My ancestors claimed themselves 'cursed', but... I assumed it was simply folly, or maybe lack of effort... Perhaps there is something tainted in my bloodline then, blocking our magic... No matter. My skill with blades has yet to fail me, you can handle the magic."

I smiled at that. Magic was my favourite thing in the world. So far, the Caravan was coming along splendidly. And if this voice in my head was right again, our next companions could be found to the southeast. At this rate, we'll have the oncoming darkness beaten in no time!



Just let the darkness win, walking is terrible. I've had enough. I thought that the journey from the Western Kingdom to Elvein College was long. And I mean, it is a long way; after all, it took me three days! But to get from Elvein College to the Eastern Capital? Aki and I walked for twice as long, not reaching our destination until my ninth day on the journey. Though to be fair, the trip from North to East wasn't as uninteresting. At least this time I had someone to talk to. Plus, the world hung in the balance, or whatever. I decided I could suffer on, if it meant others wouldn't have to.

It was nearly nightfall when we finally arrived at the city walls, but we had been able to see them since the sun was at its peak. There's a reason people call the Eastern Capital 'the Walled City'; no other city has such huge walls. It's not without reason, though. The Eastern Capital is the largest city in the realm, nothing nearby is even close. And, if my memory of history is correct, the walls were built before the Great War, during the time before the Kingdoms were even established. Raids on the city happened, and often. But that all changed after they built the Wall.

Anyway, we finally got into the city just before they closed the gates for the night. You'd think that with a history like theirs, the guards would be more vigilant, but we basically just said we wanted to get in, and they let us. We didn't even give them our names or anything.

The Eastern Capital was... Big. Like, I knew it was a large city, but reading about the size of something is nothing compared to *seeing* it. Even my home city in the Western Kingdom was dwarfed by its sheer enormity. If I had to guess, the Eastern Capital had quadruple the area of my city, if not more. I can't even begin to think about what it must have been like for Aki...

Luckily for us, we had a guide to direct us where to go. That little voice in our heads that led us southeast didn't stop at the city's threshold, but continued to lead us down the surprisingly busy streets. It may have been getting late, but the pedestrian activity wouldn't suggest that in the slightest. As we wove through the crowd, the voice in my head got louder and more insistent, so I knew we were getting close.



When we stopped at the gate, I knew we were in the right place. And not just because the thing in my head told me so. No, I should've guessed that we'd stop at the Arena eventually. It was built long before even the Wall, in a time when bloodshed wasn't just the norm, but extolled. These heroes of violence, the Gladiatorices, reformed themselves after the Wall was built, founding the Fighters' Guild and still operating out of the bloodstained Arena. But instead of killing each other for show, they both put on shows of skill and trained any who wanted to be in the art of the blade. Their gate was open to all people.

Except right now, it was closed. We showed up after normal 'business' hours, I suppose. We stood outside for a little while, hoping someone would notice our presence. Just as we were starting to lose hope, the portcullis rose without warning. Aki and I looked at each other, unsure of what to do.

Just as suddenly, a dwarf came rushing out towards us, dressed in full armour! But before we could react to... *that*, he stopped short in front of us, and looked up inquisitively. He stared at us. We stared back.

"Well, come on, then!" he said, before turning on his heel and rushing back inside.

Aki and I looked at each other again, bewildered. “So... should we go in?” Aki asked at last. After a little more deliberation, we decided to follow the strange dwarf.

It was dark inside the building, but this was only a problem for me. Luckily, Aki noticed me lagging behind; she grabbed my hand to lead me and to make sure I didn't get lost as my eyes adjusted. After running down dark corridor after dark corridor, we finally stopped at a doorway. The dwarf stood at the door, seeming to be waiting for us. “She is here,” he said, apparently as an explanation.

Then he turned and went through the door. Unsure of what we were doing, we followed him. Aki went through first, and I followed after her.



The sudden change in lighting was shocking to my eyes; I couldn't see for a moment. As my vision returned, I noticed that we weren't alone. Besides Aki and the dwarf, there was a shield-bearing animan standing to our right, and a fae wearing a mask standing on our left. But everyone else's attention was on the last person in the room: a large dragonkin kneeling in the centre, facing the back wall. I started to say something, but I was interrupted by the dwarf, who simply said, “Mistress?”

The kneeling woman stood, turning to face us. She looked quickly over Aki, but her expression changed the moment her blue eyes locked onto mine.

“You,” she muttered, recognition lighting up her eyes. “You're the one we've been waiting for. The Wanderer, if I'm not mistaken. I am the Catalyst, by your decree. But I'd prefer you call me Victory, in the future. These are my companions. I see that you've already met Inuto, and these are Skrelit and Astirice. Jenanda is... out, right now. She'll be back at some point, probably tonight.

“You told me in a dream 9 nights ago to wait for your arrival here. I only wish you'd told me in advance that others would come before you, the Guild wasn't exactly prepared for the number of pilgrims who've come. Inuto came to me the next morning, saying that I'd shown up in his dream. We'd both already been living here, working with the Guild. But the next day, Skrelit came to us from a passing garrison, and two days after that, Astirice and Jenanda came to us from the west, just as you did.

“But now, here you are, looking just as you did in my dream. You and... I'm sorry, who are you?” she said, finally seeming to remember Aki.

“I... I am Aki, from Elvein College in the North. I-I... met the Wanderer 6 days ago,” she stammered.

“It is nice to meet you. Now... We should prepare to go, we have much to do. Inuto, Skrelit, and I will pack up the supplies we have here. Astirice, can you take Aki and the Wanderer to retrieve Jenanda? She... should be doing what she normally is.”

The fae nodded, and stood up. The three of us left the building, with Astirice leading us out of the building and to a nearby manor. They led Aki and I not to the front door though, but to a side door. Astirice adjusted their mask, and then bent down to pick the lock. Realising what they were doing, I dragged Aki farther down the alleyway to hide.

“You don't have to do that,” they said, smirking, before returning to the lock. “We're not going to be caught.” They seemed confident, so Aki and I slowly returned to their side, albeit cautiously. It wasn't much longer before they had the door open.



We walked through the manor, stealthily at first, but less cautiously as we went. Astirice seemed to know where they were going, so we followed them through the wide corridors.

The door we finally stopped in front of was gilded, but not as large as the others in this hallway. Astirice motioned for us to stay quiet, and then crossed over to the far side of the door. Quickly, they pulled the door open, and Aki and I stepped into the room.

And I quickly regretted it. Because what I saw was two people. In bed. Doing something that people don't usually like getting seen doing. Which... wasn't what I was expecting in the least. Startled, I backed up, right into Aki. She made some sort of noise in complaint, and that's when the people noticed us. They screamed. I screamed. Everyone was screaming.

Astirice came into the room then, confused as to what was going on. Within seconds of them crossing the threshold, one of the women in the bed stopped screaming. She sat up, still... um, naked, and asked, "Time to go?"



"Jenanda, do you **have** to sleep with every person you're sent to talk to? We only met 8 days ago, and you've already been with 5 different people..." Astirice asked, playfully.

"Not *everyone* is demi, Aster! Just because you have to get close to people before feeling attraction doesn't mean everyone does. I just really like people, okay?" responded Jenanda. She winked at no one in particular, before breaking out into laughter.

She had a contagious laugh, and soon Aki and Astirice were laughing too. Not me, though. Getting out of the manor had taken some time, since we'd had to wait for her to put on clothes. Which, thankfully, she did! But what I had seen wouldn't leave my mind. I finally spoke up. "Yes, not everyone is demi. For example, some of us are ace, and would maybe have liked some warning about what we were walking into."

They all stopped. Everyone looked uncomfortably around at each other. At last, Jenanda spoke. "Sorry love, I didn't know. It won't happen again, okay?"

I'll make sure you always know in the future, alright? That's... all I can really do at this point, I'm sorry."

"I... thank you. I'm sorry I reacted so poorly... Can we just start over, and pretend this didn't happen?"

She smiled at me, a warm, friendly smile. "Of course, love. I'm Jenanda! Or the Comic, if you like. It's lovely to meet you! But... who are you two, actually? New recruits?"

"I'm the Wanderer, and that's Aki, the Saint. We are new recruits, in a way? We-"

"They're the ones Victory was waiting for," Astirice interrupted. "Now, we weren't formally introduced before. I'm Astirice, or Aster if you prefer. The Partner. But we have places to be, and night isn't going to last forever. Come on, we must get back to the Arena!"



When we arrived, the others were already waiting outside. Everyone had a small amount of supplies, and there were four more backpacks in front of Victory. Before she even said anything, Aster and Jenanda each picked up a pack, and motioned for Aki and I to take the other two.

We then set out for the southern gate of the city, again being led by that voice in our heads. Where we were going, I had no idea. But we were prepared for anything!

Well, almost anything. We weren't expecting to meet more members of the Caravan before we even left the Eastern Capital. But as we were going out the gate, they were coming in. Two of them, a changeling and a goblin. They had apparently found each other in the Feymire a few days after the dream, and had been traveling together since then. We happily welcomed into our group, taking time to introduce ourselves. The goblin was a hunter named Rhejem, and the changeling was called Aellei. Meeting them boosted my

confidence even more. I mean, with almost the whole Caravan collected already, nothing could go wrong!

... Right?

The Pool of Life

During the Second World War, the country of Britain was heavily bombed over many years by the German Luftwaffe, using blitzkrieg tactics. This was frequently shortened to 'blitz', leading to this era of British history generally being called 'The Blitz'. While the most heavily targeted city was the capital, London, the second most bombed city was to the northwest. That city is Liverpool, or "The Pool of Life." Around 4000 people were killed in Liverpool and the surrounding area between August 1940 and January 1942, second only to London in terms of casualties. One series of air raids happened between the 20th and the 22nd of December, killing at least 365 people. The timing of this led to the incident being referred to as the Christmas Blitz.

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Liverpool, Britain

23 December, 1940

-6:49 am-

I woke up on the floor of an unfamiliar room, surrounded by things that didn't belong to me. Where was I? What I could see was quite nondescript, but

the smell of mould was omnipresent. How did I get here? Where did all this stuff come from? I sat up with a start. The last thing I remember...

Everything came back to me in a rush. The War. The Blitz. Our house, gone. Mum and Elsie, dead. And Alan... Alan. Where was Alan? A new rush of energy surged through me. I sprang up from my blanket, not caring about the survivors still asleep around me. I wanted to move, *needed* to move, but I had no idea where to go. I had no idea where my brother was. But I had to find him; he was all I had left. The Blitz took everything else that the War hadn't already. Over the last year, everything had really gone to shite.

That thought stopped me. Mum always got onto me about swearing, especially in front of Alan. But she... wouldn't, ever again. And I was all my little brother had, so I had to be responsible now. And I had to find Alan! What would Mum do if she were here? Or Dad?

... How long had it even been since I'd last seen Dad? It had to have been a few months, at least... When was it?

~*~*~*~*~*~*~*~*~*

Liverpool, Britain

18 April, 1940

-5:38 pm-

"Do you really have to leave, Daddy?" Alan asked, not for the first time.

"My birthday is soon!"

"It's not for another two months! And besides, he's already said he can't stay. Just let him go, don't make this harder than it has to be," Elsie spat before Mum or Dad could stop her. She'd always been the sort to get cross when she's emotional. And she frequently took that anger out on Alan.

"Elsie!" Mum scolded as Alan burst into tears again. "Come here, baby. She didn't mean it, she's just upset that Dad is leaving too. Come here..." As she picked Alan up in a hug, Dad turned to me, and his new uniform creased visibly in the fading light of the setting sun.

"Elizabeth." He tried to hide the emotion in his voice as he spoke, but I could still hear the sadness. "Without me here... You take care of your mum, okay? And watch over your siblings. Can I trust you to do this, to the best of your ability?"

"You can count on me, sir," I responded, my voice breaking on the last word.

“I know I can. Thank you,” he replied, giving me an over-exaggerated salute. Dad always knew how to make us laugh, even when we didn’t want to. Alan even stopped crying, though he still seemed on the verge of tears.

“Goodbye, Dad,” I said, returning his salute. “Go save the world, or whatever it is you Army blokes do.”

“Of course, ma’am. Keep my little man safe for me, and I’ll try to be back in time for his seventh birthday.” He reached over and tousled Alan’s hair. “Is the world being saved a good enough present, buddy, or would you like something else too?”

“... I want *you*, Daddy!”

~*~*~*~*~*~*~*~*~*

Liverpool, Britain

23 December, 1940

-6:52 am-

I shook my head. Dad didn’t matter right now. There’s no way to know when I’ll see him again, and I had made him a promise. I had to find Alan. I had to keep my promise to watch over him. I... Oh God, I was going to have to be the

one to tell Dad about Elsie and Mum. No, I had more pressing issues to worry about at the moment, I could worry about that later. I started hurrying towards the nearest door, just trying to look through as much of the shelter as possible. You'd think my running would've bothered the other survivors, but most were still sleeping, and the few who were already awake seemed too consumed by their own despair to pay me any mind.

As I approached the door, I heard a creaking sound as the next closest door cracked open, and a small form crept carefully through. A very recognisable form.

"Alan!" I said, just a bit too loudly for the quiet room. He jumped, and the door he was holding banged closed. I peered over my shoulder, afraid of what the others would do. The sudden noise roused a few of the sleepers, but no one did anything beyond glare in our direction. I looked back to Alan. He still looked startled, but who could blame him? The War is monstrous, a destroyer of families and of innocence. After the last Blitz... well, it's rather unsurprising that he isn't a fan of loud, unexpected noises. He gazed at me a moment, before saying "Elizabeth?"

"I'm here, buddy. What's wrong?"

~*~*~*~*~*~*~*~*~*

Liverpool, Britain

21 December, 1940

-8:02 pm-

“What’s wrong, buddy?” I asked again.

“... I wish Dad were here,” Alan finally answered, tears starting to form in the corners of his eyes.

Silence fell over the room. The only sounds came from the kitchen, where Mum was cooking supper. I had no idea what to say to calm him down, and Elsie was too absorbed in her book to even know what was going on.

Or so I thought, until she closed her book and stared over at Alan. I got ready to defend him from whatever she was going to say. However, instead of being cross, she simply and calmly asked, “Alan, would you like to help Mum with me?”

He was as stunned as I was, but he began slowly nodding after a moment. So she set her book down, walked to where Alan sat, and offered him her hand. He paused again, still waiting for a trick. But seeing none, he took her hand, and the pair walked toward the kitchen door. As she pulled it open, the smells of tea

and fish wafted in; they smelled wonderful from where I sat, but I knew how difficult the rationing had made it to get... well, any food, really.

But more surprising to me than how Mum had tracked down such a meal was what had just happened. Elsie had not only been quite nice to Alan, but she'd even willingly gone somewhere with him. That hadn't happened in a long time, not since Alan realised he *wasn't* just a doll for her to play with. What had brought such a change on, I wondered. I made a mental note to ask Elsie what was going on next time I saw her...

From the other room, I heard Mum say, "Alan, would you go get Elizabeth for supper?" I smiled, thinking about how nice tonight seemed. Sure, the War was still going on, but things here were finally calming down. Today was a good day.

~*~*~*~*~*~*~*~*~*

Liverpool, Britain

23 December, 1940

-6:57 am-

Memory can be a cruel thing, sometimes. *Why were they gone, but I was still here?* I closed my eyes for a moment, trying to keep tears back. If Alan saw me cry, he would completely lose it; I had to be strong. When I opened my eyes

again, I realised Alan was staring at me expectantly. He must have asked something while I was lost in thought!

“I’m sorry, Alan, I was thinking about... something. What did you say?”

“I... Never mind, it doesn’t matter.”

Huh. Usually, he wasn’t the type to stop talking about something until someone asked him to. Which was usually Elsie... No, I’m not thinking about that again. To keep focused on the present, I asked, “So... do you remember how we got here? Because... I don’t seem to remember that at all. I...” I cut myself off before I said ‘It might be a trauma-related thing.’ Despite recent events, Alan was still only 7; I shouldn’t pour everything out onto him.

“You... don’t remember getting here? What is the last thing you remember, then?”

I looked at him, puzzled, but decided to play along. “Why don’t you tell me what’s happened, just to make sure I’m not missing anything?”

“Okay, sure! Where should I start?”

His strange excitement was bewildering, but I was glad he seemed to be happy again. “Uh... What part seems most important to you?”

“So you don’t remember coming here... You remember the sirens, yeah?”

I shuddered. “I will never forget the sirens.”

“Yeah... What about the roof falling in? D’you remember that?”

“I mean... Yeah? Where--”

“Do you remember laying in the rubble for hours? ‘Til the people came and dug us out?”

That gave me pause. Not only did I not remember that, I didn’t even have a guess as to what people he was talking about. The Women’s Land Army, maybe? The gleam in his eyes was making me uncomfortable. “I... No, I don’t”

“... Yeah, I figured. Do you know *why* you don’t remember?”

And all of a sudden, I *did* know.

~*~*~*~*~*~*~*~*~*

Liverpool, Britain

21 December, 1940

-8:06 pm-

Today was a good day.

Or so I thought. I listened to Alan's feet pattering towards the door, I heard the hinges creak. And then I heard the air raid sirens start up.

I didn't think, I didn't consider what I was doing, even for a second. I just acted. I leapt up from my chair and sprinted to the half-open doorway. I grabbed the startled Alan and stepped through the door, trying to cover him with myself.

And then pain. And silence. I blacked out.

~*~*~*~*~*~*~*~*~*

Liverpool, Britain

21 December, 1940

-9:32 pm-

When I came to, my frazzled brain slowly pieced together what had just happened. As it clicked into place, I noticed that something seemed off. Besides

suddenly being on my back, that is. The familiar smell of dinner was gone, or at least fading; it had been replaced by an odd, metallic smell I couldn't quite place...

Wait. Alan. Where was Alan? He was in my arms last I remembered. I was afraid to open my eyes, but I had to see. I had to know. So I gradually opened my eyes, taking stock of my surroundings. The first thing I noticed was that the roof was significantly closer than it had been minutes ago. As I looked to my right, I saw what was left of dinner, and what was left of Mum. Elsie lay on top of her, her eyes fluttering and her breathing ragged. It was a terrible sight to see, but I had to find everyone before I reacted to anything. It hurt to move, but I tilted my head up, towards my right arm. It was bent in a way arms aren't supposed to be, and atop it was Alan. He wasn't moving, and his eyes were closed.

"Alan! Elsie!" I yelled, my breath catching. They had to be okay. I had promised Dad... But then, movement above me sent searing pain through my ruined arm. I looked up to see Alan's eyes flick open. He looked at me, confused.

"Elizabeth? What's happened?" he asked, terror obvious in his voice. I tried to think of a good explanation that wouldn't break his little heart, but it was in vain. While I struggled with my words, he began peering around, looking for

something that made sense. Instead, all he saw were the remains of our house, and of our family.

His shriek drew my attention back to Elsie, who had both improved and worsened in the last 30 seconds. Her breathing was shallower, but her eyes were partially open. She seemed to be trying to say something, but I couldn't quite hear her. I started to ask her if she could speak up, but stopped as soon as she began speaking again at a more audible volume.

"Is... is Alan... alright?" she said, though I could still only barely hear her.

"Yeah, Elsie, he seems to be fine. How are y--"

"... Good," she said, and her eyes closed for the last time.

It was my turn to scream. I was responsible for my siblings, that was the last thing I'd told Dad. I'd promised we'd be here when he came back to us. The pure anguish rolling out of me started Alan whimpering. "Elizabeth? Are *you* okay?" he asked.

“I feel fine, buddy. I...” I stopped talking and followed his eyes to where he was looking. On my left side, a big chunk of our sheet metal roof had come down. Rather, a big chunk of roof had come down *into* my left side. I felt strange looking at the crimson liquid flowing out of me. That didn’t seem right. Blood was supposed to stay inside, yet here I was, letting it all over the floor. Huh. That did explain the metallic smell, though.

I tried to focus through the fog of blood loss. The metal was mostly blocking the blood flow, and based on what I knew of human anatomy, I could tell that the wound was not as bad as it could’ve been. But ‘not as bad’ was still not good. It gave me hours instead of minutes. Not that I could tell Alan that. So instead I said, “I’ll be alright. People will come to help us. The Land Army is probably already on their way, and they can fix me right up. Don’t you worry!”

~*~*~*~*~*~*~*~*~*

Liverpool, Britain

22 December, 1940

-3:24 am-

“Over here! This one’s been completely demolished!”

I woke up to a voice shouting somewhere above me. That seemed odd. I didn’t remember falling asleep. I opened my eyes, and then I remembered... the

Blitz. I looked up towards Alan, but he was still asleep. So I checked my side, and saw... well, it wasn't good. I was lying in a pool of my life-blood, and still more was flowing out of me. I knew that I had minutes at best; I had to make this time count.

"We're alive!! We're alive!" I shouted at the top of my voice, hoping that all the debris wouldn't completely block out my voice. I felt Alan waking up, but I couldn't stop shouting. I had to get the people's' attention, I had to get Alan rescued, I had to keep Alan safe, I had... I had... Well, a little nap couldn't hurt, right?

NO. I couldn't leave Alan alone. He was my responsibility. I was all he had left. I had to stay alive, I couldn't... I couldn't...

I could feel my life trying to leave my body, but I refused to let it. I concentrated all my will on staying put, on helping Alan. I was his protector, I had made a promise. Though I could hear the people above us moving the rubble off of us, I knew Alan wouldn't be safe forever. I *had* to be here for him. I had promised, and I had never broken a promise in my whole life.

As the light faded from my eyes, I knew I couldn't leave. Not really. At least, not for long... My undying spirit would live on.

NIHIL NOVI SUB SOLE

0. The Beginning

The Prophet is my friend, I think to myself, she can help...

No, no one can truly help me, I should just turn around and walk home, that little doubting voice in my head snaps back, but I quash it just as quickly. Deep down, I know talking about... this... will help, but...

I sigh, shake my head, and push my way through her curtains, noticing the sudden change in atmosphere at once. Her small house is always lit by light of those aromatic candles she loves, so it's colder (and smells better) than the surrounding woods. She isn't sitting in her 'Public Appearance Throne', but I'm used to that. Ally and I have been friends since before she became Prophet, so I frequently come to visit her in her time off.

But this is different. I'd be asking her to do something for me not as friends, but as an Enquirer to the Prophet. There are procedures for this, and I'm ignoring... well, all of them. But I want... I need...

I realise that I'm standing just outside her study, so I close my eyes for a second, collecting my thoughts. As I enter, she looks up from the book she's reading, utterly unsurprised to see me. She shakes her head, smiling, before saying, "Ah, Lu... I'd wondered when you'd be getting here. Come in, then. I already know what you're here for, so let's get right to it. I'm going to read you this story, alright? I just need you to listen to it, okay? If I explain why now, or along the way, it'll ruin the effect, so please... have a seat." She gestures towards a nearby chair, one of the few not completely buried in books. As I sat, she looks at me with a smile, her eyes sparkling with excitement. She claps her hands before reopening the book on her lap. She pauses for just a moment to clear her throat, and then her wild grin returns.

"I picked this one out especially for you, love! I hope you like it!"

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I. The Living World

“Before civilisation, before life, before even Time itself, there was the Void and the Great Sea. Then out from the Void stepped the Firstborn, the One-Before-All, majestic and calm, who began to create. First, the Near-Sky was created, between the Great Sea and the Void, as a place for the Firstborn to work. Next, a piece of the floor of the Great Sea was pulled up to form the Lands, upon which the Firstborn created the Others. First came the Great Mother, the Lifegiver, empathetic and kind, who immediately began creating the living things of the new Lands; one particular group of these many new living things were the first people of the Lands. Next, the Firstborn formed the Lightbringer, the Morning Star, bold and brash, who saw many of the creations of Great Mother, especially the people, fumbling in the Darkness, and so, splitting each from themselves, created many bright lights for them to hold.

“But the third and Last of the Firstborn’s children, was different. This one, rebellious and self-assured, did not believe that aid should be given to the life begat by the Great Mother. When the Others were not convinced by the Last’s proposal, the Last rejected all that had been given, and ended the Time Before Time, becoming the Timekeeper, the Razing Blade, the one who brings death to all others. This began by taking the Lightbringer’s lights from the created, and casting them out into the Void.

Here, they became the Faraway Lights, the last remnant of the Firstborn's love for the people. But the Timekeeper's betrayal of the Firstborn's creation was unacceptable, and so the Firstborn cast the Timekeeper into the Void as well, and had the Lightbringer give light enough to make the Timekeeper's body shine brighter than the other lights in the Void.

“But though the Timekeeper had been exiled, the Curse of Time lingered, and the people of the Lands suffered and died. When the Firstborn and the Great Mother found that they could do nothing to stop Time, they grieved, for they cared about that which they had made. And so the Firstborn retreated into the Void, and Great Mother retreated beneath the Lands, each unable to deal with the reality of Time... and the toll of death. And thus the Near-Sky was shattered, and people of the Lands first saw into the Void.

“And they grieved. What were they to do?”

II. The Refusal

“So thus, the people of the Lands were alone in the Era of Dying, with nothing to protect and guide them. They had only the Faraway Lights by which to see, and with nothing else to guide them, some took to the following the Faraway Lights as a source of refuge. But the Lights gave no comfort from the coldness of the Void, and the greatest of

the Lights was the Timekeeper, the one that placed the Curse of Time and began the Era of Dying. Yet still, the people would not acknowledge that they had lost anything, acting as though this was always the plan of the Firstborn. They ignored the great darkness of the Void, and praised the Faraway Lights as their saviours. Especially the Brightest among them, the Timekeeper.

“Over time, the Timekeeper took the Firstborn’s place in the minds of the people. These descendants of the first people, ones who had never known the Near-Sky, accepted it as fact that the Void had always been there, visible and staring down at the Lands. They had known it no other way, and the loss of the Near-Sky had pained the Elders, the ‘firstborn’ of the people, greatly. They wanted not to inflict the same tragedy upon their children, and refused to discuss the Time Before Time, when death had not yet come, and time did not yet turn. Though the Elders were only trying to keep the heartbreak of losing the Firstborn, the Great Mother, and the Near-Sky from their children, their “protection” caused an entire generation of children to not understand their own history, nor the tragedy of the Era of Dying..

“As the Curse of Time progressed, and more and more of the Elders passed into the Void, knowledge of the Near-Sky, the Great Mother and the Firstborn passed too, from common knowledge, to superstition, and finally into myth. At the same time,

reverence for the Timekeeper became more prevalent, eventually overshadowing the Firstborn.

“As this happened, the Timekeeper began to relent. Feeling bad for causing such harm on a people who now gave praise to ‘the Brightest Star’, the Timekeeper lessened the Curse of Time. Not so that the people of the Lands would stop passing into the Void, but enough that they could stay in the Lands for longer.

“But this thankfulness to the Timekeeper awakened a burning anger in one long ignored by the people...”

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II/III. The Interlude

“Ally, this is nice and all, but--”

She slams the book shut with a resounding thwack. “Hush! I’m not done yet. You’ll understand once all is revealed...”

I stare at her, momentarily confused, but the smile slowly spreading across her face lets me know she's joking. As I'm not in as comedic a mood as she always is, I refuse to acknowledge her 'joke', instead opting to just wait it out.

At last, she scowls at me, defeated. It's my turn to grin, even if only for a second. When I remember why I'm here, I shake my head and scowl back. "Can we just... get to the point already?" I ask, knowing her answer before the question even leaves my lips.

Grinning again, she gives me a wink and says, "All in good time, my child.... All in good time." In my head, I say I'm older than you; out loud I just say, "Fine. Just... keep going, then."

Triumphant as usual, she reopens the book and starts flipping through. "Good! Now, where were we?"

I have to think for a moment, but I think I remember... "The burning anger reawakening part, I guess?"

“Ah, of course! Here we go, then. And Lu? Do try to not interrupt the story anymore, mKay?” She clears her throat, and then continues.

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III. The Rage

“Many years had passed, over the course of which great numbers of the Lands’ people passed into the Void due to the Curse of Time. Though the Firstborn was gone, these losses were not unnoticed: each resonated within the Great Mother, as all living things on the Lands were part of the family. They had come from the Great Mother, and to the Great Mother they should return... But the ignited fury was not the Great Mother’s. The waters of sadness consumed the Mother, not the flames of wrath.

“No, the one infuriated by the Lands’ people’s abandonment of the Firstborn and the Great Mother was even more forgotten to the people. The one who was righteously enraged by the people’s adoration for the so-called ‘Brightest Star’ was the one who tried to give the people an escape from the Void’s oppressive Darkness in the first place, the Lightbringer. This one had only wanted to help by creating the lights, but when the Timekeeper had scattered them as the Faraway Lights and been thrown into the Void, the Lightbringer too had gone out into the Void, but to try to bring the lights back to the

Lands. Upon return, however, the Lightbringer found the people celebrating the very same one who had bestowed the Curse of Time. But the Faraway Lights, for which the usurping 'Brightest Star' was being celebrated, were created by the Lightbringer.

“Naturally, as any would when their actions are misattributed, the Lightbringer first approached the Timekeeper, and attempted to get the record cleared. ‘You have taken credit for our lights,’ spake the Lightbringer, ‘and thus taken credit for that which you had no hand in. You must inform the Lands of this, for it is possible that the people there are simply not aware of your misdeeds.’

“But at this, the Timekeeper simply laughed, and answered ‘I have done no wrong to you. The people love all of your work, even the glow that was not intended as a blessing. And I did not take credit for anything that was not at all ours. I scattered the Faraway Lights, I blessed the people with the ability to enter the Void, and now, as the Brightest Star, I keep the Faraway Lights from getting too near and blinding the people. You deserve nothing, as you have done nothing for them in this time!’

“The Lightbringer was appalled by that which the Timekeeper had said. The pressure that had been building hit its maximum, and the wrath of the maligned Lightbringer began to fall upon the Lands below.”

IV. The Trade-Off

“When, in the Lightbringer’s eyes, the Firstborn had been betrayed by yet another creation, the spark within started to blaze. But it was soon touched by the grief caused by the loss of the Firstborn’s guidance. In this manner, it became an inferno of rage.

“But all was not lost for the people on the Lands. In talking with the Lightbringer, something also started to change within the Brightest Star, the Last Child, who at last was becoming worthy of such a title. Though the intent had simply been to antagonise the Lightbringer into departing deeper into the Void once again, the Brightest Star had realised how much the people of the Lands needed help. *They can do nothing without aid, thought the Brightest Star, and yet I am willing to give it to them. Without oversight, they would have fallen long ago. Yet now I have fought with one who wished to take this responsibility from me. Do I... do I care for these people and their Lands?* ‘If only the Firstborn were still around!’ lamented the Brightest Star, ‘but it is my fault that this is no longer the case. I would trade anything to receive guidance on this new development.’

“But lo, the only one left who could offer the desired assistance was the Lightbringer, the one whom the Brightest Star had so maligned. The Lightbringer was re-collecting their scattered Faraway Lights to themselves so as to prove their value to the

Lands, and had unwittingly become the Stumbling Block, the Flame of Dawn. In this way, these two children of the Firstborn took each other's roles as Morning Light and Opposer, respectively. Each would trade all they were in order to do what they believed would be best for the people below... and maybe, just maybe, bring the Firstborn back to the Lands. When at last the self-righteous Stumbling Block returned to the place where the Brightest Star had so long lay, in order to reclaim the last of the Faraway Lights and become whole once again, they were surprised by what they found. Standing between them and the Lands below, arms outstretched and blocking their advance, was the Brightest Star. 'I will not let you harm **my** people, o sibling,' called the Brightest Star.

“‘We had no plans to do such a thing, foul thief. We are bringing **our** Lights back to them at long last!’ retorted the Stumbling Block, before extending their hands, palm outwards, towards the Brightest Star. The Stumbling Block's eyes closed in concentration, and slowly the Light was stripped out of the Brightest Star and pulled back to the one from whom it came. Their enemy rendered powerless, the Stumbling Block continued advancing on the hapless Lands.”

V. The Unending Night

“When first the Stumbling Block began collecting the Faraway Lights, the people saw their disappearance as portents of awesome and terrible events to come, though they

knew not whether the results would be good or bad. But slowly, as more of their Faraway Lights went out, they began to notice a yet brighter light moving from Light to Light before they vanished. *A second Bright Star in the sky is surely a good thing*, thought the people, *so the oncoming events must be good as well*.

“They could not convince themselves of this, and rightly so. For after every Faraway Light was flicked out, the ‘New Light’ advanced on their beloved Brightest Star, the one who produced the light for their food and who let their plants bloom. And this malevolent New Light, the Stumbling Block to their survival, pulled the Light from the Brightest Star. *This Brighter Star is too bright*, thought the people, *so we must have done something wrong by our Brightest Star, or this would not have been allowed*. And so all the people of the Lands lamented, wondering what they could have done to prevent this.

“However, things were not yet done getting worse. Seeing the people cry for the usurper, the scorned Stumbling Block came down to them faster, and asked why they were so loyal to such a rogue. But lo, the Light of the Stumbling Block was so great that all who viewed them became blind from the brilliance, and much of the nearby ground caught fire. Seeing themselves as the cause of such damage to the Firstborn’s creation, the Stumbling Block retreated to the Great Sea below the Lands. But in doing so, the

Lands went dark for the first time since the Time Before Time, the original Era of Creation.

“But, being below the surface of the Great Sea, the Stumbling Block did not see this. Instead, they tried to get as far from the Lands above as possible, diving towards the bottom of the Great Sea. There, no one could be hurt by them, no one could see the mistakes they’d made, nor how far they’d fallen.

“Or at least, that had been the Stumbling Block’s plan. But, unbeknownst to them, there was another at the bottom of the Great Sea. The Great Mother, whose depression at the Curse of Time’s inception, had been driven to the very depths to which the Stumbling Block had now fled. The Great Mother had seen no other living thing in the intervening time, but seemed unfazed by the Stumbling Block’s transformation, nor their sudden appearance there...”

VI. The End

“Instead, the Great Mother spoke in a voice unused for centuries, and said, ‘We know what you have done, foolish sibling, and we know why. All of this time alone, separated from our creations, has allowed us a certain gift of Prophecy. We knew you would come to us eventually. And we know what you need to hear, for we needed to hear it for a long time, too.’

““And what might that be, o Lifegiver? What could be so important now that was not important enough for you to come back to the Lands above before? Why... ?’ But all at once, the realisation came to the Stumbling Block.

““Dear sibling, you know what I must tell you. You also know it to be true in your heart, though you’ve been running from it. As I did. But we can run no longer. Our beloved Firstborn, who came before all of creation, is gone forever, and has been since the beginning of the Era of Dying. To continue searching is fruitless, so we must instead return, and make amends with the Last Child, the Undivided. Only through accepting the past can we look to the future; we must forgive!’

“Though they didn’t want to believe it, the Stumbling Block knew it was true. They took the hand of the Great Mother, and ascended back up, past the Lands, back to the Void. Back to the Brightest Star, the Last Child.

“When at last the Trio was reunited, they had much to discuss. Many a compromise was made, and many sacrifices made. But it was all for the good of the people of the Lands, because those people had been important to the Firstborn, and so each of them wanted to help the people, as a Last Gift of sorts. And so the Stumbling

Block relinquished much of their Light once again, separating it back into the Faraway Lights and restoring the luminescence of the Brightest Star. As the Lightbringer once again, they agreed to take turns with the Brightest Star as the Light of the Lands, with whomever was off-duty retreating to the Great Mother's place below the Great Sea, taking with themselves each of the people who passed into the Void while they were on-duty. In turn, the Great Mother would take all of those people she had so lovingly created and, after they reached the end of their times, shape them into new Faraway Lights, as a reminder that those who pass into the Void are never forgotten... and as a reminder that the ones above still care about the people of the Lands below."

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VII. The Truth

The Prophet stops speaking and looks at me expectantly, but I have no idea what she wants from me. I stare at her for a few moments longer, trying to figure out what the story meant, but I come up with nothing. So I improvise. "That's a... um, nice story. What does it have t--"

She interrupts me with a glare and holds me in her gaze for a minute, but she can never stay serious for long. She snorts, and playfully punches me in the shoulder. "Come on Lu, use your brain! Isn't it obvious?"

I am not in as exuberant a mood, but I knew she'd be like this when I'd decided to come to her for help, so I try to play along. I cock my head, thinking hard, but I have no shocking revelations. "Uh... were you trying to tell me a story just to take my mind off things? Because I'd recommend a happier story, if that were your goal..."

*She sighs, and shakes her head. "We've known each other since... well, forever. When have you **ever** known me to tell a story with no purpose behind it?"*

I have to admit she was right, but that doesn't get me any closer to understanding. "I... I don't know, Ally... Why don't you just tell me?"

"Ugh, fine," she says, rolling her eyes. "But that ruins the point, and you know it." I nod, both confirming that I knew and urging her to continue. "It's like you've never even heard of an allegory!"

"I know what they are, they're the ones where things mean other things. But what did any of that story have to do with my mom? I wanted comfort, not confusion..."

She sighs again, defeated. "Lu... a shorter version of the story would be 'an important person goes away forever, so everyone has to figure out how to deal with their grief, until they finally accept the loss, and move on'. Is that clear enough for you?"

And at last, I understand. But I'm not happy about it. "Are you saying that I should just forget about my mom? Move on?"

I notice how much louder I've gotten when she flinches away from me. I feel bad for that, but I'm still too upset to apologise. She shakes her head quickly, and says "No, no, no! Moving on doesn't mean forgetting! It just means moving past all of your sadness, past your anger, and at last being able to be happy again... She wouldn't've wanted you to be so sad for so long, and you know it."

She is, as always, correct. I know she is. But that doesn't make this any easier. I sigh, and give her a weak smile. "... Okay... I'll try. And... Ally?

"... Thank you."

In the Age of Dragons

7866 FA - 1450 CE - 367 DV

I watch the flames draw closer, and know I should be worried. But I can't make myself be, the excitement is just too much. I nock another arrow as I glance in every possible direction. But I do not see our quarry.

"I was right, you know!" I call to Amilea, not looking in her direction, not needing to. I hear her snickering from somewhere behind me, and I break into a grin. Despite the fire and the omnipresent danger, it's good to be with the old crew again...

7710 FA - 1294 CE - 211 DV

Kammiyl always was too hard on herself. And after the accident, she was even more self-loathing. We all told her that it wasn't her fault, that nothing could've been done, but she didn't seem to believe us.

So when she came to me on the accident's first anniversary, I wasn't surprised. I knew nothing could be done to convince her otherwise, and so I wished her well in all future endeavours. And so that cursed thunderdrake cost me two team members, even a year after we killed the last of the draconians...

Or at least, after the Order thought we had.

7866 FA - 1450 CE - 367 DV

A cascade of water rains down to my right, bringing me back to the present and dousing some of the fire. I look up to see Teilyr in the nearest tree in that direction, readying yet more water. They smile down, offering me a thumbs-up, and I return the gesture. From somewhere just past the treeline to my left, out of view, I hear Fyk-Dur's gruff voice saying, "Is the boss bragging about 'being right' again? For the last time, boss: we **all** knew this was going to happen, you're preaching to the choir here." I can't help but laugh at this, and I hear most of the others try to stifle their own amusement.

Another gout of fire, this time nearer to our position. It shuts us up instantly, and we're all back on edge again. I tighten my grip on my bow, and begin to focus. When we used to hunt in the caves and valleys surrounding the Great Mesa, I couldn't concentrate the same way. The sounds and smells were never what I thought they should be... But here, in Aroquil Forest? Even here, in a clearing like this one, this is my home. I close my eyes, and open my other senses. I become acutely aware of where each of my friends was. But they weren't my target, never would be. I hold my breath, getting as stationary as possible...

There. I let my arrow fly, nocking two more before the first even finds its mark. I open my eyes when I hear that ever-recognisable sound of an arrow puncturing skin followed by an agonised roar. But something isn't quite right. The roaring should be getting quieter now, not louder. Unless...

"Everyone, *MOVE!*" I shout, the sky already darkening. I loose my arrows blindly and start to run as far from where I was standing as possible, seriously hoping that the other four are out from underneath it in time. When I hear the crash behind me, I skid to a stop and turn to assess the damage.

None of the rest are immediately visible, but that doesn't mean anything. I frequently lose track of their positions in combat situations like this. The target is down, so I feel comfortable calling out to them. "Guys?"

No response.

7697 FA - 1281 CE - 198 DV

In the year 7668 FA (1252 CE/169 DV), all the peoples of the world at last revolted against the draconians after nearly two centuries of oppression. When fires died down and the smoke cleared, the people found that they had won. They had beaten their 'masters'. They were free.

But the draconians still lived, and craved a return to their 'rightful' rule. So over the next two years, the united peoples built a foundation to stand against the draconians, to hunt them down, and to slay them. It became known as the Order.

Though I was too young to be much use during the revolt, I remembered the atrocities we'd experienced under the talons of the Drakun Queens, those horrible

autarchs of the draconians. So as soon as I reached the proper age, I joined up. I grew up in the woods, and had grown proficient with a bow while trying to keep my family alive. I figured I could use these skills to help others, too.

But, you see, the world rarely stays united about something for long. With most of our enemies consolidating power in hiding, recruitment numbers were way down; my proficiency with anything that could be used as a weapon was enough for the Order to put me immediately in charge of the group of new recruits.

Though there weren't many to begin with, more still dropped out over the course of our training. By the end of it, only six of us remained, not including myself: Amilea, Feinyx, Fyk-Dur, He'ithan, Kammiyl, and Teilyr. Though we were a diverse group, both in terms of skill and background, we worked extremely well together, and had truly bonded during training. We quickly rose in the Order's ranks, in no small part because of our lack of losses. Excluding those who dropped out before becoming true members, my team never lost anyone.

That is, until the 'accident' during the Debacle at the Great Mesa.

7866 FA - 1450 CE - 367 DV

A little part of me starts to panic, but I do my best to ignore it. Worse looking things have happened that all five of us walked away from. They're all fine. They have to be. I hurry back towards the clearing.

A pained groan to my left makes me a stop, and brings my hopes back up. I run over to where it had come from and find Amilea and Teilyr completely tangled together, but otherwise no worse for wear.

I smirk. "Should I, um... leave you two alone?"

"Bite me," replies one of them, but they're so entangled that I couldn't tell who'd said it. I can't help but chuckle watching them get separated, even in the current circumstances. Once they're finally standing up, I ask them if either saw where Fyk-Dur or He'ithan had gone.

Instantly, Amilea responds "No, unfortunately. I was too busy pulling Teilyr out of a tree".

"I know something!" Teilyr pipes up. "As I tried to get out of the tree, I heard what I can only assume was Fyk-Dur running farther into the Woods on the other side of the clearing; knowing him, he'll be lost for days. But... you haven't found He'ithan yet? They... they still seemed to be standing in the middle of the clearing when it came down. I hope they're alright..."

Oh no.

7709 FA - 1293 CE - 210 DV

Feinyx was always a bit hot-headed, but I knew we could count on xem when we needed help. Xe would have done anything for us... until xe gave everything for us.

The Order had finally tracked down a Drakun Queen aerie, and believed it to be the last of them. After the Assault on Mount Garamundal the year prior, they were confident that we could be free from the draconians forever. I had doubts, but my superiors would hear none of it. Looking back, I wish they'd been right.

Every active member of the Order was called up for one final strike on the last of the Drakun Queens, and we all marched at dawn towards the Great Mesa. Deep in

the Labrynthine Badlands, the Great Mesa was surrounded by smaller hills, and filled to the brim with caverns. Most of the other squads were put together to strike teams with the sole mission of going through every one of those caves. My team, however, was one of the few chosen to stand atop the Mesa, and strike down any draconians trying to flee by air. With our team being heavily dominant on ranged attacks, I was honoured by the placement. I was still convinced that our weapons and magic could do anything.

I was mistaken. After about of hour of searching with no results, one of the strike teams must've finally stumbled upon the nest, as suddenly a Drakun Queen burst through the ground below us, followed by more, and then hundreds, if not thousands, of their offspring. Draconians of all types flooded out from the hole. The few teams alongside mine didn't amount to more than 100 people, many of whom just weren't 'elite' enough yet to be in one of the strike teams.

I sprang into action, firing more arrows than I could count. Three at a time, four, five... anything to try and minimise our casualties. Amilea covered my flank as usual, her poisoned blades glistening in the hot sun. Off to my left, I saw Teilyr and Feinyx working together, a whirl of magical energy. Teilyr would encase the draconians in ice, and then the white flames of Feinyx's VoidFyre would make short work of them. Out in front of

me, Fyk-Dur had activated his Wilder Aspect, and was punching anything in range with the combined might of his ancestors. To my right, He'ithan swung again and again, rending the draconians' hard covering with ease. As their sword drew in blood, their swings became ever faster and hit ever harder, but at the cost of their own life force. But Kammiyl was right where she should've been, backing He'ithan up and keeping them alive. Though she later felt more than partially responsible for what happened, I wouldn't blame her. I couldn't. Nobody could've predicted the events that were going to transpire...

At last, the cavalry arrived. Some of the strike teams had finally made it to the top, and began doing what they did best: slaying draconians. Since I didn't have to try and protect everyone anymore, I turned my attention skyward, to the Drakun Queens. There were at least a dozen, maybe more, each protected hundreds of drakes and other lesser draconians. We could not let them live.

I whistled to get my team's attention, then pointed upwards. Not all of them heard or saw me, though. Kammiyl and He'ithan had gone off to help another team, and Fyk-Dur was still in a rage, unaware of anything but the hunt. That left Amilea, Feinyx, and Teilyr with me. Teilyr called upon the winds to lift us up, and together, the four of us rushed through the air towards the closest of the Drakun Queens. She was smaller

than most, but still enormous, easily ten times larger than any of the more standard types. She was guarded by a fleet of Icedrakes, but Teilyr's fire and Feinyx's VoidFyre stopped them cold. And when she opened her mouth to blast us with more ice, I filled it with as many arrows as I could. At least one pierced something important, as she began to fall from the sky. If she weren't dead yet, she would be when she hit the ground. And once she was, her children would quickly follow, biologically unable to survive without her orders.

We were turning our attention to the next closest Queen, still held aloft by the wind, when we were blindsided by a Thunderdrake. Or, more specifically, Feinyx was blindsided. It tore off xer right leg, and a decent chunk of the connected torso. But Feinyx was resilient and ever headstrong. Xe grabbed the Thunderdrake around the front leg, and held on tight. The drake did every manoeuvre in the book to try and shake xem off, but it was no use. The rest of the team and I could only watch, too stunned to move, let alone help. We watched in mute horror as the drake flew ever closer to the cloud of Queens from whence it came. When it was within range, there was a sudden burst of energy from Feinyx and the world went white.

When my vision finally returned, I saw something I never expected. There was naught left of the epicentre of the blast, with only a few drakes from the edges still alive. And even they were all engulfed in VoidFyre. But there was no sign of Feinyx, not even a remnant of the saviour of the day.

Teilyr had the wind carry us down, and we were too stunned to speak. When we landed, the other strike teams slowly started to cheer. But I shook my head. We had lost one of our dearest friends that day, how could I celebrate? The applause broke off, and I tried to think of some explanation I could offer, some story I could tell...

All I got out before the tears started was, "In death, sacrifice"...

7866 FA - 1450 CE - 367 DV

I race back to the clearing, not paying attention to anything, not even checking to see if Teilyr and Amilea are following me. If what I think happened is actually what happened.... I increase my speed. I have to be sure I'm wrong.

Getting to the clearing, the first thing I see is the body. The thing I brought down is larger than I thought, and the wing nearest me is shredded. That must've been

where my arrow hit. But it still doesn't tell me where He'ithan is. I walk towards what I assume is the head end of the great beast, trying to ascertain exactly what it was. I go over each option, slowly narrowing it down. It's too large to be a wyvern... wyrms don't fly... the scales are the wrong shape for a drake... linnormr don't breathe fire... By the time I reach the far end, I have a sinking suspicion I know what it was... and it means our problems are far from over, especially since our Reaver is missing.

"He'ithan?" I call out. It's a longshot, but I'm hoping that they're aware enough to respond, or at least make some sort of noise. I wait a moment. Nothing.

A sudden sound behind me, a snapping of branches. I jump, turning and pulling an arrow from my quiver in one fluid motion. I stop when I see Teilyr and Amilea stepping into the clearing. Teilyr, smiling, continues towards me obliviously, but Amilea has stopped dead in her tracks. Clearly, she's figured out the same thing I have. At last, Teilyr notices my expression. They turn back towards Amilea, and see my grim countenance reflected on her face as well. They look back and forth between us, contemplative. "What?" they finally said.

"Drakun Queen," Amilea and I said in unison.

"What?!?" they responded. Though they're a specialist in arcane knowledge, they forget common sense stuff (like identification of draconians) all the time, so this wasn't exactly unexpected. As they look back at the fallen beast, I watch their eyes widen in shock and disbelief. "No... No! NO! The Queens are all dead! And regardless, drakontes aren't supposed to be here. They lived deep below the Great Mesa and atop Mount Garamunda. Not here! Why is one here all of a sudden?? This is not good!! uh... I, um... W-where's Heithan?"

But I don't respond. For at that moment, an otherworldly, unnatural sound comes from the fallen beast. Stranger than their normal calls, stranger than anything I'd ever heard before. But still, I know what that cry meant, and as I feel my blood run cold, I whisper "No..."

I shake my head to clear the growing despair, and, without taking my eyes off of the body before me, try to explain the situation to Teilyr. "It's... You know how Reavers are usually incredibly beneficial on hunts, as they take in power from draconic blood? Well... not against drakontes. Even after death, their blood can reverse control, taking

over the Reaver. And I think... perhaps this Queen fell onto He'ithan's blade. Because that terrible sound... if I'm not mistaken, was the last cry of a Reaver."

"No!" Teilyr and Amilea yell in unison.

"Yes." responds a discordant voice. Stepping out from beneath the fallen drakun, something that appears to be He'ithan emerges. But the expression on their face is alien, teeth bared in a strange half-grimace. Was the reborn drakun trying to smile?

In an instant, my bow is drawn and an arrow nocked, pointing at "He'ithan". But the drakun only laughs at this, a twisted sound, as foreign as... well, everything else about them. "Ha, you think *that* can kill me? I am millennia old, the last of my line, and a Queen among you primitives. You cannot possibly hope to even harm me," she spits.

"Well," I reply, "one of these knocked you from the sky earlier, and now you've killed my friend and took over their body. I've killed others just like you before. This 'primitive' will kill you yet."

Worry flickers across her stolen face, but is gone again in an instant. "Oh, your friend isn't truly dead, not yet. But kill me, and they die too."

"What's she mean, boss? That can't poss—" started Amilea, but with a flick of the Drakun Queen's wrists, both Teilyr and Amilea are thrown backwards into trees. I flinch, but my arrow stays fixated on her skull.

"Much better," she says. "Now, you insidious parasite, you have me trapped. What will you do? Kill me and your friend both? Or will you let me return to my plans of destruction?"

Arrow still pointed at her face, I consider these options. Can I trade He'ithan for... whatever she wants to destroy? Would it be worth it? Or would I hate myself forever for sacrificing one of my friends? And then... in that moment, I know what I must do.

"I've made my choice," I say.