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We've been travelling for what feels like forever. I miss my creature comforts - at least the army provides clean food, water, and a safe place to sleep... mostly. My legs are on autopilot now, and the happy couple is starting to annoy me.

"Tristan, Isolde. Maybe keep your eyes out for trouble, instead of on each other?"

Tristan shoots me one of his trademark, lopsided smiles.

One arm lazily wrapped around Isolde, her auburn hair tickling the tips of his fingers. Onyx and cobalt, a partnership forged in war — one that most know to fear.

"Come on, nothing out here can beat Tristan and Isolde."

"He's only half as annoying on a full stomach," she adds, smirking.

I watch the two of them move together, how easily they complement each other - it's odd how domestic it feels.

Their friendly bickering hasn't always been that way, back when I introduced them — it took a while before they stopped going for each others throats.

Which of course meant I had a front row seat to the flirting fighting and the battlefield marriage. They treated war like a joke and love like armour.

Not too much time for a grand ceremony when death becomes second nature.

"Why are you whining, Stryn?" Catelyn's voice cuts in.

I glance over my shoulder, ground crunches against her combat boots as she walks like her claim to the land is implied, flames dance across her fingertips just because she can.

Dirty blonde hair frames faded burn marks across her face, a quiet strength people know not to question.

She stares at me like my very presence is offensive "A soldier like you should be *grateful* to be included on a mission like this."

I snort, weavers always think they walk on rarefied air.

Her haughtiness wasn't *entirely* underserved, when she spoke you listened or you burned.

Catelyn was infantry in another life, although what she lost in time she made up for in power.

Or so I'm told.

We begin ascending a small ridge, the last golden rays beam over the horizon.

That's when it hits me.

The wind's dropped completely, like the world is holding its breath. No rustling nor birds chirping just a cold chill in the air.

Magic is always weird near the border of the alliance. Twitchy, jumpy, untamed.

Hopefully nothing. Probably something the weavers would notice long before I did.

"Special assignment is a stretch, Catelyn," Isolde said. "We're walking around on the border of the alliance looking for... what exactly?"

Then there's Fynn, the last member of our merry little band, his armour shines, so clean I could fix my hair in it, a testament to the amount of action he's seen.

Although I suppose being the vice commanders son comes with certain expectation.

Unfortunately, humility isn't one.

Neither is critical thinking.

I just thank my lucky stars he isn't a weaver.

"The official memo says unusual magical activity," says Fynn reciting it like scripture.

"As for exactly where, we'll find it in the morning."

I stared at him. Is he *dense*?

An open encampment. On the border of the alliance. No wards no watchposts no plan?

Bandits, dragons or their riders - take your pick - we're an all you can eat buffet.

I pumped my legs as I came just over the hill, and the ache greets me like an old friend. Something glints in the sunlight - almost a shiny blur - its gone just as fast.

Then again, five days with Fynn and anybody would start seeing things.

"Maybe we should find it today, get out of here while we still can," I muttered.

Fynn turned around and stared at me like I'd walked up and slapped him.

"Who's in charge?" his voice carries a brittle edge, the kind people use when they're afraid of being ignored.

I raise my hands in surrender.

Fine. If a dragon finds us, I'm going to feed him Fynn first.

I'm going to kill Fynn.

Despite my objections, we've stopped at a clearing twenty minutes into the forest of Caledonia, and now, like a good little soldier, I'm roaming around collecting firewood while the vice commander's son is stretching his legs.

At least Isolde decided to tag along.

"Don't," she said, glaring at me knowingly.

"Don't what?" I asked innocently, as we trudged back to camp, picking up smaller pieces of firewood along the way.

"You know what. weavers think they're better than us just because magic is second nature to them. They aren't the ones that collect firewood," she poked me in the chest.

"We are."

We've had this argument since Blackthorne, maybe its how she keeps our world simpler. weavers and soldiers, firewood and fire.

If you ask me they need to be taken down a peg.

I let out a short laugh. "And his majesty?" I said, gesturing to Fynn sprawling his lanky frame in the biggest tent.

She looked at me disapprovingly. "Between your stubbornness and Tristan being, well... Tristan, it's a miracle both of you are still alive."

"Hey, what's that supposed to mean?" Tristan said, walking up to us, taking the firewood from Isolde.

"You know exactly what it means," she replied, flashing him a warm smile before disappearing into their tent.

Being on the frontlines for a year, we've both seen our fair share of horrors in the infantry — but she's never let it wear her down.

Maybe that's what Tristan loved about her.

I don't think I ever told her how much I relied on that, she wouldn't have known what to do with it anyway.

Fynn still lounged inside his tent, and I can't help glaring at the impotent ass as I walk up with the rest of the firewood.

"You got something to say, soldier?" he said.

I set the firewood down just a little too hard. "Must be nice to be useless - and still get the best tent."

He watches me arrange the firewood like it offends him. "Stack it properly next time," he says.

I consider stacking it on his head.

Catelyn clears her throat - loudly. "Why don't we finish setting up... before one of you gets set on fire."

I gesture to the firewood. "Speaking of fire."

Her eyes linger on the treeline, a distant unreadable gaze that looks like she's listening for something she can't quite hear.

"Catelyn" I prompt.

"Right"

She flicks her wrist, and a small ember rises in the pile of firewood. Tristan lazily waves his hand, a shaped stream of air coaxing the flame to life.

Within minutes, we have a roaring fire - warmth, crackle, and a semblance of comfort. I'm just about to sit when Fynn, in his infinite generosity, blesses us with a command.

"Stryn, first watch. I'll relieve you in three hours."

Of course he will, right after the riders surrender their dragons and join the alliance.

"Sure," I mutter, drawing my shortsword as the rest of them seal their tents.

I lean back, warmth of the fire chasing the cold from my boots, the weight of the sword across my lap is familiar now — the mark of the army burnt into it, a small speck of onyx and gold lines

it. We were so excited when we met in the army, me and Tristan thought we could conquer the world. Now... well not much has changed.

Except him.

He makes it look so easy, weaving like magic has always been apart of him. Even now I feel the soft hum around me, there but just out of reach.

Magic here feels wilder though, more untamed. Free?

I look into the soft darkness, the forest hums with life, trees and flowers that don't die food and water that never makes us sick.

Magic breathes, when it breathes it chooses — not always wisely.

I suppose that's what draws them here, why we've been fighting dragons and their riders for as long as I can remember.

Power.

I shift my gaze upwards. The moon hangs just above the horizon, the starlight still casts a beautiful shadow across the trees, basking them in a gorgeous silver outline. I'm only now feeling sleep call to the deepest recesses of my mind, but something quite curious has caught my attention.

A... piece of sky?

The starlight seems to bend around it.

The shadows seem almost... drawn to it.

"God, I need sleep," I muttered.

"Clearly," a voice said.

I nearly jump out of my skin — but it's just Catelyn in front of me, toying with a small flame in her hand.

"You look like shit," she says, smirking.

I let out a dry chuckle and look back at my fascinating piece of sky — only this time, my skin actually does crawl.

The sky moves.

No, *No*.

Wings.

A shape - a shape peels away from the stars, impossibly vast, coming at us fast. It lands without a sound.

I'm flying through the air, I hit something, a tree maybe, the world stutters.

I fight through it forcing my eyes open,

No, *No*

Catelyn is crawling up, her eyes flaming red, her mouth open in a silent scream as fire swirls around her.

I try and get up,

To help her.

To save her.

My legs give way again, I meet the ground cold and hard — the world still spins,

All I can do is watch.

Then — then she's gone.

Her fire dies like someone sucked the air from the world.

A sound tears out of me. Or her. I don't know, it doesn't stop.

Gods — her eyes, they're... looking at me, begging me to help.

But she's not there, not anymore — she's gone.

Then it turns on me, I should move — run, but I can't, I should've saved her, I should've run faster.

I watch as flames fly towards me.

Then they split.

Tristan stands atop his flattened tent air billowing from his hands stopping the maelstrom of fire — gods he's alive, *I'm alive*.

I have to *move*.

I crawl out of the way, flames burn above me, not pain at first — heat so deep my skin wants to run away and hide. Fynn stumbles out next - takes one look at the dragon and runs.

Something coils inside my chest. Anger? Rage? I'm not sure. He's already gone well polished armour shines like a beacon through the trees.

The dragon follows, impossibly fast bleeding into the night.

No scream this time.

I know he's dead.

I'm still there, frozen.

Then the world explodes again,

The trees cry out as embers and dust fill my eyes, I force myself to my feet, everything in my body screams .

I draw my shortsword and square my shoulders, every bone in in my body screams *run* - but I don't.

Not until someone yanks me away,

I stumble, undergrowth skinning my knees as the sound of destruction chases us.

I regain my footing mid-sprint, and it takes a moment before i realise who's pulling me. Tristan "Are you *insane*" he shouts over the chaos. "Did you see that thing? What exactly were you planning to do with the sword - *clean its teeth*?" "Isolde?" I rasp

His jaw sets "We were separated, You were supposed to be the lookout!"

Tristan turns around raising his hand.

"What *are* you doing" I hiss

He looks at me with that annoyingly cocky smile "Slowing it down."

"*Now* who's the idiot" I mutter

Wind whirls around us.

Trees twist, wrench free of the earth - roots flailing, branches cracking - an unholy tornado flying toward the darkness, enveloping the beast in a vortex of chaos. A roar erupts from the shadows - annoyed more than hurt. We've slowed it down but not for long

I turn to Tristan

He's bent over, stumbling, drained.

A storm like that would take a toll on anyone.

I help him up, a flicker of darkness passes over his eyes. "We have to keep moving," he says coughing. The first rays of sunshine spill through the canopy above as we maintain a slow jog, "How the hell didn't you see that coming" he asks

"God damn shadow dragon" I mutter stumbling through the woods, my gut clenches — what if she's still alive, what if she's waiting for help that will never come.

Suddenly we crash into someone. Hard. Sending us all sprawling down a small hill, rock and branch meets flesh and bone as cuts litter my body in all the familiar places.

I climb out of the brush, I've never been happier to see someone that beat up, Isolde hugged Tristan, cuts lined both of their faces, I stand up as the world spins. Apparently the adrenaline has worn off.

"What was that thing?" she asks

"Shadow dragon" I grumble

I start back into a slow jog Tristan and Isolde close behind me, the roars have faded, for the time being at least. We break into a clearing as sunshine spills over us, finally I draw a long breath - the first one that doesn't taste like ash and fear. The air tastes bitter, a lump in the back of my throat as the memories resurface, Catelyn's frozen smile, the darkness following Fynn whole. They're gone, they're really gone.

"At least we'll see it coming now." Tristan says "Front row seats to our funeral" I mutter. Isolde shoots me a look.

I begin with a dry chuckle at first

Then the dam breaks - I'm doubled over clutching my ribs with laughter, tears blur my vision.

It catches on fast, soon all three of us are doubled over, a mixture of laughter and tears. A tangled mess of grief exhaustion and fear.

This is how we survive, we can't afford to stop and grieve.

Not now.

Not yet.

So we take the moments in between.

I lay back on the muddy ground, the mixture of dirt, soft grass, and a cool breeze centring me in reality,

They're gone but we're still here. We've made it.

The sky holds for a heartbeat.

Then it *moves*.

Light warps — stretched thin warped like heat above stone stretching the sky until it cracks, an unholy combination, black as night, silver swirls etched into its scales like ivory kissed darkness, wings unfurl as its descent becomes sharper, flint littered charcoal blotting out the sun.

I lunge forward reaching for both of them, arms outstretched.

Time seems to slow down as distance grows,

Its tail strikes first,

I fly through the air weightless until the world throws me from the ribs

I hit the ground. Hard. A crack, a scream - I don't even know if its mine.

I lift my heavy head as warm blood fills my mouth, my vision refocuses.

No.

No, no, no.

She hangs there like a broken puppet, skewered on a branch, blood dripping from her side staining the earth like it couldn't wait to claim her. As if the world already passed its judgment - cold cruel and so damn unfair.

No.

You cant have her. Not another one.

I crawl towards her,

She tries to speak but only blood comes out.

I pull myself up against the tree, plugging the wound best I can as the viscous river stains my hands.

Her eyes find mine

They flutter once

Then they don't

Tristan stirs just under her, blood drips from a deep gash in his temple, soaking into the soil as his eyes blink open - dazed and unfocused - flitting from her broken body to mine.

And then he understands.

The muscles in his face seem to scream, torn between sobbing and collapsing. A roar sounds behind me, I roll out of the way as a wall of fire erupts around us flames licking my body, I greet pain as an old friend as the smell of burnt flesh fills the air.

I try to pull him up before it strikes once more - *move*, we *have* to move - but he thrashes against me.

“No! no - Isolde!”

Its a sound i never want to hear again, anguish and pain meet in lockstep as his only tether to the world is ripped away from him.

Then the dragon charges us once more,

It doesn't make it far.

Air retaliates before the beast does, a storm so powerful the beast struggles to move, it rears its head and fire rushes towards us.

Its first mistake,

Fire is swept up around us, an unholy maelstrom, fire turns on firebreather as the dragon thrashes.

The storm is Tristan's, it doesn't stop

Tristan doesn't stop.

His back arches as veins begin to glow, like something is trying to escape from the within him - not magic, not ours. Something inside him is fighting, like its trying to break free,

His eyes snap to mine, they're black not just the irises...everything — like his very soul is turning.

The storm slows around us and the beast roars, a shrill soul splitting sound that makes my very bones tremble, I choke through dust and smoke - stumbling towards him.

A shake him. Hard. We may have hurt it for a time but it will only come back stronger.

And angrier. “Tristan, Tristan, we *have* to go, we *have* to survive”

“For her.”

Then he locks eyes with me,

The boy I knew is gone,

Pulsating dark veins crawl every inch of his skin, the irises of midnight - once fleeting, are now permanent.

Whatever was trying to escape isn't... It's *home*.

Its part of him. "It's shouldn't have been her" he says

Even his voice is different, hollow. Unfeeling, a husk of what it use to be. I can fix this, I *have* to fix this.

The dragon stirs once more, Tristan's eyes snap towards it and the beast recoils.

A dragon. Recoils

It raises its wings and launches into the air.

Not just fear. Flight.

The husk that used to be my friend turns on me, head between his hands muttering unintelligibly. I lower myself next to him, the next thing I know I'm on the floor as he stands above me.

"It should've been you!"

The words sting more than magic ever could, I stumble backwards but air wraps around me. Pinning me in place.

The man in front of me isn't Tristan.

His steps are jerky, skin cracks, bones bend. He's fighting himself from within.

Its tearing him apart.

Then pain - *white hot*

His fist connects, my jaw my ribs, I can't tell where anymore. I taste blood.

Sweet memories turn bitter.

"Tristan..." I plead.

He hits again.

I squint through blood, a flash of silver, an unfamiliar hand.

This isn't my friend, this isn't the boy I know.

Instinct takes over.

I sweep his legs, he goes to ground. Hard.

My hand find my shortsword

Too fast.

Too natural.

I hate it.

Bone groans and muscle screams as I rise sword clutched in trembling hands like it knows what I don't want it to do.

Tristan's focus flits muscles in his face slack then contort again, a part of him is still there.

Something I can save.

Its gone as soon it came,

I'm lifted. Weightless, painfully aware of my vulnerability. I hit something and crumple to the ground. Wood? Stone? I'm not sure.

He advances again, this time I slash low, I *need* to *stop* him.

The blade goes farther than I wanted, a deep gash across his knees, sickly black and blue blood falls to ground, like the world reclaiming something it lost.

He hisses striking out wildly, I spin kicking him clear in the chest as he sprawls to the ground.

I need *time*. Time to *fix* this.

Time I don't have.

I slam the pommel of sword into his head - not to kill, just to knock him out.

To buy time.

It doesn't work, I try again.

His face changes, he's him again. I can save him.

Then an expression I've never seen before crosses his face... fear.

As I hold him down a slight whisper escapes

"Please" his voice is his own.

I know what he's asking for

I can't, I won't.

But he can.

He grabs my sword by the blade the sickly blood staining my blade as he draws it into his chest.

He shudders.

Then he's still.

My best friend. My brother

A shadow falls over the clearing as the dragons massive frame descends once more wings outstretched wind billowing through already burning wounds.

I don't care.

I just want it all to be over.

I raise a broken hand but my body gives away.

I fall to my knees, the blood stained sword falls from my grasp, clattering against rock.

Hands bloodied with the ones I couldn't save.

He wasn't whole says a voice in my head

A devil on my shoulder telling me I'm holy.

I fall back the world spinning, sunlight across my broken body.

So warm, so peaceful.

I wait to step into the light

I wait to join them

But I don't

The last thing I see is a scaled spiny silhouette of patterned midnight and platinum.

A soft puff of steam envelopes me.

Then the world goes black.

Chapter two

Warm heat brushes against my skin, I open my eyes - the memories take a minute.

Then they flash before me, Catelyn's flame snuffed out, darkness swallowing Fynn whole, Tristan - Tristan and Isolde. I relive it all, I see her lifeless body dangling from the tree, the sword - plunging it into his heart.

I can't break down.

Not now

Not before I figure out what the *hell just happened*. I rise and for the first time in a while the world doesn't spin, no blood no torn skin. Just - stillness. I'm healed, the memory returns - steam touching my skin softly closing my wounds.

Why?

Their bodies still scatter the clearing, lifeless eyes that I can't meet. Burning them would be easier, customary.

They deserve more. They deserve better.

I claw at the ground, dirt marring my fingers as I dig two graves, it takes hours. I look down at my hands, dirt blood and cracked nails, it feels fair somehow.

I lower Isolde's broken form into the grave, that same look of shock etched into her face, then there's Tristan's... husk?

I don't even know if its him anymore.

I lay him next to Isolde.

Guilt spreads in my mouth like metal, that memory will haunt me forever, a black silhouette passes above me, wings cutting through the clouds. Its not hiding anymore. Watching, waiting. One question still plagues me.

Why did it spare me.

I cover their graves, no markers, no names. Its not much, but its all I can give them.

For now.

I stand in front of their graves as an emptiness passes over me, tears threaten to throw me over the edge but I push them down. Just like we were taught to do.

I close my eyes and reach out, expecting to feel the usual familiar hum of magic subtly pulling against my thoughts. This time it doesn't answer, its like breathing through glass. I've never been a weaver but I've always felt a presence, we all do.

It helps us understand what it is we're fighting for. Who we are, now it's still there , but I'm not *part* of it anymore. That scares me more than the dragon does.

I have to leave,

I don't want to,

But something is *wrong*.

I've been walking for two days, living off of water from streams and rabbits I cooked along the way. The damned dragon has become somewhat of a calming presence.

God I never thought I'd hear myself say that.

Black wings keep poking through the clouds, a constant smug reminder that he's still watching. Why? I've given up trying to figure that out,

I just need to reach Azmerius. Report back what happened. I can't feel my legs anymore, although that seems to be a common theme on this trip,

Soft trickles of water stumble playfully through jagged rock formations as I pass through one of many forests.

Taking off roads is safer, patrols passing through the area wouldn't understand how one man survived an attack that killed two of the strongest weavers we had.

It could be...problematic.

Besides I need time to get my story straight, once I make it back to the centre of the alliance I'm going to be questioned, most of all by Corvek Greyvyrn.

Getting the vice commanders son killed isn't exactly a great conversation starter.

I come through the other side of the forest as the sky burns orange like her blood on my hands, I shake the thought away. Village lights sparkle in the evening light illuminating a patrol. I check my pack and what I find is hardly encouraging, some water and stale bread I stole a day ago. I bite my lip, I need supplies, might not get another chance for a while.

Slowly, I start creeping towards the village, using the shadows as my cover.

That's when I see them.

When I see *her*.

Irisa Vale.

Layered metal in sheets of scarlet accented midnight, adorn her olive green skin, caramel coloured hair frames her face, tousled and matted in place but not broken, woven together by strings of will that refused to crack under pressure.

She's with a patrol, her weavers insignia sets her apart from the others, my mind shifts into survival mode. She may be my oldest friend but seeing her now could only cause problems. I inch closer surveying my odds, two weavers three soldiers.

The village isn't too big, but if I keep my head down I might just make it out unscathed. I enter through the outer edge of the village, a couple of them stare at my my frayed raven hair.

I'm going to stick out like a sore thumb, a tall rugged boy, sunken blue eyes and armour that looks like it's been to hell and back. I pick up my shoulders, puff out my chest and walk through the village square.

The best disguise is no disguise at all.

A line I learnt at the orphanage, stealing some bread, sometimes cake if I was lucky. Hopefully it comes in handy now.

The town square is bustling as I move through it, I keep my eyes forward -my hand darts out, a slice of bread, a crust of meat. Gone before they even realise.

The most glorious cake sits on the table in front of me, my hand darts out once more- so close, I can taste it melting in my mouth already. I hear boots crunching in the dirt, getting closer, then they're right in front of me. I turn too fast - the merchants table goes crashing down, I'm left holding an entire slice of cake. "Thief!" the call sounds from behind me. I'm running again, my

legs buckle under the pain as the patrol is close behind me, I jump over barrels throwing people aside, a child shrieks as i almost barrel over him. My armour turns on me. Tightens like its forgotten who forged it, cutting into my arms and legs.

She's caught me.

God damn Ironweaver, cold strong hands turn me over, even high and mighty weaver training can't cloak her surprise. "Stryn" she whispers. The man behind her snaps his head up. Two jagged edges adorn his armour, a field commander.

"Stryn? Stryn Ashrowe?"

"You've been presumed dead for three days son, vice commander Greyvyrn would *love* to have a word with you." She meets my eyes again, a mixture of fear and worry clouds her eyes, she hesitates like she knows what she's about to say could break me.

"They found the bodies."

I'm a dead man.

I try to sit up but blood pools - at this point I don't know from where.

Then I pass out.

The world rocks back and forth as I slowly come regain consciousness, my eyes flutter open, light pierces my brain like hot shards of glass, its been days since they've felt the sun.

The forest looks familiar, we must be near Azmerius by now. I know what's going to happen, I'll be questioned, arrested then executed. Unless I can come with a better story.

One that paints the vice commanders son in... a different light, strength is everything. Weakness isn't taken to very kindly, I need to leave out Tristan's... transformation? I don't even know what happened to him, stories of weavers who push themselves too far have always acted as warning, I've always thought that's all they were

Until now.

I groan sitting up in my saddle, a familiar patch of sky seems to be following us, the dragon. Following us into the centre of the alliance, I could say something, it'd be shot down, multiple dragons with their rider can be an issue.

Alone? Without a rider. Azmerius's ballistas and windweavers could take it out easily. Somewhere deep in the back of my head, a quiet voice says - *don't*.

So I don't.

Two horses ride behind me, three in front of me. Irisa turns, she can't meet my eyes. Shock hits me in a wave. *They think I did this.*

"Irisa" I call out. "I didn't do this."

The field commander turns, he looks almost amused "Not for us to decide boy, you know the rules."

I pay no attention to him, Irisa still can't meet my eyes. A soldier from the back calls out, "innocent people don't run." I shake my head, he hasn't seen what I have, none of them have. We turn a corner, the wind carries the smell of iron stone and — *food*. The best in the alliance, gods it's been days since I've eaten.

Giant fortified walls come into view, metal ballistas sprawl over the battlements, loaded as windweavers wait upon the walls. Usually unnecessary, dragons making it this far into the alliance is...unlikely. The citadel peeks out above the walls, four spires beautifully adorned with the symbols of the allied kingdoms glinting in the new morning light.

I can hear the bustling of the first kingdom behind them, outside a list of names are etched into the walls.

Casualties.

Five new names.

Fynn Greyvyrn

Isolde Emberlain

Tristan Emberlain

Catelyn Rhimeheart.

I see it all again, in pieces. The fire, the darkness, the branch.

The...sword.

Then I see mine.

Stryn Ashrowe.

"Risen from the dead it seems, eh boy?" the field commander snarks. The huge iron gates swing forward croaking and groaning.

Azmerius always takes my breath away, grand houses line the sides of streets, weather-worn statues of kings and forgotten heroes stand at intersection points in the road, tiny boats litter a slow moving glasslike stream.

The city breathes,

Unlike those on the border, it has a semblance of permanence, rare these days.

They parade me through the streets, the residents gawk at my broken form blood and dirt — another body, another traitor, soon another name on the wall.

News travels fast,

I see the soldiers and weavers quarters, a group of them gather in front of the obsidian black slate building, whispers. “Traitor,” “Murderer.” I hang my head low - some I’ve fought beside, some I’ve bled beside. Now they want to see me bleed.

How easily they believe.

We approach the citadel,

Watchtowers line the battlements, fyreweavers and windweavers stationed atop each one. At the heart of it all, the central palace looms - its shadow bathing the rest in darkness, a palace of gunmetal black, I’ve never been inside. A sundial sits atop it, the symbol of Azmerius etched into it, angled so it always finds the light. Four mirrored towers rise around it, together they project the sigil of the alliance, the symbol of hope. It always takes my breath away.

Even now.

The gates swing open slowly like they’re giving me as much time they can, the soldiers escorting me stiffen, even the field commander.

Corvek Greyvyrn stands in front of us, a picture of impending doom, the muscles in his jaw tighten like they’re pulled together by strings, almost as if the mere appearance of grief would break his carefully constructed facade.

His piercing gaze falls upon the field commander.

He clears his throat like he’s only just found his voice, “Vice commander Corvek Greyvyrn, prisoner Stryn Ashrowe present for questioning.”

He glares at me like my very name is an insult, I see the ghost of grief pass behind his eyes, he hides it well. “Stryn Ashrowe under the peace accords you are charged with high treason and the murder of your regiment, you will be questioned, if found guilty - you will bear the pain you inflicted.”

I don’t trust my voice, I meet his eyes and simply nod. The patrol turns as Corvek escorts me inside the palace, Irisa pauses like there’s something she wants to ask me, she meets my eyes for the first time since they found me.

“Is there anything else soldier?” vice commander Greyvyrn snaps.

She shakes her head and follows the rest of her patrol.

I look longingly at the intricate marble walls, at least I'll have some nice scenery before I die, the solid metal doors are bathed in gorgeous tapestry, I wait for them to swing open, they don't. I'm guided to the side down spiral staircases as gorgeous marble fades to functional steel, no grandeur, no spectacle. I'm guided into a small windowless room, a single table sits in the centre.

No

No

A truthseeker stands to the side, expressionless, a heart with an arrow through it carved into the edge of his armour. My shock is clearly apparent on my face.

Greyvyrn shoots me a chilling smile "Ah I see you're familiar with our friends ability"

I take my seat at the table, he starts simple everything considered.

"What happened?"

"A dragon attack." I say,

The truthseeker nods,

"How did Fynn Greyvyrn die,"

I pause, the truth would not help me here,

"Fighting" I say.

Greyvyrn looks at the truthseeker, he shakes his head. "Lies." The vice commanders hand rears back. Before I can protest, pain sears from my face as old wounds reopen. "Every lie you tell leads only to more pain," He punctuates the point with another strike.

"Do you understand?"

I raise my head, blood stains my face and I meet his glare with a deranged smile, then i tell him what he doesn't want to hear.

"Running,"

"Fynn Greyvyrn died running."

Something in his eyes change, the kind of unhinged glee I've seen one too many times. For a second I sympathise with Fynn. I brace myself for the strike that never comes, the truthseeker simply nods.

I tell them everything, the clearing, the dragon attacking, how Catelyn stood her ground, how Fynn didn't, the way the three of us escaped - barely. The truthseeker doesn't say a word but his posture shifts, distrust and apprehension morphs into something almost akin to...respect? Until I tell them about the second attack.

The vice commander scoffs, "A dragon that parts shadow *and* light?"

This time the truthseeker speaks, "Impossible."

I don't blame them, for years we've fought dragons and riders who weave shadow or light, balance was their weakness, not anymore.

"You expect us to believe that?"

I shrug "I don't care what you believe."

Another strike.

I squint through the blood,

The truthseeker sighs like he doesn't want to believe it, yet he nods. Greyvyrn's eyes narrow, calculating. I describe the rest in detail Isolde's lifeless body hanging from the tree, then I get to Tristan, I falter only for a second. Hopefully they don't notice.

The truthseeker speaks again, "your pulse quickened,"

I meet his eyes and answer as flatly as I can, "I am not lying."

"I never said you were," he replies.

Expression crosses his face for the first time, a cold chilling smile "Fear."

Greyvyrn asks, "How did Tristan Emberlain die."

I draw a shaky breath and close my eyes. Pulsating veins. Twitching joints. Bones crunching. The glint of the sword plunging into his heart. I can't tell them, not this.

There are no facts only interpretations.

When I speak my voice is no more than a whisper, "He...he died a hero."

The silence is deafening, the truthseeker studies me. I wait for judgement.

Then -

A slow nod

The truth it seems, is an object of many faces.

I let out a breath I didn't know I was holding, the commander stands and paces slowly. The truthseeker whispers something to him too low to hear but one phrase makes through, "The empty hand." They turn and look at me like I'm something that needs to be fixed. Then - finally, the silence breaks,

"You will remain within the citadel, you are not reinstated." Greyvyrn enunciates every word like a threat. I look at him astounded, the message is clear, we don't believe you but we can't prove it - yet. I'm trapped. The door groans open and I don't waste any time, I feel their eyes burning a hole in the back of my head as I hastily shuffle out.

I climb the spiral staircase once more as the stone turns back to marble, gorgeous tapestries clash beautifully with the evening sky, I'm alive. That's enough for now - its short lived, she's standing there, in the middle of the courtyard. She stares at me, every muscle in her body tightens as she walks towards me, her voice is icy "What happened, why did they let you go." I look at her, she's seen things she shouldn't have to. I don't have the courage to meet her eyes, "I can't" I hate the words the second they escape my mouth, she doesn't need to know what I saw, what I did.

She rears her hand back and clocks me square in the face, another common theme. Tears stream across her face, her voice is a mixture of fear and sorrow "I saw the bodies, I saw... Tristan," realisation hits me like a sack of bricks - *they didn't ask me about the bodies*, "What happened out there." She whispers.

The memories flash by again - threatening to break free, I almost let them. *Gods*, it would be so easy to let it out, to finally let someone share the burden of the truth. Tell them what I saw every time I closed my eyes. I don't, not yet at least, but I owe her *something*.

"Not here I say," I guide her through the citadel dodging looks from guards, a disgraced soldier and a wielder, we blend it *really* well. Its like we've stepped into a different world, beautiful tapestries and artwork fades into flags of the alliance, boards showing troop movements and latest attacks on the border. The sudden change from marble to pure stone is jarring, only soldiers with business inside the citadel stay here.

We take the stairs to the top and take one of the small rooms, functional not cozy.

"Speak," She says.

I sigh, "A dragon attack."

She punches me in the arm this time, "Tristan's wound's weren't from a dragon, he didn't seem... him." I look at her - after Tristan she's the only person I can trust, the only person I have left. "He...changed - its like he wasn't himself anymore." I sit head between my hands, my voice is hoarse when I speak, "He tried to kill me, Irisa."

She relaxes sitting beside me, "Changed how?"

"I - I don't know, he was using magic - then he... he wouldn't stop, I tried to stop him!" the scream tears from my throat, it hurts *so much* - but gods, hurt has never felt so good. She silences beside me, I wait for her to scream, yell, shout - *something*, but she doesn't. I feel an arm on my shoulder, "I'm going to find out what happened" she murmurs.

"No, you can't. I don't know what happened," I hesitate, "they never asked me about the bodies."

She looks around like she's afraid of what the walls might say, "I'll keep it quiet." She's gone before I can stop her. I look around the room - simple and functional, a cupboard and a bed. The view though, that's worth it. The sigil shines beautifully in the starlight, statues and boats adorned with soft lights glow beautifully. Atop the palace a familiar haze sits cloaked in shadow and bending light, invisible to all but me.

The dragon, inside the citadel.

Not attacking.

Watching.

I walk over to the bed, everything hurts. Its stiff, leaves no room for comfort. I don't care.

Sleep comes easy

I'm running

The trees twist inward as whatever is chasing me gets closer, I blink - the clearing.

Isolde's blood coats my hands, I look up - she's trying to speak, blood pours out. I try to help her, to *save* her.

I fail.

She dies.

Again.

The clearing warps again, I'm being interrogated, Greyvyrn's voice but its warped, its *wrong*. Tristan's, "What did you do."

I open my mouth to respond but no sound comes out. I look down - my hands are covered in blood again. Its the clearing once more, except now - I'm *him*, through Tristan's eyes I see myself lift the sword.

The blade drives forward.

"Wake" A low voice says

Its about to reach my chest, then -

"WAKE" a voice shatters through.

I roll off the bed as a sword slices through where my head was, the dull thunk of metal through wood snaps me out of drowsiness. I draw my sword and parry — barely, I'm pushed back as the hooded figure advances, the sound of steel on steel screeches through the room as I feel the cold stone against my back. The blade pushes against my throat, I feel blood — red hot trickle down my throat. White teeth glow throw the hood curved in a cruel smile.

No, not like this, I haven't come this far, done what I've done to die without answers.

I grit my teeth, my leg screams in pain as I kick it forward, he stumbles - its enough, I lash out, my sword glances off his armour. I advance, striking towards his head - he dodges and twists his blade, it hits mine. Hard. Sending it flying across the room, he spins kicking me square in the chest, I fly back gasping for air as I hit the wall once more.

He advances on me, driving the sword down - I scramble to the side, a leg connects with my face, I watch through blurry eyes as a flash of metal swings towards my face once more.

Its going to hit me.

Then something changes, something pushes against my skin - like its trying to escape. Gleaming shadows burst from me - light etched in darkness, he screams as he flies back burned and broken, a crunch sounds through the room as he folds against the wall. I stare at my hands astounded, *shining shadows?*

I walk over to the broken body of my assassin and pull off his hood, a startled gasp escapes my lips. The truthseeker stands in my room, only this time a hand grasping at air is etched into his armour — *the empty hand.*

I hear footsteps racing up the stairs, there's more.

The only way out is a window, eight flights up.

The voice screams through my head once more "*Jump.*"

"What!" I scream into the room.

The footsteps are getting closer -

Tristan and Isolde are going to kill me if I die.

I step back and jump through the window, glass pierces my skin, air rushes through my face as I wait for the world to punch me. It never happens - I'm soaring through the air atop something... something scaled and spiny - I scramble to find purchase against its scales as we rise.

A dragon.

I'm riding a dragon.

Air ripples through my hair as we fly atop the citadel, the voices in my head — its been the dragon all along. Then it hits me — how they knew, *Irisa*. I pull on its scales, I have to get back down — to help her.

"Do not scratch me human." the voice again, cold and loud.

A dragon just spoke to me.

It dips below flying through the citadel, I watch the ground rush up to meet us, a flicker of movement, a flash of red — *Irisa*. We begin to rise again,

I jump — stone meets bone with a crunch, I try to stand but pain shoots through my side, through gritted teeth I scramble up unsheathe a dagger and fling it wildly.

"Are all of you this impotent?" the voice booms once more.

It finds its mark, barely. I hear the attacker hiss as it grazes his leg.

He falters.

Its enough.

She swings forward, metal bends awkwardly lodging itself in his chest,

She pushes it further.

He falls.

We run, racing up the battlements, the citadel is oddly quiet. I look behind us, no patrols, no soldiers chasing.

This wasn't judgement, this was an assassination attempt.

The streets blur as we race through the softly lit city, I look up and see the familiar haze following us.

Towering trees loom around us, twinkling city lights chase us through the trees, we run until they cant find us anymore.

Then it lands.

It doesn't attack.

It studies us.

Irisa is staring at me, mouth hung open, confusion twists to clarity.

To realisation — how I along walked away from the attack, why they tried to kill us.

I see the pieces fall in place.

She doesn't ask, she just punches me square in the face.