

## <== Empty Smiles

It was a busy afternoon in Angolwen, with bustling crowds of mages going about their business. Among them was an oddly pale woman, her grey hair tied severely behind her head. White robes hid her frail body from view, and excess mana formed wings of ice blue behind her. This status symbol kept her unfamiliar face from drawing anything but polite respect from the masses, although she had to answer the occasional awkward question from other qualified mages - especially those that might wonder how a master cryomancer cropped up out of nowhere.

Fortunately, her tasks weren't due until late at night, and she found somewhere quiet to relax, offering a 'bauble' she had found - a priceless magical artifact - to the Angolwen academy in exchange for allowing her to enter and watch as some of their lessons continued.

She glanced into a few rooms before finally settling in to watch a lesson on cryomancy. It was the only classic discipline she had any insight into, and it was pleasant to not feel stupider than the novices.

She was less interested in the lesson, however, than she was in one of the students. She was wearing blue robes - specialising in cryomancy, for whatever reason - that clashed with her red hair. Red hair was native to the Mardrop bloodline, which she had been led to believe was all but extinct on Maj'Eyal - it ran thick with magic, and the spellhunt had not been kind to their race.

But they weren't dead, and the proof was sitting before her. It wasn't the only strange thing about the young woman, either. There was half-faded scarring on her arms, and... something about her felt off. Unhealthy, even, although the sensation was muted compared to the rhaloren she'd met in her time on this continent.

Serena had learnt to trust her instincts, and the whispers of the grave told her that destiny was at hand. The teacher, a middle-aged cryomancer with an amiably calm disposition, suggested that they relocate to one of the practice areas to see if they'd managed to get the spells right this time, and Serena followed with a sense of detached curiosity.

The practice area turned out to be an open courtyard, with a series of targets, training dummies, and even a handful of inactive golems. The apprentice mages began their efforts, several of them managing to launch their targets flying into the distance. The redhead, however, was not doing so well. Though a couple of her attempts did conjure frost, they were noticeably less effective than the others. When they finished for the day, she stayed behind to keep trying. Serena stayed too, and waited until everyone had gone. Only then did she approach, silently, and speak.

"May I make a suggestion?" she said, her voice unfathomable, both distant and oddly reassuring. The girl started with surprise, but turned and gave her a sheepish smile. "Oh! Please do. I'm still pretty new to all this."

"We all were, once." Serena observed, offering her hand. Melinda took it, flinching slightly at the odd texture of her skin. Serena didn't comment, but met her eyes. The pale golden eyes of the Sunrise met the emerald green of the young mage.

"The common method used to wield cold is from a distance - I presume that is what they are teaching you."

"Ah. Yes. They said I'd be better off with fire, but I've always loved the water, so..."

"There is something soothing about it, I agree. As it happens, there is an easier way. Several, in truth..."

She paused for a few moments, lost in thought, and Melinda was about to ask if she was okay when she spoke, detached,

"Cold waits at the end. It can be found when all is lost, when the world collapses around you. Cold will come to you in desperation, in desolation, in a futile fight against entropy. We can wield the cold of failure and use it to stave off the inevitable. If you feel hopeless, desperate, and defeated, reach out into the hollow void. Cold will come to you."

Serena let go of her hand, and with an elegant twirl of her fingers she formed a sphere of glittering white, casting it with a calm, sweeping motion into the heart of the target range.

With a sound like the quiet snap of crisp snow underfoot, the globe exploded. In the space of an instant the targets were scattered, held to the wall by a thin coating of frost, and only held intact by the magic poured into their construction as targets.

"The chill of the tomb is powerful, and deceptively easy. It wants to be used. There is no tool that is so evil it cannot be used when the need is there, but you *must* take care."

"I... why are you telling me this? You don't know if you can trust me. I mean, you don't even know who I am."

"I know that destiny hangs about you like a cloak. I know you've suffered quite enough already." she said, nodding at the part-faded scars criss-crossing her body. "The end is coming. Our divisions will die, or we will."

"I'm going to be honest. I've got no idea what you're talking about and it's kinda creepy."

"Yes, it is best that way. Good luck, miss. Pray that you do not need this."

"Uh. Thank you?"

Serena walked away from the nonplussed girl, fairly sure that she'd overdone it. The moon had risen while she had been watching the students, and the stars twinkled overhead. She narrowed her eyes and perused them briefly, before sighing and moving on. To her eyes, there was nothing there to read but for the oncoming doom.

It was almost time for her to begin. She had three tasks to complete this night.

It was as the result of the second sped off into the distance, worry heavy on her heart, that someone walked into the graveyard. Archmage Linaanil looked calmly between the opened door of the ancient mausoleum, and the regal necromancer who stood beside it.

"Pray tell me why thou desecrate our heroes." she said. Behind her, three pairs of wings fought for dominance, flame, frost, and sparks dancing about her as she flicked the tip of her stave contemptuously. The air thickened, resting heavy upon their shoulders.

"Perhaps first you can tell me how you can afford to let them rest at the cusp of a new age." Serena replied, but the Archmage was unimpressed.

"No danger is great enough to call for such a travesty, and further, I will not be distracted with thine lies. There is no danger coming. We would not wake the dead if there were. And I do not believe that thou art the honorable necromancer thou claimst, or even that such a creature exists."

"You mean to say that the Archmage of Angolwen cannot read the fate of the world in the stars?"

"Divination is a faulty art, and the magic of the stars has never been common in Maj'Eyal."

"The omens are clear, Archmage."

"I do not place faith in omens."

"We have nothing left but faith, Linaanil. There is no room left for doubt. Our petty squabbles must be put aside."

"Thou wouldst consider necromancy a petty squabble, intruder?"

"I would consider it a necessary evil. Without my efforts, the eastern cities would have been overrun by the orcs centuries past."

"Centuries? I would consider that this sheds light on the title of Second Sunrise, Serena. I was told that thee were here, albeit not that thou were a necromancer."

"Then you believe now that I act in our best interests?"

"I believe that thou believest, but it does not alter the concern. I cannot allow you to leave."

"Then we must fight, Archmage?"

"I am afraid that we must, Sunrise."

The ice blue of Serena's wings began to streak through with black and bloody red, until they resembled nothing but a bloodstained sky, empty of stars. Then the edges shone with gold, and they became instead the bright-edged-black of an eclipse. Only then, with the symbol of her true strength finally free, did she raise the moon-white tip of her own staff, and call down a beam of light to lance down from the sky.

The archmage caught it on the dragonbone of her stave, shattering it to sparks, and replied with a burst of mana. Serena flicked it aside, responding with a sphere of chill, only for Linaanil to meet it with a searing beam of flame.

The resulting detonation veiled the graveyard with clinging mist, and for a moment neither mage could see the other. Then lightning flashed, dancing from the tip of one tombstone to the next, shattering each as it did and passing to Serena in the space of a moment. She grunted, and light burst from the surface of her skin. The flare burnt away the mist, giving her a moment's notice to bat away the ball of volatile flames headed for her body, sending it to explode among the graves as she beseeched the fates for aid. Lightning stabbed down from the baleful clouds overhead, and Linaanil met it with her own. Static flashed in the air, and the clouds opened.

The downpour made no difference to Linaanil. The heat and power that blazed around her vaporised the water before it touched her, and the bolts of flame that she threw for Serena were too hot to care, although the fires they left behind died faster than they had before. The necromancer's expression was one of pure concentration, her stave moving with impossible speed to block each bolt of fire with a burst of chill. It wasn't enough - with a flick of her weapon, Linaanil froze the water drenching her, freezing her in place for an instant before a second sun flare melted the ice, just in time for a manathrust to strike her in the chest, driving her back several feet with a grunt of pain. Linaanil drew herself upright in victory, the ghost of a smile beginning to form. Distaste coloured Serena's expression for a moment. Then a bolt of pale moonlight shot forth from her staff to the unsuspecting Archmage. Driven back in turn, holding the welling bloodstain, she murmured a single word in understanding - lich. She replied with a bolt of blue-white lightning that set the very air on fire, passing through Serena and exploding in a ball of plasma behind her.

Linaanil watched for a moment as the smoke cleared, seeing the necromancer supporting herself upon her stave, and her eyes narrowed. For several moments neither mage acted.

Then a black star landed upon Linaanil with a burst of shadows, and shimmering spirits of blue and gold burst into being about the necromancer, dancing on the wind to throw themselves bodily at the archmage, exploding one after another with ice and starshine, keeping her off balance as Serena drew back up to her regal height. A warm glow radiated from her age-bleached skin, and the bloodless scrapes and broken bones upon her form sealed and reknit themselves under its touch.

Thunder rumbled as the two women stared at one another

Lightning struck from the heavens, a hastily formed barrier of light above Serena's head catching it and flickering.

"This is more interesting a battle than I have had in some time." Linaniil observed, without a hint of stress or fatigue, despite the blood upon her form. "I will grant thee that, if nothing else."

"I appreciate the compliment." Serena said, a little weakly. "But I believe you have the advantage."

"Indeed. Would thee prefer death, or surrender? If thou hast no preference, I would appreciate the opportunity to ask why thee went after the first of our Wardens."

"As it happens, I would prefer neither." Serena said, her voice rising as she cast her eyes to a small mausoleum. From inside stepped a woman, pretty, but sculpted from black shadows. She

looked over to Linaanil with bemusement and amusement both, and spoke with a jovial tone to the archmage who looked so like her.

“Sister, thou lookst terrible. At least thine studies have gone well.”

Linaanil’s concentration vanished for an instant, and the impossible pressure vanished. Serena stepped away from the graveyard of Angolwen, and found herself in a place yet more dangerous - the largest graveyard in all of Eyal. Exhausted, but not yet done, the lich climbed upon the head of an ancient war machine, supporting herself on her glimmering staff, the wings of the eclipse streaming behind her as she began to speak, first at a murmur, but rising as she did.

“The world is in danger, hero. Danger comes from beyond, and the strength of today is not enough. I do not command that you return, even now. For you, I do not ask. For you, I will beg. I beg you to return, to lead your people again. Do not fight against us. In this age of death there is no time left for division. Eyal must stand together, and it needs you. Your people need you. It has been centuries since you walked, warrior. Eyal is different. But one thing has not changed. None are stronger than you. And Eyal needs you.”

Serena stepped forward from the golem’s head, and when she landed the ground rippled, alternating light, darkness, and the purest elemental earth. For some time there was nothing, and Serena feared that he had refused. Then bones of marbled white broke the surface, and curled around as a hand pulled itself up through the ground. The skeleton that emerged was strong, unnaturally large, with great fangs and the bright golden shine of will where his eyes should be, but it was the bones that stood out - not bleached white nor broken brown, they were glossy and gold, as if the earth had protected them and strengthened them in the intervening centuries.

“The spirits of the dead do not call you friend, Sunrise. But if I had refused, I would miss the chance to tear out your throat if you lied.”

==> [Cleansing Flames](#)