

They say beauty is in the eye of the beholder, and mine have never beheld such beauty before today.

Not to say I haven't seen my fair share over the course of two lifetimes. Take my home here in the Saint's Tribulation Mountains for example, with all of its dazzling vistas. We have verdant forest greenery as far as the eye can see, with multiple roaring waterfalls and nestled valleys within a day's hike, to say nothing of the breathtaking cliffside views overlooking vast swathes of the Northern Province. If nature isn't your thing, the village itself has plenty to see, such as all the pleasing architecture with its rounded edges, bilateral symmetrically, and wide-open spaces. Then there's the various works of local sculptors, weavers, artists, potters, and calligraphers who have become world renowned over the last decade, all scattered about as monuments to our heroes of yesteryear. My personal contribution can be seen in the many stained-glass workings set in wrought iron panes, though I merely rattled off the idea and better minds ran off with it. Didn't think it'd give rise to a craze that's got every household in the village sporting a stained-glass window, typically depicting a character that espouses some value like honour or courage, or more simply, a weapon like the spear, sword, or bow. Make no mistake, despite all the industrialization and modernization going around, this is a village of Warriors first, for the trials and tribulations of our mountain home is not for the faint of heart.

There are plenty of other examples of beauty to be found, in all sorts of shapes and sizes. Me though? I'm most partial to the beauty of the feminine form. A dimpled cheek, a freckled shoulder, a smouldering gaze, curved hips, or heaving breasts, all this and so much more is what comes to mind first and foremost when I think of beauty. Not without reason, as I am most fortunate to have so many beautiful wives to love, adore, and

appreciate. Today however, I find myself appreciating a different kind of beauty, one I've been denied for too long. That's the catch, isn't it? You always want what you can't have, and ever since I woke one day at twelve years young with the memories of two, admittedly fractured, lifetimes, I have yearned for this beauty before me. For years, I felt the absence in my mornings and spent evenings dreaming of what may come, and after so much blood, sweat, and effort, my dreams have finally come true.

Today, I reclaim the throne that has been denied me for so long, and more than that, the dignity lost without it. I am known across the Empire as the Savage Divinity, a title I bore with indignation and accepted because the words rang true. No more though, however, as from henceforth, I shall be known as the man who brought the Empire, nay, the Divinity who graced humanity with dignity and aplomb to separate man and beast forevermore.

"It's so beautiful," I say, choking back a tiny sob as I take it all in, my emotions threatening to overwhelm me in my moment of triumph. "Thank you for making this happen."

"Don't see what all the fuss is about. It's just a –"

"Shh-shh-shhhhhh." Holding up a finger to forestall Dastan's blasphemy, I wave him away, for his work here is done. "Thank you my friend, but you don't want to be here for what comes next. You've trained long and hard to bring us here, and now I must be alone."

"Whatever you say, boss." Giving me a little mock salute that does nothing to spoil my mood, Dastan asks, "We still on for tonight?"

“Yes. Bring your axe,” I add, reminding him that there is still work to be done.

Dastan chuckles, showing he doesn’t understand just how important tonight is. He was always good at following orders though, so he doesn’t ask any questions. “Will do, bossman.”

Though it’s a little rude not to see him off, my friendship with Dastan can withstand this much, so I simply nod and let him find his own way out. Walking up to my throne, I take in its smooth, porcelain curves and the polished wooden seat I carved with my own two hands. It almost doesn’t seem real, and I reach out to stroke the cool, rectangular water tank, ignoring all the ugly bronze piping that we couldn’t hide because drywall isn’t a thing. “Thank the Heavens,” I whisper, and with no one around to see me, I leave the door open and drop trough, before shuffling around in a small half circle with my pants and underwear dangling around my ankles. Would be easier to step out of them, but this is the way I always pooped in my past life, and by God this is how I’ll poop from here on out.

As my cheeks come to rest upon the cold, hard wood, I sit up straight, then slouch a bit before trying to remember what I do with my hands. Fold them across my lap? Rest elbows on knees and lean forward? Hands on knees instead? Should I install armrests? No that would be weird. What about back support? Nah, too much. Least the seat is the right height this time, not too high and not too low, so my knees have a little bend in them, yet not so much I gotta squat. Heaving a sigh, I fiddle about with my posture for a little more before finally giving up, because something just doesn’t feel right. What though? I got the tile floors and the tub across from me, my shirt pulled to one side, and my stomach churning with anticipation. Everything

seems just right, so why do I feel like there's something missing? Wracking my brain for a long minute, I come up empty on what it might be, until I reach up to scratch the back of my head and incidentally look down at my feet, which are feeling a little cold.

And are spread a little more than shoulder width apart, about as far as my pants will stretch. Why though? I mean, I get why, but I don't have to strain the fabric to sit comfortably, except I feel that it's necessary. A natural movement made without thought, and it takes a whole lot of thinking before I understand why, the answer to which lies in the undignified puddle formed by my pants and underwear. While it might not look like much, this too is a throne, one reserved for the same furry butt in this life and the last. The memories of my sweet, brown-furred doggo squeezing his fat ass in between my ankles come flooding back, always eager to keep watch while I do my business the same way he thinks I keep watch for him when we go out on our walks, only he likes to keep watch from a place of warmth and comfort.

Dogs and boxers are akin to cats and boxes. If it fits, it sits.

That's how it is with the memories these days, trickling in bit by bit or flooding back without warning, and I'm still not quite sure whether I am Rayne, Falling Rain, or Amigui first and foremost. A question asked all too many times before, one I have no answer for, so instead I turn my mind to a more pertinent question.

Where's Buddy?

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The piteous whine was a heart-breaking sound, a plaintive supplication that brought to mind images of drought and famine, but Alsantset would not be fooled again.

“Enough whining,” she snapped, and the sound cut off forthwith, only to be replaced by the most mournful, doleful stare in existence as Buddy hung his head low and opened his brown eyes wide, peering up at her in hopeful misery from the kitchen floor. “And sit properly,” she added, refusing to give in to the canine’s wily ways. The dog made no effort to heed this command, retaining his ungainly posture with his back feet splayed out to one side, instead of sitting with his feet under him like a proper hound should. Of course, that only added to Buddy’s charm, as he was not what one might call dignified, or even handsome and fetching. No, her brother’s hound was an awkward and unseemly creature, with loose skin, long, floppy ears, and all the grace of a drunk, excited child. It made him a poor subject for all the portraits, carvings, and statues so many artisans thought to make, but he had an irresistibly wretched sort charm, one that had her reaching for treats before she thought better of it and snapped at him again. “Stop that. You ate breakfast not five minutes ago, then stole breakfast from Banjo and Baloo.” Turning to the bashful bears whose posture was just as ungainly as they sat upon her kitchen floor, Alsantset scolded them too. “And you two? How can you sit there and let Buddy eat your breakfast? He is one tenth your size and a mere fraction of your weight, yet all you do is cower and watch as he steals your food. Disgraceful.”

The bears dipped their heads at the sound of her tone, for they could not understand her words. Buddy certainly seemed to however, licking his chops and glancing back at the two bears sitting by their empty bowls. There was not a hint of guilt in that little beast’s heart, of this much, she

was sure, for Buddy's only regret was the fact that he was caught, which was why Alsantset had to prepare more food for her brother's spoiled pets, or his 'fur babies' as he loved to call them. Thankfully only around family, as even he had enough shame to keep such things hidden from most.

"You are both old enough to hunt and forage for yourselves," she grumbled, ignoring the bears as they sidled up alongside her to sniff at the food she was preparing. They made sure to rub their heads against her shoulders too, as if a show of affection would see them fed sooner. It'd been many years since Banjo and Baloo could be considered small, and now they towered even above the tallest person in the village when stood upon their hind legs, and just barely matched her in height while they sat on their furry rear ends. Their size meant little however, save to show just how gentle and useless they truly were, always carefully watching where they placed their oversized paws so as not to squash anyone or anything underfoot. Left to their own devices, they would likely starve within the week, or be killed by the first person they approached to beg food from, so Alsantset rationalized her efforts as a life-saving measure to keep these bears from gracing some unlucky hunter's floor in the form of a fur pelt.

And that same hunter's head from gracing a spike outside her little brother's manor...

As for the culprit responsible for her extra efforts, Buddy's quiet pleas grew more and more insistent until he was all but assaulting her calves, pushing his head and rubbing his shoulder against them as he weaved in and around her ankles. When that didn't work, he started whimpering too, a soft and quiet cry that struck her like a dagger to the heart. There was Aura at work there, the cunning little thief literally tugging heartstrings to see himself fed. It wouldn't work, as he'd eaten more than his fair share this

morning, and would be fed by many others before noon, so she held the line and ignored him as best she could.

Not all that well of course, because when it came time for the bears to eat, she scooped up the furry little bandit and hugged him close as he tried to wiggle free from her embrace. Only for a bit though, as he gave himself over to her fingers as she rubbed his soft head and laughed at the sight of his eyes rolled up in sheer delight. "What is with you today?" she asked, exasperated by his antics. "Stealing, begging, even using Aura now? If I did not know any better, I would think you had not eaten for days, while I know for a fact you ate like a king just last night."

A giggle from the doorway stole her attention away, and she glanced over to see her sweet daughter standing in the doorframe. "I don't think you can make fun of Uncle Rainy anymore," Tali said, skipping over to give the sweet hound a kiss on the nose. "Not if you're also talking to the animals too."

Feeling her cheeks colour, Alsantset huffed and reached out to pull her daughter into a hug. "You will tell no one, and I will overlook how you have kisses for this worthless hound, but not for the mother who raised you."

Giving her a quick peck on the cheek, Tali giggled and pranced away, before opening the icebox which set Buddy to wiggling up a storm. There was no holding onto him anymore, not with his loose skin keeping her from getting a good grip, so Alsantset let go and shook her head as Buddy hopped out of her arms and went crashing to the ground. He didn't land hard, as he knew well enough to lighten himself now, and his claws clicked against the floor as he scrambled to get his legs under him. Darting over to

Tali's side, he promptly sat down and lifted his right paw, then the left paw, then spun about in a circle, rolled over onto his back, and hopped up onto his hind legs all without prompting, going through all the tricks he might be called upon to perform in his haste to receive his treat.

It wasn't that he couldn't understand the commands. Buddy was perfectly capable of parsing complex sentences; he merely lacked the patience to sit still and wait for them at this particular moment.

As extraordinary as her brother's hound might be, Buddy was first and foremost a dog, and not even a working dog like those kept by shepherds or hunters all across the Empire. In his defense, Buddy's eagerness was understandable since sweet Tali was an indulgent sort, happy to break into her personal stash of Spiritual berries to share with the greedy little hound, who reacted with sheer delight as she threw him one, then a second and a third in quick succession. None of which he caught mind you, his snapping jaws missing the mark each and every time only to lap his prize up off the floor with a complete lack of decorum. When it became clear no more berries were to be shared, he whimpered, tapped his front feet a few times, then went to lick the floor clean of any and all berry juice while watching Tali's hands like a hawk.

Hands holding berries for the bears, which the thieving hound once again tried to snatch, but greedy though he might be, even he wasn't daring enough to snap at Tali's fingers, so all Buddy could do was spin, hop, whimper, and watch as the bears gently ate their treats out of her hands.

Right up until he noticed Tali had left the icebox open, only a heartbeat before Alsantset recognized what he meant to do next.

Awkward and ungainly though he might be, Buddy was still a Divine Beast, one capable of miracles when the situation called for it. Covering the distance in a single bound, he stuck his head into the icebox and emerged with the entire basket of berries caught between his jaws. The look he exchanged with Alsantset was one of sheer disbelief, as if he himself didn't expect to succeed, no more than she believed he had the audacity to even try. Something in her gaze drove him to action though, and he ran off without so much as a single yip, leaping over the counter and soaring out the open kitchen window into the skies as he Cloud-stepped away with his prize.

Years ago, when her Warrior instincts were well-honed and her reflexes at their peak, she might well have caught Buddy before he reached the icebox. She most certainly would've caught him as he emerged, or at least stopped him from making it out the window, but almost a full decade of safety and indolence had dulled her edge greatly. So much so that she failed to even react until he was away clear and free, while sweet Tali stood frozen in open-mouthed shock, unsure whether she should be angry or amused.

Well, no sense letting her daughter know just how far from grace her mother had fallen. "Let that be a lesson to you," Alsantset proclaimed in an even and unhurried tone, as if she could have stopped the hound and simply chose not to. "Always close the icebox when you are done. Ice is not free, after all."

Difficult to instill proper values in the girl, especially with an overindulgent uncle living next door. This was a lesson Tali would not soon forget however, and a costly one at that. An entire basket full of Spiritual berries

was a priceless bounty, one even the Emperor could not often enjoy, so to lose them all to a mere dog was even more of a disgrace. Tali took it in stride however, with only a modicum of grumbling, since she had no one to blame but herself. Also because she likely knew her Uncle Rainy would make it up to her and then some, and she had other things on her mind, like tonight's all-important dinner which Tali had woken up bright and early to prepare for.

The sweet girl had come a long way since making dumplings for her Uncle Rainy, as she was now a full-fledged Chef in her own right. An unfamiliar title bestowed upon her by that same uncle, though he was unable to explain the difference between a cook and a Chef. Regardless of the title, Tali had learned everything her parents could teach her with regards to her culinary arts, and she was dead set on putting her skills on display for tonight's affair. Always happy to lend her precious daughter a hand, Alsantset busied herself with the prep work while Tali listed the menu out loud, reaffirming she had everything she would need for this most important meal. "Lamb poached in chili oil, braised pork shoulder, and pan-fried fish filets to wrap in the steamed flat buns, with spring onions, cucumbers, and lettuce for extra texture. That's to start," Tali began, before taking a deep breath and continuing. "Then crispy duck, steamed fish with taro root, fried pork belly with pickled mustard, and ginger scallion chicken for the main dishes. For dessert, we have an assortment of sweet buns filled with taro, red bean, custard, and sesame paste, as well as a sweet herbal soup to be served hot. Is that enough?"

"Mh." Rather than answer, Alsantset made a noncommittal sound, then pretended like she didn't notice her daughter's consternation. After a count of five, she looked up to find Tali's worried pout waiting to greet her, to which she gave a little shrug and asked, "No dumplings? You know how much your father and uncle love them."

Rolling her eyes, Tali huffed and scrunched her nose before setting to work, and Alsantset watched her daughter fondly while helping out. Outside, she could hear her son hard at work with his Martial training, ever eager to join his grandparents out in the Western province. Even after so many years, there were still pockets of Defiled hiding out in the desert sands, so Papa and Mama would lead a Sentinel patrol out every spring and return in the winter. A part of Alsantset was proud to see the Warrior her sweet Tate had grown into, a stoic and sturdy young man with an athletic frame and a smile that stole the hearts of all who saw it, but the mother in her hoped that he would never have to ride out and do battle, for war was a chaotic and unpredictable affair. Doubly so with how many enemies little Rain had made, enemies he paid no mind to because they were so beneath his notice, so the quickest way to catch it would be through the people he loved, and he still doted on little Tate so.

It wasn't Rain's fault. A powerful man attracted powerful enemies, and there were few enemies who could threaten Rain directly. Which meant the rest of them were safest staying here under his watch, while Papa and Mama had long since shared their plans with Alsantset should they ever be taken prisoner, namely that they would seek to die fighting or kill themselves so that they could not be used against him. With Grandmother also there to watch over them, there was little chance of that happening, but two hands cannot block four swords. A single Divinity protector might not be enough, though Alsantset suspected Rain had his own safeguards in place to keep their parents protected.

And Grandmother too, though the Herald of the Storm would balk to hear it. Carefree though he may appear, there was no one more paranoid than Falling Rain, and he knew full well what the greatest threats might be.

As if summoned by the mere thought of him, Rain poked his head through the kitchen window, the very same window Buddy absconded from not an hour ago. “Hi sis,” he said, grinning like a fool before ducking back out to avoid her scowl. Scurrying around to come through the door like a proper person should, he gave her a big hug and a small peck on the cheek to make up for the undignified greeting and appearance, wholly unbefitting a man of his status. Doubly so now that the bears were throwing themselves at him, though their enthusiastic, full-bodied greetings were unable to shift his dishevelled frame even a single centimetre. “And who’s this young lady hard at work in your kitchen? I didn’t know you’d hired a professional chef for tonight’s dinner. Hello, I’m Falling Rain. And you are?”

Huffing in mock anger, Tali refused to turn around and greet him. “Not today, Uncle Rainy.”

“What?” It was adorable how genuinely crestfallen Rain seemed when Tali refused to play their game, though that didn’t stop him from hugging his bears and massaging their cheeks. “No, no, you’re supposed to giggle and say, ‘It’s Tali, Uncle Rainy’, and then I go ‘What? Little Tali? Impossible, you’re just a little girl about this high with pigtails. How can this young woman before me be Tali?’”

“Not in the mood.” Leaving off her stirring, Tali rounded on the most powerful man in the Empire with her fists on her hips, and to Alsantset’s amusement, Rain truly flinched. Most men with so much strength would let it get to their heads, but her little brother was the same sweet, silly man he’d always been. Sillier, if she were being honest, and happier too, though we still had his melancholic moments and was often plagued by doubts and indecisions. There was none of that this morning however, as he seemed utterly carefree, and more than happy to cower before his beloved niece as she took him to task for his little dog’s crimes. “Less than an hour ago,

Buddy stole all my berries, the special ones Uncle Taddy gave me that I was going to use to make sweet tarts. Took them right out of the fridge, basket and all, bold and daring as can be.”

“That... sounds exactly like something he’d do,” Rain said, instantly conceding before his niece. “In fact, now that I think about it, I’m kinda surprised he hasn’t done it before. Weird that he ran off with the basket instead of just eating all the berries in one go, but he is not a smart dog. How’d he get in anyways? Did you leave the icebox open?”

“Whether I left it open or not is irrelevant,” Tali replied, looking away to hide her guilt. “Banjo and Baloo can open the icebox easily, but they know better than to steal, and Buddy should too.”

“You are absolutely right and I shouldn’t have even asked,” Rain said, again conceding without a fight, and Alsantset shook her head to see it. To the rest of the Empire, Falling Rain was the Savage Divinity, the man who slew the Uniter and almost single-handedly turned back the Defiled invasion. To the other Divinities, he was the first True Human Divinity, though what that actually meant was a matter for debate. As far as she could tell, it simply meant her little brother was far more powerful than any other Divinity in existence, to the point where none cared to even test him, not after hearing how he killed the Eternal Emperor, a powerful Divinity few even knew existed. Even Grandmother stopped trying to spar with him when it became clear just how outmatched she really was. It wasn’t a matter of martial skill anymore, not when little Rain was capable of controlling his weapons without even having to touch them, summoning waves of water to wash you away, or Cloud-Stepping out of sight and Concealing himself so well you could step on his foot and never notice.

And that was simply the tip of the spear, as Rain had yet to truly push the limits of his strengths, and Alsantset prayed he would never have to.

Which was why she could smile and look fondly upon her little brother as he kowtowed to his niece, promising to replace what Buddy had stolen and then some as he slowly backed out of the kitchen. “At least that explains why I can’t find the dumb dog,” Rain said, with one foot out the door as the bears tried to drag him outside to play, while he acted as if they were merely eager little cubs rather than fully grown bears weighing a half-tonne each, if not more. “Dropped by to ask if you knew where he was, but I suppose he’s in deep hiding until he forgets he committed a grave crime. So maybe a few more minutes, give or take.”

“Remember, I want you on your best behaviour for dinner tonight,” Tali shouted. “No pranks or antics, understood?”

“Absolutely,” Rain lied, and Alsantset had to look away before she broke out into laughter, because her little brother had yet to learn how to keep a straight face. “There’ll be no pranks, antics, shenanigans, or mischief of any sort from me, no ma’am.”

Showing she still had much to learn, Tali studied her uncle’s face and nodded. “Good.” Then, with a display of wisdom that went beyond her years, she turned to her mother and quietly implored her to make sure. Reaching out to pinch her little girl’s cheek, Alsantset washed her hands and marvelled once again at how wonderful it was to have running water inside the house, instead of having to keep a basin of water separate for washing only. Drying her hands on a cloth, she stepped out to find the most powerful person alive rolling around in the courtyard with the bears, flinging

one up high into the air while wrestling the other before having them switch places with effortless ease.

Only to catch his eye and devilish grin a moment too late as he lobbed a bear in her direction and shouted, “Catch!”

There was no time for thought, only action as the fuzzy, oversized projectile arced towards her, and she fell back on her tried and true training. A single breath was all it took to find One with the Self and One with the World, and her Domain billowed out around her, a shroud of energy projected beyond her Internal Core into the real world which stretched less than a centimetre past her skin. This External working of Domain Augmented her strength, speed, and durability, enough so that she should be able to support Baloo’s weight, whose adorable expression was a mixture of glee and anticipation as he tumbled head over heels through the air with mouth open, eyes wide, and hind paws clutched tightly in his claws. Strength of body alone would not be enough to catch the foolish bear though, because even if she let him crash into her chest and caught him with both arms outstretched, it might well prove to be too much force applied over too narrow an area and cause injury to them both. She knew well the theory behind Domain Plating, had read the prepared primers front to back on multiple occasions and attended countless lectures on the subject over the years. Despite all her efforts however, success had eluded her in her many prior attempts, and she suspected would continue to do so for some years yet.

Which Rain knew, and he would never risk injury to her or his bears, which meant he would most certainly step in before either one of them was hurt.

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When did Alsantset become someone who relied on others to keep her safe? A question asked and answered in the same breath, for she'd long since realized the cause. In the final battle against the Uniter and his hordes of Defiled, she'd been skewered by the Mataram Patriarch's spear while keeping her little brother safe. It was less a decision and more a reaction, but if she were to do it all over again, she would not change a single thing. According to those who saw it, she might well have actually died, only for her soul to be snatched back from the very precipice of reincarnation by Rain. That was more or less the end of her part in the war however, as the Healing left her weakened and helpless, and after the death of the Uniter, there was little else for her to do save accompany Rain back to Central and leave the Royal Guardians and Death Corps to hold their foothold in the west.

That was more than ten years ago, and Alsantset had not been in battle since. Not for a lack of opportunity, as there were Defiled warbands and enterprising Warlords aplenty to do battle with in the interim. She always had an excuse on hand to avoid conflict though. It'd been so easy, as she'd done plenty, and Rain did too, so when he started to take a hands-off approach to the remainder of the war, she followed suit. These days, she was less a Warrior and more a Mother, a Teacher, or even a researcher if the need called for it, helping Rain, Yan, and Grandpa Du develop a standardized Path for all to follow. They left the war in Papa's capable hands, and though he enjoyed plenty of success in those first few years, between politics and general fatigue, he had to fight tooth and nail for the sustained support necessary to reclaim the entire province, which was why there were still hotspots of Defiled and rebel activity there to this day.

Of course, it wasn't as if Alsantset had abandoned the Martial Path out of fear of death. She would still fight if called upon, with the only difference

being she was far less likely to volunteer out of hand. That's why she was so worried about Tate, because she wanted to be there to watch over him in his first battle, yet she was not looking forward to returning to the battlefield, for she was uncertain if she was truly prepared.

It was one thing to die for your family, but another altogether to come back to life and risk it all a second time.

All this and more flowed through her mind as she realized what her little brother was doing. At risk to poor Baloo no less, who she would not allow to come to harm, for he was as much a part of her family as her own children. Nor would she rely on another to see him safe, for she was Alsantset, a mother, daughter, and Warrior of the People. As Baloo passed through her Domain, she exerted her Will upon him and exercised the Authority bestowed upon her by the Heavens Above to support his entire body in a cushion of Plated Domain. This was not enough to keep him from injury, so she stepped aside and turned while bringing him along with her, guiding his momentum away from the house and back until it had played out enough for her to catch him, an effort of Will and Domain that left her spent and breathless.

To which the bear responded by bouncing in her arms and licking her face, which roughly translated into, 'Again please'.

After putting him gently back on the ground, Alsantset turned her glare upon her brother. No longer the wilting flower he'd been in his youth, he grinned like a pleased wildcat while emanating pride and confidence in his big sister, as if the thought of her failure never entered into his mind. "Congratulations on progressing yet another step along your Path," he said,

leaning over to 'catch' Baloo as the bear ran in and tackled him to the ground. Only because Rain allowed it however, and Banjo joined in with their games soon after, leaving Alsantset glaring at nothing at all. It didn't take long to sort the bears out, and Rain soon had them both reclining on their backs with their heads nestled in his arms like the big babies that they were. "I knew you could do it."

Difficult to argue against the facts, or even his methods considering how they'd pushed him in the past, so all she could do was accept his congratulations with grace. "Any particular reason for the push, or was it merely done on a whim?" Difficult to say really, for even though it seemed like Rain had plans within plans, he was prone to bouts of impulse and acting without thought at the worst of times. It had all worked out for the best thus far, and lately, he'd become even bolder about it as he came to understand truths that the rest of them had yet to uncover.

"Well, I spoke to Tate over there before popping in," Rain replied, nodding over towards where her son was hard at work practicing the Forms. "He said he's determined to fight on the Western Front and will leave with the next group whether you agree to it or not. Asked if I had a place for him with one of my friends, and said he'd run off to join the army proper if I didn't. I told him I'd think about it, and I have. I think he's ready."

A pang of guilt flashed through her as she came to terms with the truth at hand, that she'd been holding her son back out of fear for not just his safety, but her own as well. Tate was a man grown, twenty-two and yet to fight in his first battle, which meant he was almost five years behind his peers. The issue was that he was a passable young warrior at best, lacking the instincts or talents to separate himself from the chaff. It would take years of dedicated training to make up for his shortcomings, and it pained her to think what might become of him on the battlefield where even Peak

Experts were never safe. What's more, Tate's smile was so bright and cheery, she couldn't bear the thought of seeing it fade when faced with the harsh realities of war and suffering, an ugly truth she'd kept hidden from her children for as long as she could. Despite everyone's best efforts, there was still much work to be done in the Western Province, with dark days aplenty left to be had by all. Better if Tate stayed here in the North to pick up a trade than subject himself to all that, except her sweet boy dreamt of being a war hero like his grandfather and uncle, a dream he would not be dissuaded from.

Though there was no judgement to be found in Rain's amber eyes, it was clear he was aware of her inner struggles. "We can't protect him from everything," he said, offering her a sad shake of his head in response to her unspoken request. "And if I go with him, it might well put him in even more danger. Better if he goes with you, his heroic mother who will stop at nothing to keep him safe, with a full company of veteran Sentinels at your side. Short of tying him down, I don't think we can keep him from running off. If you don't want to go with however, I can talk to some people."

It was clear Rain himself wanted to go to protect Tate, and upset he couldn't. His presence would invite scrutiny from Defiled and Imperial Divinities both, as they all yearned to unravel his secrets. Secrets he shared freely, yet they continued to suspect him of holding something back, suspicions founded on nought but greed and frustration. The Path to True Divinity was not easily taken, nor could it be taught or imparted, for it was a journey of self-truths and Heavenly Enlightenment, even if Rain himself believed otherwise.

"You are right," Alsantset admitted, and she sank down to sit down on the grass beside him. "Utterly lacking in tact or consideration, yet still right nonetheless." Across the grassy courtyard, she watched Tate go through

the Forms with the grace of a bull and bearing of an oriole, which was the wrong way to go about it. Too light when he should be heavy, too hesitant when he should be forceful, too hasty when he should be careful, he had far too many flaws for her to feel good about sending him off into battle, and all her efforts to mend them came up short. There was no helping it however, so with the decision made, she moved on to something she could affect. Turning to her little brother with pursed lips, she asked, "When are you going to stop whiling your days away with nonsense and start a proper family of your own? It is high time you experienced the trials and tribulations of fatherhood firsthand."

Though meant as a joke, Rain's sad smile caught her off guard as he shook his head in return. "It's not that simple," he began, taking a moment to gather his thoughts before continuing. "Even if I was ready, which I'm not, there's a lot to account for. Let's say I decide I want to start a family today. How do I go about it?"

"If you still need me to explain this part, then I pity your wives."

Her attempt to inject levity into the conversation fell flat, but Rain humoured her with a small smile. "What I meant was if I should try for a natural birth, or should I adopt instead? After helping Tursinai through labour, Lin-Lin was very clear about not being ready to have a child of her own, and I doubt that'll change anytime soon. So if I do want to go the natural route, it'd have to be with Luo-Luo, the political implications of which are a nightmare to think about. Any child of ours would be the grandchild of the Emperor, which opens up a whole host of issues with the Imperial Family. Add in the fact that he or she would also be my firstborn, and that's putting a lot on the shoulders of a child. Even though Luo-Luo is eager to become a mother, she's agreed that politically speaking, it's better if our child is

second or third, if only so they only have to bear the burden of Imperial blood.”

This was nothing new. The Emperor and the Supreme Families had spent the last decade locked in contention with one another, jockeying over the scraps of power left in the wake of the Eternal Emperor’s abrupt absence. Rain had kept himself out of it thus far, but the grandchild of the Emperor and the firstborn of the only True Human Divinity would make for a powerful piece on the board in their games of politics. Even here in the village, people were not above such social jockeying, which was why Tali was so anxious about tonight’s dinner.

Rain was not done speaking though, so Alsantset held her tongue and listened. “Then there’s Luo-Luo herself,” he said, pitching his voice low as he hugged his bears close, and she wasn’t sure if he knew how vulnerable he appeared. “She would love nothing more than to bear my child, except I’m not sure if even she knows if it’s because she wants a child of her own, or because she believes that is her sole purpose in life. Not to mention the fact that I’m a Divinity, so who knows how that’ll affect my outlook on my natural born children, even though every female Divinity in the Empire seems to think that bearing my child will solve all their problems with their... suboptimal parental instincts.”

What he left unsaid were his fears regarding Lin-Lin’s possible reaction to any child born of their union, as he’d need more than a few drinks before he was ready to touch upon that. Waving the topic aside, Rain sighed and moved on. “I could adopt, sure, except once I do, I just know there’ll be a wave of demi-human babies dropped off at my doorstep, left there by Divinities who think they can build a relationship with me if I look after their unwanted offspring. I wouldn’t put it past the Emperor to drop a child in my arms either, because he’s already hinted at having me ‘foster’ or ‘Mentor’ or

‘guide’ some promising youth or another. Thankfully, Luo-Luo has kept that from happening thus far, mostly because it would invite reciprocation, and I will not send any child of mine into the viper’s nest that is the Royal family.”

Alsantset waited a good minute to make sure her little brother was done venting before deigning to fill the silence. “Not so simple indeed,” she said, slipping her arm around his shoulder and smiling as he leaned his head against hers. True Divinity though he may be, he was still her little brother, with all the same doubts and worries as always. “Take it from me though, little brother; parenting never is, and it never will be. You are as ready now as you will ever be until you take that first step, so you might as well do so sooner rather than later. Learn from father’s mistakes. Do not give your wives any reason to regret.” Smiling, she added, “If you act soon, you can lean on little Tali for help through the difficult start, as it would do her good to experience just how difficult starting a family really is.”

“Noooooooo,” Rain grumbled, sounding all of six years old as he tried his best to pretend he hadn’t heard her. “Don’t talk like that. Sweet Tali is just a baby, barely out of pig-tails, so how can she be ready to be a mother?”

Alsantset thought the same way about Tate, and how her little man wasn’t ready to be a soldier. Patting his head, she said, “It’s been years since she wore her hair in pig-tails, and should you delay any longer, she will become a mother before you are a father. Though the date has yet to be set, she is likely to marry young Talbur soon. Next spring by the latest, I would imagine.” Shaking her head at her little brother’s refusal to accept the passage of time, she added, “Which reminds me. Your niece sent me out here to put an end to whatever schemes you have planned for tonight’s dinner.”

“I already promised to be on my best behaviour,” Rain whined, but his heart wasn’t truly in it, as he was also doing his best to hide his guilt.

“A promise I believe you intend to keep,” Alsantset said, “Yet I notice you made no mention of how your friends might behave. Little Tali will be most upset if she learns you set them upon her prospective husband in an effort to scare him away.”

“Not away,” Rain protested, but he had the good sense to look ashamed. “Just... you know. Put a little fear in him and see how he takes it. Can’t have little Tali marrying a wilting flower, now can we? If the kid can’t handle Dastan, Ravil, Wang Bao, and a couple others, I don’t see him faring well when the Royals come a knocking. Or worse.”

A surprisingly logical rationale for sending thuggish veteran Peak Experts to threaten a young man of twenty-two. At least he didn’t ask Siyar to help out, and Ulf Saar had mellowed quite a bit in the years since, which meant Talbur had a chance of making it through the dinner untraumatized. Not a good chance, yet a chance nonetheless, meaning little Rain actually somewhat approved of the boy. “Though Talbur has been courting Tali for years now,” Alsantset began in a soft tone to humour her little brother, “And tonight’s affair will be restricted to family and close friends, this dinner will be the first public acknowledgement of their relationship. I would say such an event would be stressful enough, without your former underlings glaring at the young man the entire night.” Until now, Alsantset and Charok had only met Talbur’s parents in private, while the boy was introduced as Tate’s friend as opposed to Tali’s paramour. A distinction only made necessary thanks to little Rain’s high profile, but the parties involved had accepted the necessity with minimal pushback. Especially young Talbur, who cared nothing for little Rain’s status, as the same could not be said for the

plethora of Imperial dandies and fops who unsuccessfully tried to catch Tali's attention over the last few years.

If only sweet Tate was as wise and level-minded as his sister, instead of going moon-eyed at every pretty face. Thankfully, Alsantset need never fret about any Imperial ladies appearing on her doorstep with an ivory-haired babe in her arms...

Burying his face in Baloo's fur, Rain let loose a muted growl of pure frustration. "Fine," he said, stretching out the word like a petulant teen being told to finish their chores before going out. "I'll tell them to leave their weapons at home and behave."

"And you?"

"I'll... limit my glaring, but there's only so much I can do."

Which was about the best Alsantset could hope for, so thought it best to move on. "Good. Now, before I return to help my domineering daughter prepare for tonight's all-important dinner, was there some pressing reason you were looking for Buddy?"

"Oh right." Popping his head up with a look of delight, he pointed towards his house next door. "The toilet is working now. You should try it out. I was going to, but I couldn't because Buddy wasn't around, and then I realized I couldn't sense him, which is weird." Which made no sense whatsoever, and Alsantset knew better than to ask. "No worries though," Rain continued.

“He’s probably at the school like always, making sure the local kids arrive safe and pestering Yan for treats. I’ll pop in during the morning break and pick him up then, so I don’t make a big spectacle of things.” Pausing a bit, little Rain gave her a look, one brimming with serious concern. “About Tate,” he began, and though she knew where this was going, she also knew she had to appear strong, because powerful though her little brother might be, he still had his weaknesses, chief among them being his love for his family. “If you think it’s too dangerous, then I’ll tell him the same and keep him from running off.”

“No,” Alsantset replied, and now it was her turn to sigh. “You are right. We cannot shelter him forever, and he is as ready as he will ever be.”

“What about you?” Hearing something in his tone, Alsantset glanced at her little brother and found him uncharacteristically somber. “Are you ready? Because I almost lost you once already, and cannot bear to lose you forever. Eternity is a long time after all, so I’ll need my big sister to keep me honest.”

Leave it to little Rain to get all melancholic about immortality. It was rare for him to come right out and say it, but clearly he hoped that everyone he loved would progress to Divinity alongside him, even if it was less than the perfect True Divinity he himself had attained. A lofty ambition, one she feared beyond even his considerable grasp. “I make no promises,” she said, pulling him in close for a one-armed hug. “I can only say that I will strive to progress as far along the Martial Path as I can.”

“Shouldn’t call it that,” Rain grumbled, which was the beginnings of a long and tired argument. “It implies the only Path to Divinity is through strength of arms, when it really isn’t.”

“Yes, yes,” she interjected, patting his head before standing up and dusting herself off to avoid listening to his rant. “Unfortunately, your niece is a harsh taskmistress, so I must return to the kitchen without delay. When my husband makes his way back, do not distract him lest he suffer her wrath, for there is still much to be done before tonight’s dinner is ready after all.”

Leaving her little brother to watch over her son, Alsantset allowed herself one last glance into the courtyard before heading back into the kitchen. There was a time when she’d have found him still brooding over his worries, but he was already happily playing with his bears again, chasing them about and rolling about the grass in a wholly undignified manner. Peace suited him in ways she never thought possible, and she was happy to see it. He’d suffered and sacrificed enough already, so if he wanted to spend the next few decades amongst family and friends, then he deserved it. As he himself said, eternity was a long time after all, and life being what it was, he was certain to loved ones along the way, while she suspected that deep down, he knew as much too.

Such was life after all, trials and tribulations without end, which was why she was happy to see little Rain enjoying these peaceful and carefree times while he still could.