

My boots were cushioned by the plush and lush bloom-speckled ground as I meandered to the center of the small Lupoan valley cradled by the soaring Cressa's Mountains to one side and the dense Lupoan forest on the other. Surrounded by the looming stone and wood, it was as if I stood in the hollow of some ancient giant's throat, and only the patch of sky above kept me from being swallowed whole.

But even the sky offered no refuge because it housed the teeth of the giant itself. There, cruising among the clouds, lurked the actual threat.

My muscles tensed in building anticipation as I squinted against the harsh afternoon sunlight, lifting my gaze to the Lupos that had been circling above, their wings outstretched like darkened sails casting great shadows upon the ground.

From down here, as they flitted in and out of the clouds, the winged beasts seemed docile and benign, befitting creatures unburdened by the world beneath their wings, possessing a freedom that was out of reach for those of us tethered to the world beneath our feet.

Even up close, one would find the beasts disarmingly adorable, with their comically large ears dangling and flopping in the wind, curled whiskers, quite endearing underbites, and gentle eyes of gold rimmed by long, white lashes.

While they could be tamed—some were even kept as pets by the Even's Elite, the rest living harmoniously alongside the Beast Keepers who populated the elevated Lupoan town, in dwellings perched upon the boughs and winding branches of the forest—it would be a grave mistake to think of them as anything but deadly. Belying their cuddly appearance were fangs like scythes protruding from their powerful jaws, and talons like daggers sheathed in their paws, which made them perfectly capable of mauling any living thing foolish enough to provoke them and unlucky enough to be standing within their sharp sight.

To the ignorant observer, I would appear like that unlucky fool. Completely vulnerable. Prey to the beasts that had commenced their hunting upon taking flight. But even with eight of them in the sky now poised for the kill, the thrill of this hunt belonged to me.

I rolled up the sleeves of my white wrap dress—an attire I was wholly aware was unsuitable for combat, which Alora, my lady's maid, had tried in vain multiple times to get through my 'thick skull,' as she had so put it. But it was a favorite of mine. I adored how its featherlight fabric draped comfortably against my form and how its filmy skirts were like the bristles of a dandelion flying about with the slightest breath of wind.

I would admit vanity played its part, however, I didn't don the dress over the combat leathers Alora had prepared simply to look fashionable. It was a deliberate move to wear a dress to a battle with the deadliest creatures in the Even. A move that reeked of arrogance, true, but it served a purpose. By carrying myself with the reckless and untroubled air that only a true powerful goddess was capable of in the face of such danger, it would cement the common populace's belief in their Redeemer, the invincible deity I had been made out to be.

For generations, the priesthood had indoctrinated the Evenian masses with the conviction that our old gods had forsaken us—left us to fend for ourselves in this dying world. As children, from the moment we could grasp such concepts, we were all taught that the once worshiped Primes had grown disinterested and withdrawn their favor from our realm. We were abandoned by those we had blindly venerated for millennia.

But then King Thorn gave rise to new gods: powerful mortals turned immortal through means only known by the late king himself, remaining a mystery to this day. From the Arising

came a new order where only the King, the Even's Elite, and the prophesied Redeemer were to be revered as the new deities. In the absence of the Primes, the current King stood as the supreme figurehead, his edicts spoken as the voice of the divine in our world. The Elites whose unwavering allegiance belonged to the Crown were similarly holy conduits.

And I, the heralded Redeemer, had my role carved out as a savior destined to protect the Even from all harm that may befall it, and to bless the lands of the deserving. My words and deeds were to be heeded as if I were a living goddess.

This faith in our new hierarchy had been so deeply ingrained that any hint of skepticism was deemed heresy and anyone who deigned praise the old gods were crucified—shunned from Evenian society and branded as traitors.

But it was all a bunch of bullshit. Though the Primes had well and truly abandoned us to our demise and were not deserving of worship, the Even's trinity was a sham. I was no living goddess, just a mortal through and through who, by some twist of fate, happened to have in possession the kind of power that should only have belonged to a Prime. The King was no holy figurehead—he was an unremarkable man with the unholy mouth to ever exist. And the Elites who made up the upper echelon of our society were no sacred vessels either, just power-mongers reveling in their hedonistic ways, typical of those with endless fortune and hours at their disposal.

The majority of them, at least. Not Saverger, my eldest brother, I chose to believe. As High Liege of Nos Oryn, he might be authoritarian in his ways, but he didn't spend his time in idle carousing like most of the High Lieges and their circles of Elites did. My brother cared for our country and governed our region as he saw fit—governed in the best way he knew how, no matter how... questionable his methods might sometimes be.

I glanced at the movement in my periphery. Jutting from the side of the mountain, the monstrous viewing platform had gathered a large crowd. I could make out numerous distant figures peering over the stone railing—onlookers, from the commoners to the petty nobility, ready for the coming spectacle. One that I would give with more enthusiasm than usual given that Saverger, whom I never felt short on wanting to impress, was among those who watched from the sprawling tents which lined the foot of the mountain; among the Even's Elite—most from Nos Oryn and some visiting from the other regions.

It also helped that the High Liege who ruled over Coreone, our neighboring region that bordered the Forever Plains, was in attendance as well. Earning the admiration of a dashing handsome man—on whom I had harbored a girlish infatuation ever since he saved me from one of the many pathetic attempts at my life—certainly proved further incentive.

Closing my eyes, I breathed in deeply, raising my arms as my focus turned inwards. A faint murmuring stirred there, but I coaxed it until it grew to a loud hum—until my whole body reverberated with this pure, scintillating power that felt nothing short of exhilarating.

Once I opened my eyes, my perception had shifted. I saw the world with preternatural clarity—saw the invisible threads stitching together the very fabric of life. I saw and felt the strands of the sun, the wind, the soil, and even the heartbeats pulsing nearby. Every element of life had loose threads I could pull, threads to weave and reweave as I pleased.

At last, I looked to the stocky, heavily bearded Beast Keeper who lingered by the forest line. At my signal, which was nothing more than a sideways tilt of my head as if to say, well,

what are you waiting for? He brought two fingers to his pursed lips and loosed a piercing whistle. With that, the beasts began their descent upon me.

The first three of the eight beasts came hurtling through the air, heading toward me at breakneck speed. I planted my feet firmly on the ground and lifted my hands above my head. Pulling from the searing rays of the sun, I concentrated the energy into a radiant sphere that burned between my palms. Before the Lupos could come close, with my eyes snapped shut, I clapped my hands together and the sphere burst into a hundred flares of light, blinding the beasts and causing them to veer off course.

A roar of cheers erupted from the crowd above as I whirled around. Two Lupos landed in tandem several feet away, their massive talons ripping through the grass and soil where they impacted the ground. I taunted them with a beckoning gesture, and they roared before charging in my direction, fangs bared.

The air stilled momentarily as I siphoned its invisible currents, gathering them into a swirling vortex around me. Finally, with one sweep of my arm, I released it as a powerful gust that tore through the space before me, sending both beasts careening through the air before crashing into the dirt, knocked unconscious upon impact.

The smell of loam grew stronger as I welled up the spring of life deep within the earth. The ground beneath me stirred, and thick living vines emerged from the soil. With each twist and turn of my wrist, the vines responded. They grew and moved under my instruction, surging obediently wherever I willed them to go. I let them coil around the unconscious beasts tightly enough to incapacitate them, but not kill.

Use the sword. Saver's words drifted to me, borne on a wisp of wind he'd summoned, just as I caught the glint of a blade on the ground. How it came to be there, or why Saver instructed me to use it puzzled me. I have no need for it, obviously.

The lapse in focus cost me as an incoming beast flew overhead with its claws unfurled. A second away from having my face clawed beyond recognition, I managed to conjure a wind current to push against it. It was strong enough that the beast hovered an arm's breadth away, held in the same place despite flapping its wings in tremendous effort. Meanwhile, I let my vines grow tall enough to seize it by its limbs.

As I released the wind, the beast tried futilely to get out of its restraints until it eventually collapsed to the ground in its exhaustion, tangled in the vines. I had three already subdued, which left five more. The remaining five still soared above, beyond my vines' reach. If I could just get them to come down...

It would be a shame to end the show this early on, but this was an opportune moment to demonstrate the new trick I had been working on.

Looking skyward, I reached to the winds that carried the beasts high above. Their tendrils coalesced around my extended arms as I wove and gripped them, bracing to perform the final step of this dance—a new finale. At last, seizing the winds completely, with a strong exhale, I pulled them earthward in a violent downdraft. The Lupos plunged helplessly toward the ground, but before they could make impact, I calmed the winds, slowing their fall to a controlled descent. Within seconds, the last of the Lupos were also cocooned in my vines, trashing to no avail.

Just like that—faster than I could break a sweat—I had all eight beasts subdued without a single casualty.

With a satisfied grin, I reveled in executing the maneuver flawlessly. I was not the only one impressed by the feat, if the riotous cheering from the viewing deck and the gaping expressions of those lounging in the tents were any indication.

I retrieved the abandoned sword from the ground, swinging it idly as I made my way towards Saver's tent.

If I had been a lesser person, I would have shrunk from the weighted stares of the Elites upon me. For many of them, who lusted for power more than anything, they would covet this magic of mine even more than the throne itself. And I took immense satisfaction in having flaunted my abilities to their smug faces once again—abilities unmatched by any of their own. Nothing brought me greater pleasure than seeing the raw desire burn in their eyes as I dangled it like a key in front of prisoners, taunting them with something they would kill to have but could never attain. Something that was only mine to hold.



“Well? What did you think of my performance back there?” I said with a posture that would rival that of a queen’s, after exchanging pleasantries with the two High Lieges who sat on lavish chairs with tall, straight backs.

The tent’s interior wasn’t massive—just large enough to fit a seating area for a small party—though it was excessively decorated. Tapestries in rich crimsons and golds adorned the canvas walls, complemented by expensive rugs which blanketed the floor.

“Very impressive. But what was the need for the other theatrics when you could have simply grounded all eight beasts right from the start?” Flynn queried with raised brows, his mouth fixed into a broad, bemused smile that sent my pulse racing as if I were in active combat.

Coreone’s High Liege had not changed one bit, appearance-wise, since I last saw him. Garbed in sunny Coreonian gold, his unbuttoned tunic exposed a glimpse of his tanned, toned chest. His hawkish features framed by auburn hair that fell in tiny waves past his shoulders lent him a roguish charm that had my proud look melting into an idiotic grin.

“But then it wouldn’t be much of a show. I didn’t want to bore,” I replied.

“Roise, a display of your magic is hardly a bore. Your magical prowess, as always, impresses us all,” Saver said, his steely tone no stranger to my ears despite his compliment.

Though striking in his own way, juxtaposed against his friend who was all pleasant smiles and warmth, my brother’s demeanor projected a regality that was as harsh as the winds he could command. His features were frozen into a stony expression that rarely seemed to leave his face. Even his long, light, fawn-colored hair was neatly drawn back into a rigid ponytail that could not have been comfortable on the scalp. “Still, a true display of might would be to conquer the beasts with your blade.” His cutting gaze fell upon the sword I now leaned on like a cane.

I huffed a muted laugh. “But I’ve no use for the blade.”

“Your magic is a tool, not a crutch. You need to learn to fight as you are.”

But that made no sense. My magic was no mere accessory, but an extension of me. It was as much a part of me as the strings were to the harp. Without my magic, I was practically

useless, like an instrument that could make no sound. My slight frown settled at the polished knee-high boot of Saverger's leg crossed elegantly over his other.

Before I could voice my retort, he continued, "We're not certain how your magic will react once you're in the depths of the Nhyr, away from any form of life, your magic's source."

The Nhyr, the mist that left nothing but rot and death in its wake and had ravaged our lands for over two centuries, was the very thing the prophecy foretold I was to redeem our people from.

"My magic doesn't need life to draw power from—it comes from me. I am its source. I was able to summon it when I was in the Nhyr," I said.

Leveling me with a look that would have crushed the fragile confidence of my younger self, he warned, "Don't get too complacent now."

"Your brother raises a fair point," Flynn cut in, his tone gentle—a balm against my growing aggravation. "It would not hurt for you to master the blade alongside your magic. You came from a long line of warriors, after all."

I offered a disgruntled shrug at that, feigning indifference. If only I could be half as diplomatic as the charming Flynn.

Saverger took a moment to refresh himself, raising his ornate silver goblet to take a sip before setting it down on the sidetable. He clasped his fingers together and began once more, "Do you know why the Primes created the Dagahr, the Guardians of Andawan?"

Legend held that Andawan, the home of the Primes, were protected by the Dagahr—colossal beings of wing, scale, and flame, capable of obliterating whole cities to ash. Except the Dagahr was no mere legend. Its kind had even found its way into our realm. I had seen one myself—came face to face with it soon after I had recklessly ran into the Nhyr as a child.

It seemed an odd question to ask, but I answered anyway, maybe a bit sarcastically, "To help them guard Andawan?"

At my brother's arched brow, I amended, "To keep themselves in check, I suppose." "Correct. The Primes created the very thing capable of destroying them in the understanding that a day might come when one among them became too enamored with power, too hungry, too proud. They understood they needed a force that could rein in any among them who became corrupted, and to humble the ones that needed humbling."

Now I see where he was going with this. He thought I needed humbling, didn't he? Primes forbid a female to be anything but a meek, obedient thing around here. There would always be somebody to try to take all of her teeth.

I would have genuinely taken offense by his insinuation, had it not contained a kernel of truth. I knew exactly the power I held and had never shied away from showing it.

"Well, for what it's worth, confidence shouldn't be mistaken for arrogance," Flynn offered, and bless his heart for saying that.

Ignoring his friend's remark, Saverger intoned, "I think you might be becoming a bit too arrogant for your own sake." His emerald eyes, so like my own, was searingly disapproving as they fixed upon me. "Remember the lives lost due to your stubbornness once before."

I winced. Shame now seared my whole being as I bit the inside of my cheek. How could I ever forget that ill-fated incident from the past, when I had foolishly entered the Nhyr, causing my mother and others to follow after me, leading them to their deaths. In their frantic search,

they were the ones to never be found again, while I emerged alive, miraculously untouched by the Mist of Death and the deadly creatures that roamed within it.

No one had ever been known to survive the Nhyr other than me, prompting the discovery of the magic that coursed through my veins, revealing me as the prophesied Redeemer.

The memory of that tragedy—of my mistake which cost me and my siblings our mother, and my father his wife, was a wound that would never close. It was an agony that would leave me forever incomplete.

Flynn shifted uncomfortably in his seat, no doubt preparing another honeyed phrase to soften the blow of my brother's words. But the guilt that consumed me was a darkness that not even his sun-touched abilities could chase away.

Swallowing hard against the lump in my throat, I forced myself to meet Saver's gaze. "Not a day goes by that I don't remember."

"As you should." With an air of resolution, my brother rose to his feet. "I want to know how well you would do on the field without your magic," he declared.

Before I could comprehend the implication of what he said, a guard at his side advanced, holding what appeared to be a collar in one hand. He placed it atop the High Liege's waiting palm, and I took a good look at it. It was an odd accessory—white and appeared to be made of segments of curved bone attached to each other, resembling ribs.

"Are those bones?" I asked.

He hummed his confirmation as he motioned me forward.

"Is that for me?" I said as I shuffled forward tentatively to inspect the item closer. "It seems rather out of occasion to be receiving a gift."

Although, being the Redeemer, I often received gifts even when no particular event called for it. Packages wrapped in decorative paper would frequently find their way to my chambers, offerings from hopeful souls who thought showering me with presents would grant them divine favor.

But out of all my gift-givers, the most prolific was Saver himself. Though his reasons differed from the rest, he had quite the habit of spoiling me with lavish, and sometimes unusual, gifts. These ranged from gowns of the finest make to precious jewelry, and even livestock—the reason behind the menagerie of animals I kept in my private pen in the castle's animal quarters: five horses, four goats, three pigs, two llamas, a parrot, and an iguana.

"It's no ordinary accessory," he said, positioning it around my neck. "It's crafted from dragonbone."

There was an audible click as the collar locked in place. Right away, an inexplicable feeling washed over me. I felt a loss—like I'd been drained of something vital. Like a veil had been placed over me, muting my senses and the world around.

"What is happening?" I said, alarm evident in my voice as I gripped my collared neck. I didn't like the feeling one bit. Not just how the thing bit into my skin, but how it made me feel within, like the life in me had been drained completely.

"As we've gleaned from the texts of the Book of Aens, dragonbone has the power to stifle magic," my brother said.

It really was no ordinary necklace. True enough, I tried to call upon my magic but its presence was lost, nowhere to be felt—just terribly gone. In its place an emptiness I had never

known before. My breaths came hard as realization dawned on me. “How did you even get your hands on this?”

Flynn was the one who answered, a faint crease now present on his brow. “A long time ago, the remains of a dragon were excavated in Plaia, back when the continent was still part of the Evenian territory. King West acquired it for his private collection.”

“And I made arrangements to have a part of it transported here,” Saverger supplied.

So he could use it against me if I ever got too drunk on my power, too full of myself, or if I ever misbehaved. And to test if I was worth a lick on the field without my ‘crutch.’

A sense of panic unlike any other seized me as I clawed at the collar. “I don’t think this is necessary. Please have it removed,” I implored, hating how terrified I sounded in the moment. Nothing like the bold female who had sauntered in like she had just come straight from conquering a kingdom.

When it became evident Saverger would not relent, I turned pleading eyes toward the other High Liege who seemed just as appalled as I was, yet he said nothing, his frown only deepening.

Oh, how little it took to cut me down to size. Only a dragonbone collar wrapped around my neck and I was leashed like a pliant dog.

“We have to be smart about this. There are eyes watching. Would it be wise to let the people see their Redeemer cowering behind a useless sword?” I reasoned.

“Haladars never cower. But since I know that appearing weak is a great concern of yours, I have sent the public away.”

By public, of course he didn’t mean the Elites. He certainly wouldn’t mind me being humiliated in front of them, would he?

At times, I couldn’t help but wonder if Saverger was somehow envious of my magic—if he saw the power it afforded me as a challenge to his authority. Technically, I superseded him. He was an Elite. I was the Redeemer. I could destroy anyone that would come in my way. I could go off the rails and have everybody kissing my boots, even the King himself, if I so chose.

Fortunately, I still had control of my mental faculties, and people groveling at my feet was not really an appealing prospect. Besides, I respected my eldest brother—adored him even, despite his constant coldness. I would not dare defy him.

Not overtly, at least.

“Fear is what keeps even the greatest grounded,” he admonished as he pressed his fist around my hand that still held the hilt of the sword. “Defeat the beast with only this.”

While I could hold my own with a sword, I was no legendary fighter. My sword-wielding skills were average at best—passable. Even if I were faced with only one Lupo, there was no way I’d make it out of that fight unscathed—without at least one of my limbs maimed.

Armed with my magic, fighting the beast had been a mere sport—a fun game. Without it, I was most certainly nothing but a hapless game to the beast. Just fresh meat to sate its voracious appetite.

Yet, as if to underscore Saverger’s argument, it was my very ego—which I had enough self-awareness to acknowledge might indeed benefit from some deflation—that lent me the nerve to compose myself; squaring my shoulders and setting my jaw before marching out of the tent and onto the grounds with the bravado of one who expected to win, even when defeat stared them right in the face.