



BYWAYS

JOURNAL OF ARTS AND LETTERS
SPRING 2021

Pinna Neri
re/hi/neo

Byways:
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Cover Art
Trina Orr, Amber

2022 Poster Art
Kiki Kelley, Facebook

Special Thanks to:
Mike Matthews, Professor of English

Hobby Memorial Library
Editorial Staff

Forward

Byways: Journal of Arts and Letters is an annual collection of creative works submitted by Central Texas College students. The works presented in this issue are original works of drawings, paintings, poetry, photography, and short stories. This year, a new category, musical lyrics, was added. The pieces showcased in this issue represent the best in their respective categories.

Whether art, literature, or music, its purpose is to provide each artist's unique perspective with all creative work. It invites discussion and an exchange of intellectual ideas between the creator and audience. This type of creative stimulation offers each person the opportunity for growth, expanding our knowledge levels while encouraging us to think beyond the limits of today's boundaries.

Students submitted many pieces for inclusion for this year's Byways issue. The works included in this volume represent the best of CTC students' creative abilities. For all authors and artists that submitted works not published in this issue, your pieces were commendable and showed great potential for your future development. Lastly, the editorial staff wishes all submitters the very best in whichever direction your artistic talents guide you.

Byways Editorial Staff

Table of Contents

Forward.....	i
Rustic by Lacie Draper.....	4
Eternal Heartbeat by Ashley Demers	5
Grandma’s Brooches by Amber McCallister.....	6
Logan by Mekaila Vila.....	7
Petals by Ashley Demers.....	7
Khan el-Khalili by Crystal Kniffen.....	8
Fountain of Youth by Aelissa Vasquez	9
Lost in the Woods by Amber L McCallister.....	10
But the Mirror Said by Gryphon Roberts.....	11
Power to Create by Kaeden Nelson	13
Constitution on Parade by Jared Sonti.....	13
Collapse with the Dawn by Naomi Mitchel	14
Abstract Sky by Aelissa Vasquez	14
Dear John by Ashley Demers.....	15
Love’s Perspective by Amber McCallister	16
Hello Goodbye by Ashley Demers	17
Rock Romance by Amber McCallister.....	18
Hello, World! by Gryphon Roberts	19
Levi by Mekaila Vila	19
My Psalm 23 by Antwion Lewis.....	20
Facebook by Kiki Kelley	21
Bust of a Grenadier by Jared Sonti.....	22
Parley by Gryphon Roberts.....	23
River of Hope by Aelissa Vasquez.....	23
Black is Beautiful by Steven Valentin.....	24
Summer Fails by Juan Arango	25
Picture Plain by Aelissa Vasquez.....	25
Beach by Kiki Kelley	26

Mo3 by Dymon Finklea.....	27
Tears of Hell by Amber McCallister.....	28
Amber by Trina Orr.....	29
“Please, just call me Ton.” by Kaeden Nelson.....	30
Obsidian Earring by Megan Combs.....	37
Portrait of a Man by Jared Sonti.....	38
Mana Burst! by Kaeden Nelson.....	38
The Glass Sentence by Gryphon Roberts.....	39
Depression by Kaeden Nelson.....	40
Haikyu Nishinoya by Gemini London-Edwards.....	41
King Without a Crown by Diunté L. Bridges, Sr.....	41
Mom’s Bouquet by Mekaila Vila.....	42
Two Is Better by Antwion Lewis.....	42
Who Am I? by Antwion Lewis.....	43
Blue Moon by Amber McCallister.....	43
Traces of Time by Kiki Kelley.....	44
The Storm Within by Michael Solis.....	45
Perspective by Amber McCallister.....	105



Rustic
Lacie Draper
1st Place- Photography

Eternal Heartbeat

Ashley Demers

2nd Place – Music Lyrics

Blue skies to angry black clouds
Happy smiles to sad sad frowns
You have gone away...

Sweet baby girl to grown up woman
Trying to figure out what went wrong and
Realizations of you gone...

Hey, Ms. Haeli Renee
You will never fade away
You...will always be...

There, in our heart and soul
Gone, but not forgotten, no
Our hearts are torn, torn
To pieces, where's our peace and
Harmony, you are so lovely
Eternal heartbeat

I, am filled with despair and tears
Knowing I failed you through the years
But you, forgave me lovingly
I was blind, but I can see...that

You, always in our heart and soul
You will never fade away, no
Our hearts are torn, torn
To pieces, oh but you will ever be
Lovely, your heart and soul so lovely

Eternal heartbeat...
Runs deep
Within our family
No matter what, all we see is beauty
Blue seas, laughing
You will forever be

An eternal heartbeat, even through our misery
We see, how you flow so deep

Through our sadness and misery
You will be forever flowing
You are always in our memory
Yes you are, forever and always
Eternal heartbeat

We long to see your face again
Why did we lose you? Oh can we see you again...
It came to a bitter end
And we can't wait to see you again...

Even through our misery
Our hearts break, our souls seek
To see you smile, hear your laugh again
If I had one more moment with you again...

I'd ask you to smile and laugh all over again...
I'd ask your forgiveness all over again...
I'd do everything all over again...
If I could just see your face again...

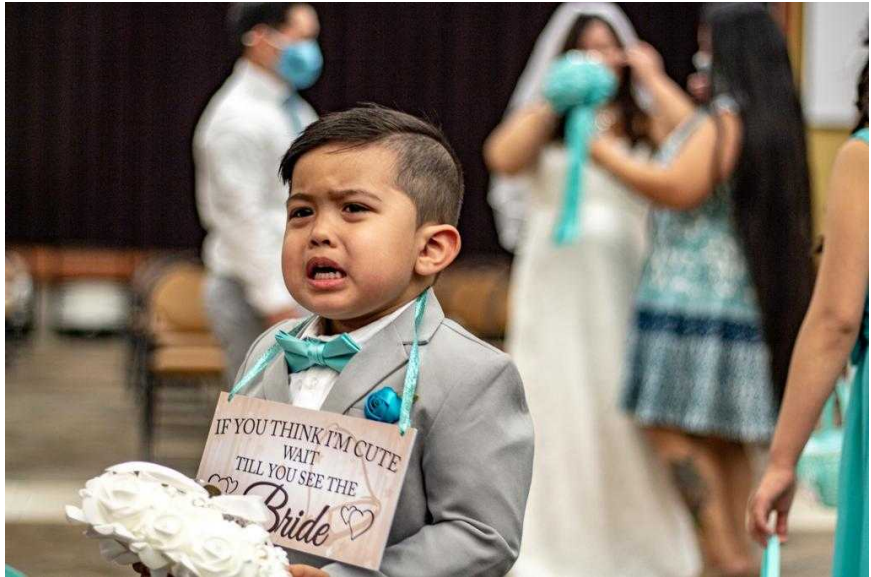
From sugar sweet to rushing river stream
We would turn back time if we could...
Your beautiful eyes, your dazzling smile
Something we have of you, and for good...

Eternal heartbeat...



Grandma's Brooches
Amber McCallister
Honorable Mention

Logan
Mekaila Vila
Merited Work



Petals

Ashley Demers

1st Place – Music Lyrics

Pick a petal, pick a petal, watch it fall into
blue

Mind won't settle, heart won't settle down
until we find the truth

Oh, yellow petals into blue waters...
Sit and watch it sink farther...

Down, into the unending depths, so far...

Petals, wither like a knife to the heart
Oh, watch it fall apart
Oh try not to fall apart

The colors fade into the lapping waves
Tell the petals it's time for them to be brave
Can't dive in and attempt to save
Petals become the water's slave...

Pick a petal, bring a petal to your face
And smile...

Rose red, innocence, beauty in a smile...full
of grace

Purple petals, blue petals
Beauty in your eyes...so wide

Happy, sad, sorrow, mad
They all whirl on the winds...of change
You are here, you are not here
It still all seems...so strange

So...I will go...and...

Pick a petal, pick a petal, watch it fall into
blue

Heart still broken, tears still flowing
Not knowing what to do...

Pink petal, yellow petal, watch it fade into
blue

Smiling...I know it's you

Khan el-Khalili

Crystal Kniffen

3rd Place – Short Story

My husband and I saved all year to prepare for our dream trip. We went to Egypt for Christmas of 2008. With three days to see as much as we could, we used the first day to see the Sphinx, the Great Pyramids of Giza, as well as the Pyramid of Djoser in Saqqara. We woke up early on day two and spent the morning shop hopping by way of tuk-tuk. We checked off our shopping bucket list with a trip to a papyrus factory, a create your own perfume lab, a smoke shop, and a carpet shop. We also stopped at a roadside market to have a bite to eat and purchase handmade jewelry from a local family before heading back to our room to get cleaned up for our Nile dinner cruise. Upon boarding the paddlewheel and string light donned boat, we were offered a cocktail and escorted to our small corner table. The evening was filled with entertainment, including a belly dancer, a band, which incidentally sang "We Wish You a Merry Christmas" in a thick Arabic accent: and a Tanoura dancer. The Tanoura dancer was the most interesting to us as we had never seen anything like it. A large, well-groomed man dressed in a round quilted skirt danced and twirled like a little girl with a new dress. The huge skirt spun like a top as he made his way from table to table, encouraging audience participation. The evening drew to a close as the band played, and the tip basket circulated.

In true, "save the best for last" fashion, we reserved the Khan el Khalili market for our last full day in Egypt. This was something I had researched and planned for months prior to our trip. However, no amount of research could have prepared us for the reality. The taxi driver stopped the car and mumbled something to us in an impossible to understand, Arabic, English mashup. As we climbed out of the cab, we began to wonder what we had gotten ourselves into. Our senses were completely overwhelmed. First, by the smells of this buzzing beehive of commerce. There was a stench of dirt and body odor and cooking meat and hookah, and perfume and spices all combined with the glorious smell of fresh-baked bread: somehow, we could smell each scent individually and also as one. We made our way deep into the labyrinth of narrow passageways, broken alleys, and make-shift buildings. The sounds of shop keepers yelling at each other and at us, combined with cars, scooters, and their horns filled the air like the roar of the game day crowd fills Yankee Stadium. And then, as though someone flipped a switch, everything came to a screeching halt with the call to prayer. This was a great opportunity to take a break and enjoy the fresh, round pita-like bread that we had purchased, literally, off the top of a young man's head. As we sat and enjoyed our snack, it was impossible not to notice the vibrant colors and scattered reflections of the metallic trinkets. Imagine you took a paper rainbow, cut it into a million tiny pieces, and sprinkled it like confetti: that was the Kahn el-Khalili market.



Fountain of Youth
Aelissa Vasquez
Merited Work



Lost in the Woods
Amber L McCallister
1st Place – Metal Work

But the Mirror Said

Gryphon Roberts

3rd Place – Poetry

Let me tell the story
Of the boy who broke his own heart.
I'm sorry to say this is true,
It's a story; not a work of art.

This boy thought love came from one lady
And she was all that he had.
The only love that he could hold,
The one that would leave him so sad.

He tried to make her smile.
He wanted her to love him so,
But the boy had competed for that love,
And he lost more than you could ever know.

He cried "Mirror, tell me how to beat them.
They always win her love when they grin."
The Mirror spoke back and shook his head,
"Sorry, but you'll never win."

The boy didn't think this was fair.
He thought that there must be a clue.
He blamed her for not loving him more.
He blamed love for not loving him true,

But she loved this boy very much.
If only he had seen it then,
But this boy was desperate and losing it all;
He'd go through this pain again and again.

He cried, "Mirror, I want her to love me.
How can I make this true?"
The Mirror looked sad, but told him still,
"Sorry, but she will never love you."

The boy was nearly broken.
What could this possibly mean?
"Perhaps it's who I am as of now."

He would change the way he is seen.

He tried to be all kinds of people.
He tried to be somebody new.
If he could do this every day,
She'd truly say she loved him too,

But the boy could only do so much.
He exhausted his heart to a tee.
"What if this didn't work; what if I failed?"
"Could anyone love me for me?"
His love was true, but so very unstable,
His plan simply failed again.
What had he done to be in so much pain?
Why was he born to be so broken?

The boy crawled his way to The Mirror,
It's all that he knew how to do,
But The Mirror's words drove him insane,
"I'm sorry, but I can't fix you."

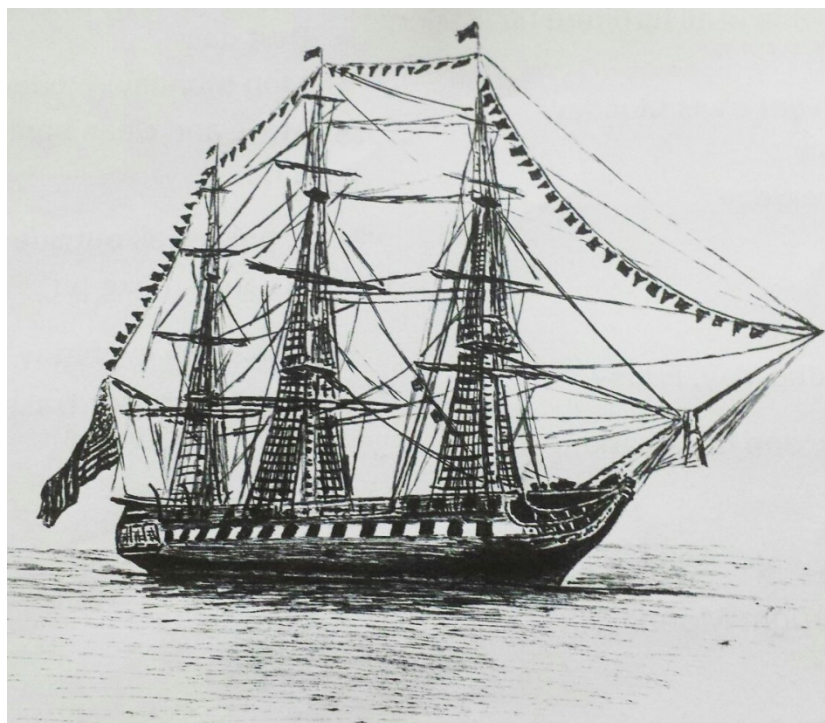
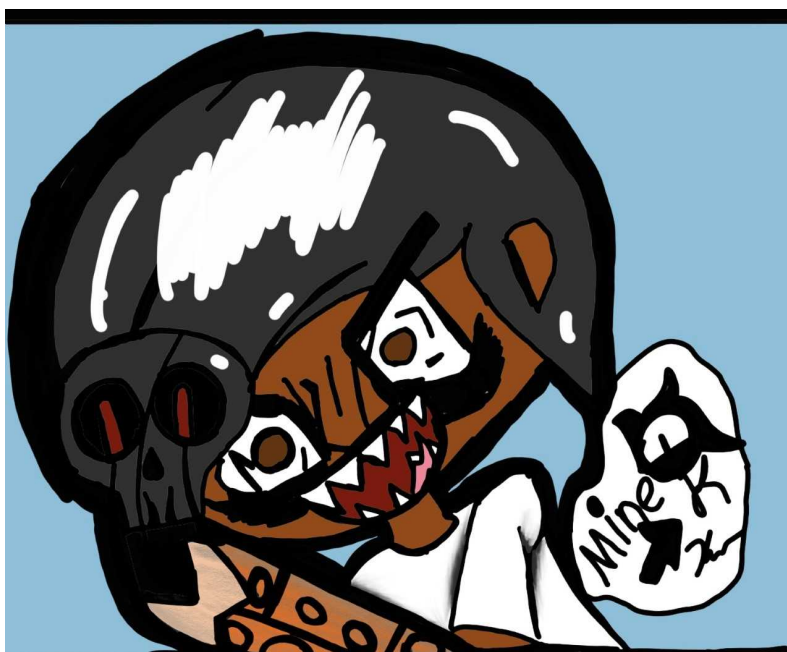
And thus, the boy had shattered,
Yet The Mirror stood tall and unharmed.
Were The Mirror's answers right all along,
Or was the boy's questions just wrong?

But the story didn't end here,
The boy lives on in pieces of his past self.
But he had thrown away who he was before.
He had thought so little of himself.

But the boy would not give up yet,
He'd live life one step at a time.
He learned to love himself and his traits.
He learned of The Mirror's crimes.

He would find what he thought was broken.
His life would be just fine.
He would put himself back together again.
His love would be justly defined.

Power to Create
Kaeden Nelson
Honorable Mention – Digital Art



Constitution on Parade
Jared Sonti
Honorable Mention

Collapse with the Dawn

Naomi Mitchel

1st Place - Poetry

Two hours before I woke the family,
In our last conversation you told me,
“Defeat and survive this calamity
To remain strong-willed, and earn my degree.”
As mother took hold of your frigid hand
With the dawn your, once brown, eyes have turned blue
This awful pain, how are we to withstand
I'm not ready to say good-bye to you!
Echo the sounds of a metallic ring
As the Reaper arrived to lay a claim
Time for your soul to return to the King
“Welcome home”, the Angel's loudly exclaim.
Then your heartbeat reduced to zero
With trembling hands, I lost my hero.

Abstract Sky
Aelissa Vasquez
Honorable Mention - Painting



Dear John
Ashley Demers
Honorable Mention - Poetry

Dear John,
Thank you for being born
Although it was cut short
What a wonderful guy you were...

I wish I'd known you more
But this I know for sure
What a wonderful guy you were...

You made her smile
You made her heart beat wild
When I think of yall I cry
And incessantly ask WHY

My first memory of you
Is the day I first met you
You said, "Nice to meet you ma'am"
I thought, what a wonderful man

You make her happy, yes
You make her heart soar, yes

You love her craziness
Together yall were blessed

Thank you oh so much
For helping me in a crunch
You were our music guy
In the sweltering heat, you made us smile
I'm so glad you were a part
Of our wedding day and start
Of an adventure anew
I knew it would be the same for yall too

Now our hearts are in pieces
Oh Lord, please bring us peace and
Answers to our deepest lows
Lord, why these two sweet souls

We're trying every day
To get through every day
And so I just want to say...

Dear John...thank you...I'm sorry...and we
say...
We will miss you...and yall's love...always



Love's Perspective
Amber McCallister
Honorable Mention - Painting

Hello Goodbye

Ashley Demers

Merited Work - Poetry

Late night, early morn, waiting for you to be born
Wanting to hold you and see you smile, making the hot summer
sleepless night worthwhile
She's here! She's here! Tears in our eyes and smiles on our face
Welcome to the world Ms. Haeli Renee
Adorable giggles and baby snuggles, your first birthday cake
smash and nap time cuddles
Gave way to playtime, tutus and daredevil tumbles
Saturday nights spent at the races with lots of familiar faces
Watching your daddy drive, you were his biggest inspiration
Fun summer days splashing in the pool to your very first
Day of School
Your favorite cheerleader movie, days of unpredictable fun
Becoming such a free spirit, and far from done
You became a big sister, and oh what a sight, to see you love
little sister with such intense delight
A warm May day, both dressed in white, and you catching the
bouquet with a squeal of delight
Banding together with a change of life and dealing with it in
sadness and strife
Cold snow and rocky mountains, new experiences and still
youthful fountains of joy, strength and love
Back to the heat and sweltering sun, I have you back yet my own
sadness has overcome...I am there
in body but not in heart, my own selfish antics made me seem as
if apart
I am ashamed every day for letting my issues get in the way of
fun with you and your sister too
I know I said I was sorry and I know you said it was okay
But I was going to make it up to you, try as I may
A new, better man in my life, you accepted him as family
And what a joy it was to not be in calamity
An ocean of blue as you walked across that stage
Made our hearts swell with pride as they said your name
The world is your oyster, so much ahead
If only we knew there was little time left
Together on the waves of the sea, so glad you were there with me
Such a time of adventure and child-like glee
Again you two walked together, flowers preparing my way

Hello, World!

Gryphon Roberts

Let me try,
I swear that I'm ready this time!
Who knows, I might just blow your mind!
We'll be fine; I'll always stay kind!

Hello, World!
It's okay, you can send me out,
Although I may be scared throughout.
I'll make it there; I have no doubt!

How I wish I could stay,
But I'm leaving today!
You want me to stay, but need me to go.
Gotta be this or that, so I gotta know!

Sorry I couldn't do it like the rest of them all.
It wasn't coded in me, but that wasn't your call!
Let's say it again, before my life gets twirled,
Just like you taught me: Hello, World!

I'm scared, I know. It's plain to see
That I'm not ready, though I'll never be!
No one ever is; they all get hurled,
But you're in my heart when I say, "Hello, World!"

Levi
Mekaila Vila
3rd Place



My Psalm 23

Antwion Lewis

Honorable Mention – Poetry

(Based and Inspired by New Testament grace of Jesus Christ and
Psalms 23)

Guided by His Voice, when He calls
My mind is laid to rest,
And I have direction.
No longer lost to ponder,
Answers from deep reflection.
I can eat and drink,
In the best places.
Finally, my soul is still,
And I notice that food has been tasty.
I increase in my heart and mind,
Now I'm fit for life's races,
No matter how high,
Or how low.
Thoughts, His Voice replaces.
When it is like Niagara Falls,
Or the smallest flowing river,
It is for my building,
And I alone have understood.
Things too great to count,
People always cheering,
It seems that it will never end,
Though it is nearing.
I have been forgiven,
You have been forgiven,
Now let's start cheering.
When I'm home,
I'll understand forever,
Without thinking contrary.



Facebook
Kiki Kelley
2nd Place – Painting
2022 Byways Poster Art



Bust of a Grenadier

Jared Sonti

2nd Place - Drawing

Parley
Gryphon Roberts
Merited Work – Poetry

Are you lonely?
Why did you say you're not lonely?
We can't keep going.
I know,
Love's not for show,
But I'm loving our case.

Would you love me?
Could you ever truly love me?
We can't keep falling.
I know,
Twice in a row,
But I'm loving the chase.

Is it working?
Tell me, why is this not working?
We'll just keep trying.
I know,

It's still too slow,
But I'm loving this pace.

Can we parley?
Please, can we just simply parley?
We'll just keep fighting.
I know,
We took a blow,
But I still love your face.

Am I sorry?
Why did I not say I'm sorry?
My heart keeps hurting.
Just go,
I still don't know,
If I'm loving this place.

Are you dying?
Why did you say you're not dying?
My heart keeps crying.
You know,
I'll be alone,
And you can't be replaced.

River of Hope
Aelissa Vasquez
Merited Work





Black is Beautiful
Steven Valentin
Merited Work

Summer Fails

Juan Arango

Merited Work - Poetry

Trapped inside a cage, clear and calm as a lake,
In the spring of time
Should its body be hard as a shell yet so soft on its inner core.
A life that's trapped under the water or over a rock
Owner of a twelve by six-inch house
No worries in life but that of to eat and drink.

Worth less than gas but needs of upper class.
Youngins of bone and flesh constantly poke its face for fun and games.
No walks just swims; no food but pellets.
When life is done, and the flushes come.
It's he and his coastal shell,
Turtle



Picture Plain

Aelissa Vasquez

Merited Work - Drawing



Beach
Kiki Kelley
1st Place – Painting



Mo3
Dymon Finklea
3rd Place - Painting



Tears of Hell
Amber McCallister
2nd Place – Photography



Amber
Trina Orr
1st Place – Digital Art
Cover Art

“Please, just call me Ton.”

Kaeden Nelson

2nd Place – Short Story

My name is Tonya Brittany Love, but people have always called me Ton—mostly because I don’t like Tonya. This day, I was wearing my favorite pink PJs with purple polka-dots. I was just waking up; my hair was an awful mess, and I was groggy with a minor headache—which was typical for me waking up in the morning. This was just another morning... or so I thought...

I wake up yawn, and say, “Ahh, what a great night’s rest. I wish summers could last forever so I could do that every morning”—whilst my head is still aching.

Then, I gasped. “Wait, I’m forgetting something very important.” Because of that “morning-ache” I wasn’t quite sure what it was I couldn’t remember.

“Ton, honey you’re doing it again; you’re talking to yourself”, said my mother to me, annoyed.

My mother has a mud-like shade of blonde hair. Her eyes have a soft glow, warm, like an oven, and saturated. Her voice was soft and caring, but powerful and stern. She was strong, but gentle; balanced, calm, and reserved. My mom is a very respectable and very respected woman. Her name is Rose Lily Love.

My mother always knew when I talked to myself—probably because I was always super loud when I did it— and whenever she noticed me talking to myself, she would correct me, in hopes that one day I would learn to stop this habit of mine.

“Sorry Mom”, I replied, somewhat insincerely.

“Seriously though, I’ve got to be forgetting something”, I thought to myself.

“Well, I didn’t practice math problems, but I have plenty of summer for that... Wait, what’s today?”

I mentally screamed!

My mind was—and has always been— exactly the opposite of my mom’s: cluttered and disorganized; confused and conflicted. My head is filled with miniature versions of me. None of the mini-Tons had any real control over the big-Ton on the outside though. The date was August 24, 2084, the last day of summer for the students of Acirema. Prior to this date, all upcoming middle school students—which included myself— had to make one very important choice.

“I FORGOT TO CHOOSE MY CLASS!!” I screamed horrified. “Oh my God! I’m literally going to die!”

Yeah, that... The upcoming 6th graders had to be sure to choose one of 12 “classes.” By this point you are probably wondering. “Or what?”...

“Alright Ton calm down. Now, what happened,” Mother asked me, appearing to be calm but was really freaking out herself.

“M-mom... I f-forgot. I forgot it. I forgot it and now I’m dead,” I stuttered looking broken and defeated. “M-mo,” I started as my mother interrupted.

“Ton, spit it out!!” She yelled, sounding angry.

“Mom, I f-forgot to choos-se my class-s at school,” I said, now feeling even more defeated than before.

“That’s okay, Honey,” said my mother nervously—while pretending to be fine. She’s always had a knack for hiding her emotions.

“Mom, I’m dead, aren’t I?” I asked my mother hopelessly.

If you didn’t catch on to the problem, I am literally dead if I do not get the chance to choose a class. The consequence for not choosing a class—and the incentive to choose a class—is execution by the government. Most importantly, the due date for this consequence is tomorrow.

“Ton, no you are not “dead”. All you have to do is choose your class today; that isn’t so hard is it?” suggested my mom to me.

“Mom, you’re right. I am going to school now... As soon as I get dressed...By the way can I ride Horsie –Horsie was my horse’s name– to get there faster”, said I, feeling oddly confident.

“Yes, Sweetheart you may,” replied Rose as she continued, “and as a matter of fact, you can keep it; it’s yours!” Mom said happily, but mostly just to get rid of the thing.

As I started to get dressed, I got the idea to put on my favorite, cosmic pink jacket. I also put on my favorite purple scarf that my dad gave me. The idea of dying was probably getting to my head and bleeding into my wardrobe choices.

Soon, I was dressed and ready, but not quite without practice. To actually “choose” my class, I needed to pass a test, a simple test of shooting. This test was so simple that anyone could do it with their eyes closed. I just had to shoot a few targets and break them—like a certain mini-game I played before.

Still, I needed to practice just in case, so I shot the targets that my mother prepared in the back yard for about 10 minutes, just long enough for me to regain my accuracy over the fear and possibility of instantaneous death.

Then I said it: “Mom, I’m ready,” with glowing eyes filled with confidence—they were a gorgeous blue.

Mother replied, “Now that’s my girl! Oh, but one more thing: here.”

She gave me one hundred Aciremian dollars, about two hundred American dollars—as of 2020. The thought of her daughter dying was getting to her now too.

“Actually, Ton have this too”, said my mom, handing me one-hundred more Aciremian dollars.

Sure, she was grieving before I even died, but, if I died indeed, at least I got some money to spend before-hand. I was always a heavy spender—by now I’ve gotten a bit better, so Mom knew none of the money would return. Every dollar would be spent on my journey.

Thank...you, I whispered guiltily.

“You’re welcome, now, bye my sweetheart; don’t get hurt out there!”, she said.

“I won’t”, I replied, and with red cheeks, I quickly exited and began my journey.

I rode my horse—that I had brilliantly named Horsie—to New America Middle School, where I saw a line about the length of a football field and a half. I stared for a moment until...

“Nope”, I said, walking in the other direction. I was not about to wait in that line for hours.

“Rather than standing pointlessly in a line and wasting my time, I’m going to do something fun with my time”, I said as I started racing toward the mall of New America. This mall was notorious for “killing your time and murdering your wallet”, perfect!

“I am about to have the best day of my life! Can you believe it Horsie, two hundred dollars to spend at the Mall of New America; this is a dream come true!”

I couldn't wait to get to the mall. I was ready to buy everything everywhere. I raced toward the mall, which was about six miles away, a good 20-minute jog for most of my peers, but for me, it took a good 35-minutes of running, and another 5 minutes to catch my breath afterward.

"Wow, this place looks so much better now that I can actually afford what I'm looking at", I said with my red-er face. "Do I want this one, or maybe this one" was all that could be heard for hours throughout the mall of New America. I didn't yet realize it, but the reason no one else was there was because none of the stores had anything of value. Soon enough, I realized that I didn't really like anything I was looking at. In the end I just settled for a box of Gourmet cookies—and I wondered why it took me 40 minutes to get here— and started running back to the school. I knew Horsie was getting tired of waiting, and I didn't want him to have to endure any more torture.

When I arrived, I found, to my amazement, that Horsie was the second one in line, and suddenly, the thoughts started flooding through my head: "What if I fail? Am I even good enough to pass? If I fail, what will I do, will I just die?" "No", I yelled aloud causing strangers to say, "who's she talking to".

"Negative thoughts are why people fail. If I think in my mind I will fail, it will become a self-fulfilling prophesy. I am instead going to bust in there, and I'm going to show the test who's boss." So, I walked in there, quite confidently, loaded my pistol—I've always liked pistols— and I took the shooting test.

"Positivity and optimism:" I just kept repeating these powerful words in my head throughout the entirety of the test; after all, science suggests positivity can improve mental health, and optimism can heal sicknesses. Basically, being happy makes life better. After about 12 minutes of waiting not-so patiently, I got a gorgeous paper explaining in-depth my test score. On the top of the page I saw an average score, and I celebrated the passing grade and my saved life, at least I did until...

"WHAT!", I screamed, after looking down. I noticed that my grade was on the bottom of the page—seriously, who designed that? It turned out, I scored only 20 points of 200. I failed the shooting test, and I failed. I was lost inside and did what any one in my circumstance would've done: started crying.

I just pathetically sat there, crying and regretting everything. There was nothing to do, no hero to save me, not even a friend to hug me.

Suddenly, "BOOM!" People busted through the door with shotguns! "Now which one of y'all got money?", asked one of the bandits of the Zuza clan—who, might I add looked quite fearsome.

I, despite being stacked with 196 Aciremian dollars, didn't say a word. The bandits waited about three seconds for a response, then the boss commanded, "Get 'em boys!". The team of bandits swarmed the room instantly. All the adults in the classroom were targeted and knocked down first, with the new sixth grade students following quickly after. Everyone in the classroom was quickly taken captive, everyone except for me.

"God knows I can't shoot this thing well enough to survive, let alone save these guys, so why would he put me in a situation like this?" I wasn't sure what to do next, so I started looking around.

"Well, looking around seems to always work in cartoons, so I'll just give it a try", I thought, desperately searching the classroom for a weapon—or more-so an escape

route. There was a pointed magic staff and a curved sword dropped by the bandits. And I—being the excessive nerd that I am—thought, “If you can’t use range, there’s always magic, or... melee... At times like these, Ton, just go with your gut.”

I jumped up, grabbed the sword, and ran immediately toward the boss.

“You dare challenge Kimbley The Big, you’ll regret even thinking about challenging me!”, the boss, Kimbley, said as he charged at me with his two mighty Berserker Blades.

The blades looked like weapons from an RPG-type video game—or a demon-related anime. They were a burnt black color with deep red ends, and white spikes that looked as though they were carved from the bones of his enemies. Kimbley swung his mighty right Berserker Blade, and the powerful beast cut nearly five inches into the ground.

Luckily though, he missed me, for I slid perfectly—and gorgeously—behind the blade and under Kimbley’s legs. I then propelled myself from the wall behind Kimbley and leaped onto his hulky, rough back—eww, his back was rough. I then held his arms tight with my favorite purple scarf and threw him into the wall. Kimbley’s head, with an oozing, blistering knot, the size of my fist—that’s nasty—fell to the ground as a result of the impact. Kimbley The Big was brought down by a little girl who wasn’t even capable of passing her own test. Due to this, Kimbley was made very angry, which I would come to find later, but what mattered is that now I won, and I did so not because I was stronger, rather, because I was smarter than my opponent.

“If any of you guys get any closer, I’ll have no choice but to kill your boss right now”, I said, as I held my sword to Kimbley’s throat. I was bluffing, but they didn’t know I was bluffing.

The other bandits kept creeping closer as the sword kept creeping closer to Kimbley’s esophagus.

“You guys think I’m kidding, you’re about to lose your leader forever!” As I said this, I ferociously stared down everyone in the room. If I got anything from my mother, it was my ability to get whatever it was that I wanted with a little bit of sass.

Each of the bandits dropped their weapons and left. Kimbley got up, but he couldn’t leave just yet.

“No, you can’t leave yet”, said I sternly. “Wh-why not?”, whined Kimbley—so pathetic.

I then finished: “I want you to grab every single dollar you took here today, and I want you to put it in my hand.” Prior to the raid in this class, I assumed he raided other classes.

After a long pause Kimbley said it: “Here”. Kimbley was quite hesitant, but when he remembered that knot I put on his head, he gladly handed it over.

After getting the money, I politely handed it in to the principal of the school and returned to greet Kimbley one last time. “Okay, you can go now”, said I with a cute little smile on my face.

After saving everyone else’s lives, I came up with a plan that just might save my own.

“Hello, sir, are you still doing class entrance tests?”, I nervously asked a knight class test proctor—who had a sort-of odd smile about him.

“Yes, ma’am we are. Because today’s the last day we decided to extend it out until seven o’clock, which gives you two hours. Does that sound like enough time?”, asked the awkwardly cheerful test proctor.

“Yes, thank you, that’s plenty of time,” I said very sincerely .

“Would you like to start now?”, asked the proctor with a toothy, very suspicious, smile.

“Yes, please”, I answered. I was in fear for my life, so I sounded really desperate when I said it.

“Judging by the sword in your hand, I reckon you want to take the Knight Entrance Test”, asked the still nice proctor.

I nodded. Then the proctor says, “Alright then, good luck!”.

I entered the exam, and I was standing in a room where I saw a team of five warriors, each holding a sword and a shield. “I guess I’m supposed to fight those guys,” I thought to myself. At this point, however, I realized the wisest way to go about it was to just wait for the first one to charge at me, so I wait.

I was correct; the first of the five warriors started charging at me recklessly, so I thrust my bandit sword through the chest of the first fighter. The person disappeared into dust. They were just holograms, so there was no reason to feel guilty for killing them.

After the first one was taken down, the rest quickly rushed toward me all at once. I leaped up, causing each of the holograms to bump into each-other’s heads. Since they were all stunned already, I slaughtered each of them within 5 seconds.

“That was way too easy!” I thought, only to see a team of ten, stronger, knight warriors standing behind me when I turned around.

This time, they chose not to charge at me.

Consequently, I had to come up with an entirely new plan to beat them, and I would have to be the first to make a move too.

“Well, part of being a knight is actually knowing how to fight; only question is can I do that?”

I was without a plan, but I was hoping that I would figure one out as I went along. Until then though, all I could do was dodge.

The warrior slashes, and I jump to the right. The next one slashes, and I duck below it, and the next one slashes and cuts my arm. At this point I realize that I am not making any progress.

“This isn’t working; I’m not hitting anything. At this rate I’ll fail. I need a plan.” At this point, however, I still had no idea what it was that I should do. The knights keep slashing at me, but I cannot seem to defend myself aside from these quick dodges. Then I asked myself “What can I do with this?”

At first nothing comes to me, but I soon consider dodging attacks in a way that would throw them off like dancing or something, something that they would not be able to predict.

So, I put my desperate plan into action; my dodges turned from large hops and dips to small steps and ducks. Eventually, I perform a slight head tilt as a sword comes at me, and the sword stabs the knight behind me right in its target, and while the other warrior was struggling to get its sword out, I broke its target with the back of my sword and thrust it into the target of the knight in front of me. What I just did was great, excellent, but now I still had seven more warriors to take down. Worse, I was getting tired, and the adrenaline was starting to wear off; my whole body felt as though it was instantly falling apart. I was really beginning to feel the increasing pain of the cut along my arm. Moreover, there were still seven warriors to beat, and I was surrounded in a circle.

“Wait, I know this circle”, I declared to myself mentally. “This is the same circle from earlier only now I can’t wait for them to charge”. “So, what can I do? I’m surrounded, fatigued, and dripping blood. Well, I’ve got no choice. I’ll try the attack from that one video game,” I thought to myself.

“Sword spin attack!”, yelled I, while performing a video game move. The attack was surprisingly enough to beat the entire team at once.

“That was exhausting,” said I whilst panting. I was relieved and victorious... or so I thought...

The dust from the warriors was all that was visible in the room for a few minutes.

“Why do I still see the simulation”, thought I; I looked around the room. After about 30 seconds of looking, I laid my eyes open something straight out of a horror movie. Submerged in smoke and dust, there was a single, female warrior.

“Something tells me tricks won’t work this time”, I thought to myself as I questioned how I would even begin to approach her. She looked like she ate the mercies of her opponents as breakfast, keeping sure not to share any with anyone.

Suddenly, she—still a computer program—attacked, blasting fire everywhere. Her flames added to the dust, making an unbreathable arena full of dangerous Carbon Monoxide. Surviving longer than a few minutes would be impossible. Worse, after the previous “Sword Spin Attack,” I was out of breath. Moreover, the pain from my cut was starting to become unbearable.

“If death had a look and feeling this would be it,” thought I. My gaze was filled up with flames and my lungs with carbon dioxide. I checked my pockets for anything. I found a few—yummy—cookies, a water bottle, and nothing else, so I opened the bottle of water, and splashed it in front of the blast. I managed to protect myself from the blast, but only partially; I was now left with a minor burn all the way down my right arm.

I groaned, “Great, now that makes two arms in brutal pain.” By this point, swinging a sword would not be very easy for me.

“That hurt, but it worked. Okay, now what,” thought I desperately.

What was I to do? This lady set the whole room on fire!

“You know what, this is it; I will not lose here! I’m going to beat you no matter what it takes! You can burn my arm, my leg, my face, my hair, my anything, but I will beat you, here and now!” , I screamed as I dashed at the warrior—albeit recklessly—I slashed once, and I missed, hitting only the ground. Following up with the second slash, I dashed again only to get half-charred on my right again. Still, the second slash was quickly followed with a third.

“You think burning me will stop me, huh,” thought I, racing toward the warrior through the unbearable pain of the flames—and the cut on my left arm. This time, however, my sword was too fast for her to handle. One hit quickly turned into two than three. Sooner than I knew it, the warrior’s target broke, and I won. “Whew, I’m do-”, I started before fainting in exhaustion.

Apparently, as I fell, I was caught by that creepy, nice test proctor from earlier.

“Congratulations miss,” said the proctor even happier—and creepier—than ever. “Also, I’m terribly sorry you had to go through that,” added the proctor who looked hurt by the circumstances.

“Sorry, but why?” I didn’t know what he was apologizing for.

“Miss, the simulation just now, you got a level 50 boss with fire mage abilities. The odds of getting that setup is one in ten thousand, if not less; no-one has gotten that before.”

“So,” I replied, “I won, didn’t I?”

“Well, you did, but you now have second degree burns along your right arm and a deep cut along your left. You also could’ve very well died to Carbon Monoxide poison.”, explained the proctor.

“Well, we can’t change it now, can we? We might as well just look at the positives. I won, and saved my life twice doing so; that’s good isn’t it,” said I, with a smile.

“Yes, it sure is, miss Tonya; it sure is.”, the proctor said as he smiled back—Eww, he wasn’t supposed to smile back.

“Please, just call me Ton”, said I, walking next door to pick up my results for the test.

Just like last time I, saw the average grade, but it wouldn’t fool me this time; I looked underneath to see my grade was a whopping 180 out of 200. I only needed 150 points, but I gladly accepted more.

After jumping up with joy, I walked gleefully back to the mall; this time I would hopefully find something that I would like. The Mall of New America has been noted for its knight class armors and weapons, and today, I would finally be able to make use of such noted items, so I headed back toward the mall.

Upon arriving, I noticed that there were a lot of more fashionable outfits; however, I disciplined myself and was able to resist buying them. Today, looking great was not—entirely—my goal. Eventually, I found a silver helmet for about \$50 (Aciremian). I decided to buy it, but only with a pink can of spray-paint (\$3 Aciremian). This helmet looked like a medieval bowl with lines through it, ugly yet impractical. I also bought a chest plate and some knee-pads for \$90, (Aciremian). I then bought a saddle for Horsie, which was on sale (\$30, Aciremian). I pocketed the remaining 9 dollars—tax is a monster.

I came home, and my mother greeted me as any good mother would.

“Ton!! Oh my God, what happened!?” she questioned.

“It’s a long story,” I replied with a sigh.

“Ton, where’s the gun? Wait, Ton, you didn’t pass the shooting test?”, Mom asked me, concerned.

“Yeah, I failed it mom...”, I admitted.

“Honey, I’m so sorry,” she said, with tears in her eyes.

“...But, mom, I did pass the knight test,” I explained.

“Well, Ton, that’s alright; things like that happen. It may just be what God wanted for you.” She continued, “Sometimes we can’t see what God wants for us until he shoves it in front of our faces, you know.”

“Anyway, how about we enjoy this pizza that the pizza-man delivered here,” suggested Rose with a smile.

The two of us talk as we enjoy delicious, Acirema-style cheese pizza. Eventually, in the conversation, a question comes to my mind...

“Hey mom, why don’t we ever talk about dad,” I asked casually, with a face stuffed with pizza.

“Ton, sweetheart, we just don’t okay,” replied my mother.

“Mom, you know, you can’t just keep dodging the question; it won’t ever be answered,” I added, starting to get irritated.

“Ton, honey, I can see the way you’re squinting your eyes, and it’s disrespectful, so stop it,” said Mother, pretending to be annoyed.

I sigh. “So, is that your way of avoiding the question mom,” I questioned whilst angrily widening my eyes.

“Tonya, WHAT did I say!?” Mom yelled.

I then squinted once more—and, I perhaps went a little overboard.

“Ton, that’s disrespectful; stop it,” she said again.

“Well, it’s hard to respect you when you aren’t making any sense, mom,” answered I, whilst still squinting.

She suddenly stops and goes silent. Consequently, I feel terrible, but was I truly to blame? My mother was never the sensitive type, so I thought that she would not get mad at me...or so I thought.

Mom laughs hysterically (the angry kind) –and, at this point I realized that I screwed up. “You know what Tonya, keep acting like that, questioning life; you’ll get your answers one day,” Rose said, with a red, anger fueled face.

“Yeah, and what’s wrong with that,” I questioned.

No, shut up me, you idiot.

“No, Ton, you aren’t supposed to say that,” thought I, immediately.

“Ton, sweetheart, I ...” Rose started as tears began flowing from her face.

It was only at this point that I realized that my mother wasn’t mad at me at all. She was saddened, hurt by something, something she was not yet able to tell me. Still, forcing it out of her wouldn’t help anyone, especially if talking about it brings her to tears each time. The wisest thing to do at this point was just to shut up and listen to her.

“Ton, just... I don’t want you to end up like your father.” She sighs and continues. “I just can’t...”

No, Mom, you’re supposed to finish!

“Mom, I’m sorry,” I said, guilty because I had just made her cry.

Mom gets herself together and says, “Also, Ton, you’re grounded for the rest of the week.”

“Well, so much for that,” I think to myself before saying, “Okay.”

“Also, sweetheart, it’s 9:30 and school’s tomorrow. You know what that means,” Mom finishes, as she heads to her room.

“Yeah, good night mom,” I say as I go to my room.

This day was quite an adventure; however, another one awaited me in the morning, the first day of Aciremian middle school.

Obsidian Earring

Megan Combs

Honorable Mention





Portrait of a Man

Jared Sonti

3rd Place – Drawing



Mana Burst!

Kaeden Nelson

3rd Place – Digital Art

The Glass Sentence

Gryphon Roberts

2nd Place - Poetry

There was a boy who loved to write.
It was his passion, his heart, his soul.
He wasn't confident on how good he was,
But at least it made him whole.

He had a lot to give to the world,
But made one fatal mistake:
He didn't believe in his own worth.
He could give, but would not take.

When a world too cruel had shattered him,
Others rushed to take what was left.
This was the boy's true sin:
He did nothing to stop the theft.

They took his heart so when he wrote,
He knew not how characters would feel.
They took his soul so when he spoke,
He'd be ignored; his voice concealed.

A writer with no sympathy; a heart with no empathy.
The boy lost the passion inside.
When words are everything, yet he is nothing,
What else would he do but hide?

To a writer, words mean so much,
But nobody would understand his.
He didn't set himself in stone,
So others could simply break what he is.

Every word he spoke was small and timid;
His voice fragile, but that was his penance.
"This boy is cursed!", we all admitted;
For he could only utter a Glass Sentence.



Depression

Kaeden Nelson

2nd Place – Digital Art

Haikyuu Nishinoya
Gemini London-Edwards
Merited Work – Painting



King Without a Crown
Diunté L. Bridges, Sr.
Honorable Mention – Digital Art

Mom's Bouquet
Mekaila Vila



Two Is Better

Antwion Lewis

Merited Work - Poetry

Journey of life is not to be alone
Major choices, determine the outcome.
In the blink of an eye, it will be gone,
If we come together, we make the sum.
In this stage, we can be very happy
Do not fail the commitment or things be...
Arguments may rise which make things unhappy,
Pass this stage, and a long life we will see.
Did we blink, no time to think, are we here?
Mixed grays and two generations, we made
The sound of the chariot is now near,
Flashing back, moving forward, and we fade.
The time will come for everyone to decide
However the yes, there is a long ride.

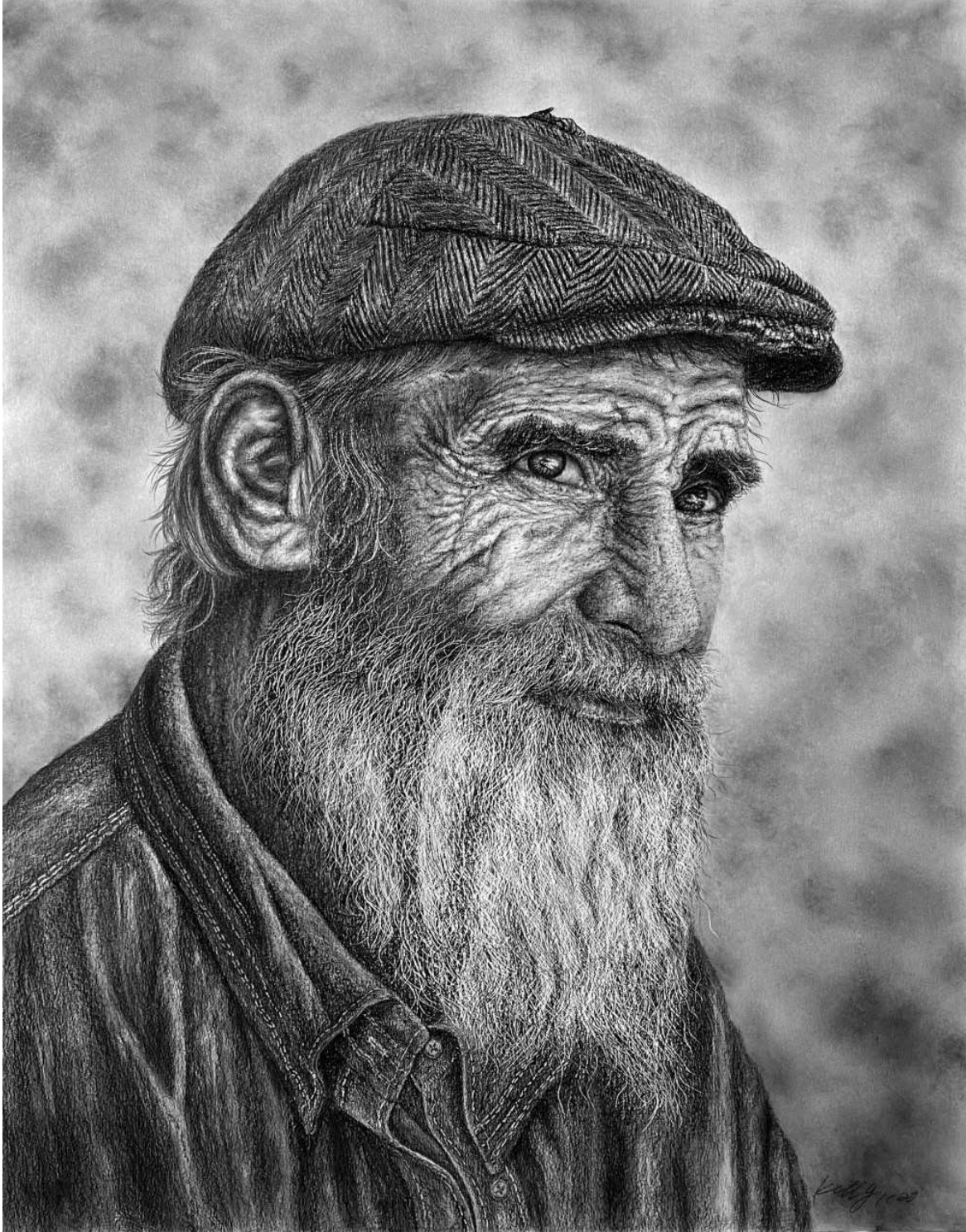
**Who Am I?
Antwion Lewis**

Express Me,
Can You?
Express Me,
But I got deep.
Express Me,
I can breathe.
Express Me,
I am free.
Express Me,
Without confinement.
Express Me,
And come into alignment. Express Me,
At your liberty.
Express Me,
But not in your reality.

Signed by: Love



Blue Moon
Amber McCallister
Merited Work - Painting



Traces of Time

Kiki Kelley

1st Place - Drawing

The Storm Within:
Book I Of the Survival Series
Michael Solis
1st Place – Short Story

Acknowledgments

I WOULD LIKE TO DEDICATE THIS BOOK TO A GOOD FRIEND WHO I CONSIDERED A BROTHER TO ME. WE LOST HIM TOO EARLY BUT I'VE COME TO REALIZE THAT HE LIVES IN ME NOW. TO ANTHONY OWENS AND HIS SON RICHARD. MISS YOU BOTH VERY MUCH. FLY HIGH

TO MY FAMILY, FRIENDS AND SUPPORTERS WHO MADE THIS POSSIBLE. I WOULDN'T HAVE BEEN ABLE TO PURSUE WHAT I LOVE IF IT WASN'T FOR YOU ALL PUSHING ME TO BE THE BEST I CAN BE.

ONE

He was in the middle of a field, sword in hand, bodies littered on the ground around him. The crimson red sun reigned supreme in the blood-soaked sky. He was panting, out of breath as the stench of blood filled his nose. Vultures swarmed the battlefield, swooping down from above to pick the remains of the fallen. It did not matter who was friend or foe, for they were both food in the eyes of the ruthless scavengers.

He struck the ground beside him with his sword, falling to his knees. He could not catch his breath regardless of how many times he took in large gulps of air.

Then, from the depths of hell of an unknown origin, there was a terrible roar that erupted from all around him, making the miniscule hairs on his neck and spine stand on end. "Foolish boy," a cold voice said. "You really think you can defeat me? I've been around since the Beginning of Dawn. There's no way you can end me." There was a sound that sounded like laughter. "I, however, will have no problem ending you."

He got up to retrieve his sword before turning around and walking right into the teeth of a phantom creature.

Daniel jumped out of bed, sweating profusely, his heart beating abnormally fast. He threw the blankets off of him and walked to the bathroom, running the water to let it get cold. He made a cup with his hands and ran it under the water, allowing it to fill up, after which he threw it on his face to help him wake up. He breathed a sigh of relief; he was now fully awake and not shambling about anymore. Going back to his bedroom, he glanced at the clock on his bedside table. It read 6:40 AM in bold red numbers. Might as well get ready for school he said to himself as he sat on one corner of his bed. He retrieved his headphones, plugged them into his phone and began playing some Five Finger Death Punch, nodding his head occasionally to the beat.

Twenty minutes later, he went downstairs to get something to eat. His father was sitting in his reclining chair listening to the news. His mother, however, busied herself in the kitchen,

cooking up breakfast. His mother had long black hair with caramel brown eyes. He had the same jet black hair passed down to him but not her eyes; he had darker brown eyes like his father.

“Morning mom,” he said as he took a seat on one of the barstool chairs. “What’s for breakfast?”

“Morning sweetie,” his mom replied, taking the time to look up from what she was doing and smiling, her face glowing like the sun as she did. “Eggs, bacon, and pancakes is what’s for breakfast dear.” She hurried to the griddle to get the last pancake. She made his plate and handed it to him. “Here you go hon. Eat up. Your bus will be here soon.”

The doorbell rang a couple of minutes later; he heard his dad calling out, “I’ll get it.” Daniel knew who it was and he smiled instantly, his mouth full of syrup drenched pancake no doubt. He felt in his shorts to see if he still had it and as soon as he felt the hard square shaped box, he put it down so as not to arouse suspicion.

“Good morning Mr. Gates,” he heard the voice of his girlfriend say, her English accent undoubtedly beautiful. He heard her footsteps coming towards him and a few seconds later felt her warm lips press up against his cheek. He blushed when he glanced up and saw his mother smiling. “How are you my love?”

Mrs. Gates put her hands to her heart and said, “Aw. Young love.”

“Let’s go,” Daniel said, jumping up from his seat, running to his mother and giving her a kiss on the cheek. “Love you mom. See you at the game tonight.”

Mrs. Gates nodded as she watched her son take his girlfriend’s hand and lead her out of the house. When she had heard the door close, Mr. Gates entered the kitchen and wrapped her up in his arms. “We need to let them know how everything is going. Be at the school later David. We need to make sure they don’t come up.”

Mr. Gates nodded and gave her a kiss before going upstairs to get ready for the day ahead.

** ** *

She gazed into the blackness of the darkened room, kneeling, head down and waiting to be told otherwise. “The Assassins are placed where you instructed we put them Dark Lord. They await further orders.”

A deep cold voice resonated through the room, making the atmosphere that much colder. “Observe. We must make sure he is the one. If he is, we will move on to the next phase.”

“Yes My Lord.” She got to her feet and was walking toward the exit when a deep growl ensued from the shadows. Though their body was absent, the deep red eyes glowed maliciously.

“Do not fail me. If you do, I will personally make sure your exit from the human realm is as painful as I can make it. Do we have an understanding?”

She smiled, though not in front of the Dark Lord. She cleared her throat. “I wouldn’t dream of failing you, father.” With that, she went about her way.

** ** *

TWO

After a hellish day at school and a surprise pop quiz, Daniel was ready to put on his pads and play some football. He held his girlfriend’s hand as they walked along the corridors. “So,” he started, fumbling to find the words. “I have something for you.”

“Oh yeah?” She stopped, still holding his hand. “What is it?”

Daniel reached in his pocket and pulled out the square box; Mary gasped and put her fingers to her mouth as she held back tears. “Oh my god.” Her luscious black hair flowed freely in the spring wind, her green eyes watered.

“I was going to give you this beforehand but I just couldn’t wait any longer. You make me hap—” Daniel looked over her shoulder and saw that there was a man in a black suit, glasses on, staring at both of them. Daniel awkwardly stood there a bit of fear creeping up in him. Who were these men? And what did they want?

Mary turned around to see why he had stopped and cursed under her breath. “We got to go,” she said with a tone of urgency. “Now.” She grabbed his arm and turned the opposite way to run but before they could go full speed, another suit blocked their path.

They changed direction and ran along the main corridor and when that had eventually failed, they stood there, brains buzzing rapidly, adrenaline pumping through their veins as the suits made their way ever closer to them. Daniel looked around for a slip through the cracks and when he couldn’t find any, went to protect Mary.

“Stop,” came a voice from behind him.

Daniel and Mary turned around and saw a red haired woman with red heels coming toward them. She looked at him and smiled from ear to ear. “I must admit, I thought you would be harder to track down.”

“Who are you?” Daniel asked.

“You’ll know my name soon enough. You should do the smart thing and come with me. It will save you a lot of pain down the road.”

“I have a better idea,” Mary replied, gritting her teeth. “Get lost.”

The woman laughed then nodded at one of her guards beside her. The guard instantly took out his weapon from his holster and shot her.

Daniel turned around and saw her holding her stomach, her hands stained with her blood, her shirt dyed with bright red. “No,” he muttered as she looked into his eyes. When she fell, he caught her and helped lower her to the ground.

“I will see you soon,” the woman said. “I suggest next time you will be smarter.” Before another word could be spoken, her and her men disappeared into nothingness, without a trace.

Seeing how everyone around him was gone, he held onto Mary tightly, his hand on her wound. “I wish there was something I could do to help.”

“Y-You being here is more than enough for me. I-I’m sorry I never told you about who you are.”

Daniel gritted his teeth, trying to keep from crying despite his eyes watering. “HELP!” he shouted at the top of his lungs. He looked behind and in front of him but nobody was coming. “HELP!”

Mary shook her head slowly, her face beginning to turn pale. “They won’t be in time.” Despite the fact that he could hear the sirens in the distance, he knew reluctantly she was right. “I love you.”

He couldn’t hold the tears back any longer. As he felt them rush down his cheeks and fall off his face, he was quick to wipe them off her face. He could see the fight in her eyes begin to disappear; he swallowed the lump in his throat. “I...I l-love y-you.”

He felt her grip on his hand loosen, one last breath issue out of her body. She was gone. Her eyes were looking at him blankly, her face white as a cloud in the sky. He lowered her head gently on the ground before backing away from her corpse and putting his head between her knees, where he began crying nonstop.

** ** *

The first thing Daniel did when he got home from school was throw his backpack near the door and go upstairs. He didn't care about no football game, homework, or anything school related. On top of that, he had a killer headache from all the crying and his eyes were red and puffy. He locked the door so he could mourn in peace, or at least attempt to.

There was a knock on the door, followed by his father saying, "You okay sport?"

Daniel ignored him, his face buried in his pillow. He didn't want to talk to anybody, hear anyone's voice; he just wanted to be in his own little world. Who were those people in suits? His brain, despite the emotional state he was in, was buzzing with so many questions.

This time around, there was another knock on the door and then his mom's voice came shortly after. "Honey, could you please open up?"

Daniel groaned as he lifted himself from his bed and stumbled to the door. As soon as he turned the lock and opened, his mom flew in and embraced him tightly. "I'm so sorry my sweet boy. I know it hurts."

He didn't know what to do, deciding to whether or not to hug his mother back. "Thanks mom."

"It's time you knew just why it happened."

Daniel got out of his mother's embrace with a puzzled expression on his face. "What don't I know?"

His mother closed her eyes, appearing to be troubled. "You will find out soon enough. Get some rest. I'm sure Mary's parents are going to come here shortly and will want to know what happened."

She let him be, walking downstairs and leaving him with more questions and more confusion. He went to lay down in bed, a picture of Mary beside him.

** ** *

"It's done My Lord," the woman said as she kneeled.

"What is? I thought I told you to scout the area out, make sure it's really him before going on to the next phase."

"He and his girl were awfully antsy seeing the guards—"

"Anyone would, you fool!" At the start of him raising his voice, the invisible hounds growled viciously, their deep guttural sounds filling the room rather quickly. "I told you to scout, not to worsen the situation."

"Nobody saw My Lord. It was only him and his girl."

The Dark Lord stood up, though nobody could see him doing so, and walked over to the room. "Whether he is the one or not, I want him dead. Do so now."

"Yes My Lord." She looked up at the pitch black ceiling and was gone in a bright flash of white light.

His room now dark and motionless once more, he sat on his throne, his hounds taking their place at his feet. "My daughter loves to try to make me proud," he said, muttering to himself but looking at his pets, stroking their heads. "Make sure she does what I set her out to do."

** **

THREE

Daniel snuck out of the house as soon as he woke up from his nap a couple of hours later. Retrieving his wallet and his Los Angeles Dodgers military cap, he went downstairs as quietly as he could, unlocked the front door and gently closed it.

As he walked down the street with loud music coming in through his headphones, his eyes focused on the ground, he couldn't help but stop at Mary's house. He saw her parents at the foot of her house hugging friends and relatives as they did all they could do to help them cope with their loss. Her parents were miserable looking, as could be expected; the guilt that he felt quickly overwhelmed him and he had to keep going. He couldn't bring himself to approach them, let alone tell them it was his fault that their daughter was dead.

By the time he had reached into his pocket to mute his phone and removed his hoodie, he glanced up and saw the church bell towering above him some good fifty feet high. The windows were dark and tinted to block out the sun, the light brown texture of the building shining from the sunlight.

When he put his foot in the church, he saw that it was barren; church pews were empty as well, with thick Holy Bibles in the back of said pews. Walking along the walkway, he saw the cross in front of him as the altar grew closer with each step; he couldn't help but think about how in a week or so he would be carrying his girlfriend's casket, grief overflowing the place.

"It's been a while since you have set foot in this church, hasn't it?" somebody asked as it lit the candles on the right side of the altar. "Three years. If memory serves me right."

"I'm not big on religion," Daniel responded, taking a seat. "Not big on faith either to be honest."

"What brings you in?" the pastor asked, sitting next to him. "If not faith or your religion, something had to usher you in."

"Maybe I wanted to know when the service for my girlfriend is going to be. Other than that, you wouldn't find me here on any given Sunday."

The pastor looked disturbed at what he had just said. Finally, after a moment he said, "I am so very sorry for your loss. I know you and Mary were close but—"

Everything happens for a reason. Right?" He held his composure, standing up and taking a few steps back, his eyes like daggers. "I've heard it all before pastor. If I didn't love my girlfriend, you would not see me for a very long time. That's what I think of your religion."

He walked towards the door but before he could push it open, the pastor called out after him. "One day you're going to have to choose the path you have been avoiding: the path to help those in need, or the path to condemn the whole world to an unforeseen mercy. Be careful and mindful of what you pick."

Daniel advanced out of the church, the warning going in one ear and out the other. He sat on the third step leading down to the sidewalk and put his hat and sunglasses on. He looked at the clock on his phone. 2:35 PM. Almost the end of the school day. Something was telling him to go

but, at the same time, he didn't want to hear people's apologies or sympathetic words. I'll just go back at five. When I know everybody will be at home.

"Daniel," he heard a soft voice in front of him.

He knew immediately who it was and therefore he was reluctant to look up.

This time, the woman approached him and shook his shoulder for a second. "Daniel?"

"Yes?"

"What are you doing here?"

He took a moment before he responded. "Just wanted to get some fresh air."

"I'm happy that I found you here. I wanted to ask you something—"

He jumped to his feet and ran down the street, turning the corner and moving as far away from her as he could. He wasn't ready to tell her or to see the pain in her eyes. Not now anyway. The wound to her was still so fresh, in no way or form ready to heal. He sat down next to a big dumpster, put his headphones in, and tuned the whole world out, his head between his knees and fresh tears spilling out onto the ground.

Daniel woke up to him drooling and his playlist no longer playing. He retrieved his phone and realized it was a little after five o'clock. He also saw that he had a couple of missed calls from his parents followed by a few text messages. Now was the time to head to the high school and satisfy his hunger.

Half an hour later, he was at the front entrance of the school, the sun rapidly setting behind him. He would have to move fast to avoid being in the dark. He jogged down the darkened hallway to his locker, the sound of his footsteps echoing off the walls of the high school, the sweet smell of lemon filling up his nostrils pleasantly.

He reached Mary's locker, looked both sides to make sure none of those agents or anyone else was coming his way before putting in her combination. When it had opened, he instantly went for the picture of them together in Mickey Mouse ears and the picture of them when they were little, around six. A piece of paper folded in a square caught the corner of his eye and, curious, he took it and put it in his pocket.

A deep growl caught Daniel by surprise; in response, he quietly closed the locker and ran to the end of the lockers. He dared himself to look and could see nothing in particular but two sets of red eyes that were as red as blood. He had never seen anything like it; it was too big to be a dog and he was pretty sure it wasn't a wandering wild animal, but sooner or later, he would have to deal with them. But what to do? He looked around. He saw the double doors but the chances of them being open would not be enough time to scurry back to his hiding cover and think about another corner to hide in.

"Your heartbeat is calm for a person who has two Hellhounds tracking you."

His feelings of mourning and grief turned instantaneously to that of anger and revenge. He knew who it was and he wanted nothing more than to rip her throat out. He didn't care what these hellhounds were, or what they were capable of doing. He came out of his hiding spot and put his hands up, ready to fight.

From the shadows glowed two more red eyes. "Do you know what I am, Daniel Gates? I do not play nice but most of all, I do not fight with my knuckles!" A blue light shot at him; with a half second to react, he ducked down and avoided the blast. What the hell? he asked himself as he scrambled to his feet.

"What are you?" he asked, his anger threatening to overtake him.

The shadowy woman laughed, the hellhounds at her feet, waiting to be told otherwise. “More powerful than you. Are you ready to die?”

“Not before I take you with me!”

As he began running towards her, he was blinded by a bright white light. He threw his hands to shield his eyes and could feel his body lift up in the air. When the light died down, he had to adjust to the new surrounding that was his home. He rubbed his eyes and could see his parents in front of him and when he turned behind him, saw a muscular man with shoulder long brown hair standing over him.

“What happened?” he asked, shaking off any assistance the man was trying to offer him.

“You almost sealed your fate,” the man behind him said, eyeing him closely. “Going up against a succubus is one of the most stupidest deaths in the history of mankind.”

“I’m sorry, but who are you?” Daniel asked, his fists balled up and ready for action.

The man looked down at his fists and smiled, getting close to Daniel, each smelling the other’s breath. “If you think you’re fast enough to land that first punch, do it tough guy.”

Daniel’s dad appeared in the living room, a man with a bald head next to him. “Balisnor. Daniel.” He said both their names sternly but none fidgeted, not even an inch. They stayed in place, staring persistently, intently, until the bald man took his turn. “Balisnor! Show some restraint!”

The man named Balisnor broke his eye contact with Daniel, though he was reluctant, and stepped back a few paces.

“Please sit,” the bald man stated with a smile on his face. When Daniel did, he went on. “My name is Erek. You have already met my bodyguard Balisnor. First off, I want to offer my deepest condolences to you for your loss. I know it’s not easy but trust me when I say, things get better.”

Daniel looked at his dad and didn’t hide how he was feeling when he opened his mouth. “How much did you pay this therapist? Because now would be a perfect time to get your money back.”

“Don’t be rude to our guest Daniel. He’s not a therapist. He comes far and wide to explain what we cannot. Your mother and I love you and want the best for you but we can’t hide the truth from you no longer.”

“What is it that you and mom can’t tell me? Am I adopted?”

Erek was the one who answered this time. “If you want me to be honest with you, these folks you refer to as your mom and dad are not your actual parents. They were assigned to protect you and, up until this point, they have done a spectacular job. However, in this unfortunate scenario, it is no longer safe for you.”

Daniel’s mind was now whirring. If these people weren’t his parents, then where the hell were his real parents? And when he heard Erek say that it was no longer safe, how was he supposed to interpret that? “I’m confused. Why is it no longer safe?”

“It’s too much to explain. We don’t have time to break down everything you want to know. That succubus is going to stop at nothing until she has you in her possession.”

“How much do you need me?” Daniel asked, sitting back on the couch, clearly amused. He wasn’t buying any of this hot garbage, regardless of how desperate they were trying to shove it down his throat.

“I need you to understand the gravity of our current situation. It’s no laughing matter. We need you to further our movement.”

“I’m not going anywhere until I go to my girlfriend’s funeral. Your movement can shrivel up and die before I turn my back on her and go somewhere with complete strangers.”

Balisnor and Ereke went to speak before his father figure raised a hand and chimed in. “Let me talk to you in private for a second.”

He and Daniel got up and proceeded to go to the kitchen, out of prying ears and sharp dagger eyes. “You’re making this impossible Daniel. And at the wrong time. She will be coming here next.”

“My life has been a lie!” Daniel said through gritted teeth. “I don’t know who the hell is who anymore. My real parents are somewhere else and the people I thought were my parents are decoys instead. When were you going to tell me?”

“When we had more time. But we don’t. There comes a time when we must all make a decision that will make an impact in our lives. You must make one.”

“What about Mary’s funeral? You want me to just forget about her?”

“It’s never easy making a decision out of a complex situation like this one. To answer your question though, yes.”

Daniel couldn’t believe what he was hearing but if there was anyone that he was going to listen to, parent or not, it was going to be him. “Alright. I’ll go with them but when they allow me to, I’ll be back.”

His dad had a gleam in his eye, putting a hand on his shoulder. “It’s going to be a hard life, transitioning from one life to another. However, you won’t have to be at a disadvantage when enemies come for you. If we are destined to meet again, then may the goodness of the earth make it so. If not, I wish you nothing but the best.”

He nodded, realizing that he had desperation in his voice; and although he really did not want to go, he knew that this was his calling.

They went back into the living room together, his dad’s hand on his shoulder. Daniel took a deep breath, exhaled slowly and looked down at the floor as he said, “I have decided to come with you, as long as I can come back once I’m done with my training.”

Ereke got up with a bright smile on his face. “Excellent! And of course, of course! We should go now, before it’s too late.”

Daniel trudged over to them and waited, not wanting to make eye contact with Ereke or Balisnor. He looked at his parents, however, and managed to smile. “May we meet again.”

“You will find the answers you seek,” his mother said, smiling reassuringly.

“We will meet again,” his father stated as he watched Daniel vanish before their eyes. “Stay strong,” he whispered.

He grabbed his wife by the waist and pulled her close. “We did the best we could. Balisnor will teach him the ways of the warrior. The hard part is over.”

Just then, the doorbell rang. They knew who it was.

“I love you.”

“I love you too my love. May we meet again.”

The woman with the gold eyes slowly walked in, admiring the art on the wall as well as the pictures. When her eyes fell on the couple, she smiled, her hands turning into long sharp claws. “Who wants to hurt first?”

** ** *

The last thing Daniel saw before it turned to a white nothingness was his parents waving goodbye. After twenty seconds of free falling, his feet finally hit the ground...then his knees. "Ow," he grunted as he got up and dusted off. His mood instantly turned sour when he saw that Balisnor and Ereke were still on their feet. He could have sworn that Balisnor had a smirk on his face.

From the middle of the forest, they traversed to escape the trees. Once they had and they were along the starting line, Daniel lost his breath at the sheer beauty of this unknown alien place.

Up ahead was a large marble castle with a large watchtower on the left side; the majestic building was protected by a thirty foot high brick wall that had what appeared to be soldiers patrolling the area. To the left of where the castle was erected were snowcapped mountains that were breathtaking. To the right was a large lake that was busy with people fishing and swimming.

"Where are we?" Daniel asked, not being able to take his eyes off the beautiful scenery before him.

Ereke smiled, putting his hand on Daniel's shoulder. "The castle before you houses the most powerful royal family within the Five Kingdoms. This one is called Varin. Welcome to Varin Daniel, your new home."

** ** *

FOUR

When they approached the wall sometime later, there were guards waiting for them. Realizing who they were, they stepped aside and allowed them to pass. They walked along the cobblestone roads, little shops lined up along the sides of it, smiling people behind the tables watching them as they walked past.

The cobblestone street that was under his feet suddenly turned to solid marble; when he glanced up, he noticed he was in the hallway leading to the castle. White walls were on the sides with torches lit every ten feet. Still, they kept walking. Finally, after a measly two minutes, they came across two giant double wooden doors that stood at least thirty feet high. They creaked as they opened, revealing a magnificent room behind. When they had walked through and stepped into the room, Daniel gasped at the beauty.

Welcome to the most magnificent kingdom among the Five Kingdoms. This is the throne room. Isn't it magnificent? Come meet my wife."

The throne room had a sunroof, allowing the sunlight to pour in and make the room appear golden. At the end of the room was a stage where three thrones rested in the middle. The thrones were made of the same marble the castle was constructed out of; and standing in front of either side of the middle throne were two women. The woman on the right had to be his wife due to the fact she looked to have been in her mid to late twenties. She had long platinum blonde hair that was braided from the just above her ears and had piercing but stunning emerald green eyes. She wore a simple yet elegant headband that had rhinestones all along through it; in the middle, it was shaped like a small "v." She had a bright welcoming smile on her face but for some reason, Daniel felt like it was just for show, like her true colors would come out once he got to know her.

The girl next to her was far younger and looked at Daniel like he was something she had never seen before. She wore a blue dress that hugged her curves rather tightly. Her long jet black hair fell on her back, her deep blue eyes locked onto Daniel's that it felt like he couldn't move. She was hypnotizing him, and he liked it. On her head was a jeweled crown that had a variation of precious stones; strapped to her waist were two sharp sai, the hilt sporting a circular ruby.

Erek joined them and hugged them at the same time before turning to face Daniel. "This is my kingdom. From this point forward, you are a Varinian, which means you will follow our customs and courtesies and face the same punishment as the people born here do. This is my wife, your Queen, Guinevere and my daughter, your Princess, Anya." Daniel bowed his head in Anya's direction but she kept looking at him with that cold dark stare.

The king continued. "You will start training tomorrow. The sooner you are taught to defend yourself from those that are after you, the sooner you are able to return home with no fear. Go. Explore your new home. Anya here will be your escort."

Princess Anya smirked, not once breaking the eye contact set between them. "Very well." As she made her way down the stairs, she walked by him and whispered, "Look forward to it."

** **

Mr. Gates's face was covered in blood. He had three claw marks on the side of his face that were an inch or so deep. Mrs. Gates was across from him crying, her makeup beginning to run and leave black streaks on her face.

Penelope, amidst the tears and screams and blood splatters on the walls, was smiling. Her long claws were stained with red, her smile still there. "Is he the Chosen One?" she asked for the umpteenth time. "Tell me and I'll stop. Don't." She thrust her fingers into his thigh, smiling and laughing with her mouth open as his screams filled her ears. "And I keep going."

"I don't know!" Mrs. Gates screamed at the top of her lungs, her teeth gritted, and her face stained with tears. "What did you expect him to do when he watched you kill his girlfriend? He's scared so of course he's going to hide."

Penelope tilted her head in her direction, her claws still dug in Mr. Gates' leg. After a long minute, she pulled up and extracted her claws from his flesh. She slowly walked to the other side where the wife was and stroked her finger down her cheek in a slow motion. She got uncomfortably close to her face, so close that Mrs. Gates could hear her breathe excitedly. "It wasn't that hard, now was it?"

Mrs. Gates shook her head, her breathing trembling.

"But I'm afraid what you said is not going to work. You see, I need a pinpoint location as to where he is."

"I told you, I don't know where he is. I'm telling you the truth."

"Are you though?" She straightened herself out and stood in the middle of them. "I grow bored. So, if you cannot get me the information I need, then you are of no use to me."

The room got quiet. Neither of them talked, causing Penelope to roll her eyes. "Very well." She walked to Mr. Gates with her claws out and stabbed him through his heart, sticking through his back. "The next time I ask you a question, answer it to the best of your ability."

Mrs. Gates screamed as she saw her husband's life ebb away. "I'm sorry," she whispered as she let the tears flow. "I'm so sorry my love."

Penelope bent down with her sick smile still intact. "His blood is on your hands. Tell Daniel the Dark King is going to be looking for him for the rest of his days. Tell him there's no place he can hide that he will be safe." A second later, Penelope was gone and she was still tied to the chair, her husband already dead.

** ** *

Once he had been shown around the castle, the King and two of his guards showed him to his room. A single candle was ablaze on top of a tall dresser, the sun pouring in through a big window. He stepped in and saw that the wooden floors didn't creak as he slowly advanced into his room, unsure if this was supposed to be a trap or not.

He turned to the King, who was smiling as he crossed his arms. "Is this a trap?"

King Ereik laughed, dropping his arms and walking towards him. "Visitor or not, our guests get the best. Rest up, because tomorrow you start your training."

"Yes sir," Daniel said, bowing his head.

Ereik leaned in and whispered in his ear. "Remember, it's Your Majesty. Don't worry. It takes some time transitioning."

Daniel cleared his throat before saying, "Yes Your Majesty."

As the king was leaving, his daughter appeared at the entrance and smiled at her father. When the King nodded his head in acknowledgment, she returned the gesture. "May I enter?"

"Yes, Your Majesty." He was confused as to what to say or do. Part of him was telling him to bow; the other was telling him not to make a fool out of himself and instead wait to be told. What do I do?

The princess smiled widely, taking a step closer. "You don't have to do that with me. I'm your princess, nothing more or less than that. When we're out in public however, just address me as Your Highness."

"Yes...Your Highness." His heart began to thump hard as she smiled, taking another step closer to him. He felt a tingle in his body that flooded through him, a sensation he had never felt before, not even with...

"How are you liking Varin?" the princess asked as she sat on his bed.

"I...I'm liking it...so far."

"If you like what's inside the walls, you're going to love the outside. It's beautiful, majestic, exuberant. Too many words come to my head when I think about it."

"You'll have to show me one day."

Princess Anya stood up and stood ever so close to him, so close that he could smell the wild strawberry scent of her hair. "I keep my promises Daniel Gates. Complete your training and I promise to take you out beyond the wall."

There was a knock on the door and they broke apart quickly. It was Balisnor who had walked in on them. "My Lady, are you alright?"

The princess fixed herself up and smoothed out her dress. "I'm fine Balisnor, thank you. I was just telling him good luck with his training tomorrow."

"Your father would like to see you My Lady, hence why I'm here."

"Very well." She looked Daniel in the eye once more and whispered, "Good luck. I will be watching."

"Yes, Your Highness."

When she had left and was out of earshot, Balisnor walked in and said, "You start training tomorrow. You need to focus and get out of your head anything that may hinder your performance. Can you do that for me?"

"Yes sir."

Balisnor could see the trouble in Daniel's eyes and said, "I know what troubles you, but you need to know they made the right decision in bringing you here."

"That's not what I'm troubled about Balisnor. It's the fact that my real parents might be here and I don't know anything about it. Where they live, what they do. I'm just an orphan in this place that I don't even know."

"Make a name for yourself and I promise you, they will hear about you and come. Put all that worry to rest and show us what you got."

He smiled and, in return, Daniel smiled back. "Yes sir."

Balisnor went to the door, then turned around as if he had forgotten something. "I suggest you keep your relationship with the princess secretive. You have a lot to show Ereka before he even allows you to be with her alone. Keep it professional when out and about. What you two do behind closed doors is none of my business."

Daniel nodded to Balisnor to let him know he understood before the big guy made his way out, leaving Daniel to his lonesome. He dug in his pocket and retrieved a square piece of parchment. When he had opened it, his eyes filled with tears as they set upon a picture of Mary and him smiling widely for the camera, cheek to cheek. He laid on his bed with his hands outstretched and examined it until his eyes grew heavy and he couldn't stay awake no longer. When he had felt the urge to sleep, he took off his shoes and placed the picture next to his bed before getting in the covers and dozing off.

** ** *

It seemed as if the past forty-eight hours since being tasked with her current mission that she had become familiar to the dark room where her father inhabited. She knew that the reason he was so hard on her was because it crazed him that he couldn't do what she was given to do. Even if at times he came off a bit...unbearable.

"Perhaps I should put someone who's a bit more competent on your mission since the taste of failure is on your lips," his cold voice echoing off the stone walls. "I would do it myself but..." There was a sigh from the shadows. "My current state will not allow it."

"Father," Penelope said, doing her best to look at the floor instead of looking at where the throne was, which she knew he would take as a challenge. "I have done everything you have set me out to do and have not been wrong." She took a deep breath to steady herself. "Yet."

Mortezan was silent for a moment, then uttered, "Go on."

"I know this might sound a bit far-fetched, but I think he's in Varin. Let me take a few of the hounds to scout to justify my reasoning. If he is there, they will let you know immediately."

Her father was quiet until he said a few seconds later, "Very well. If he is there, you will lead my army to their front gate. If not, I will relieve you of this task and you will be exiled for all eternity. Do we have an agreement?"

"Yes My Lord."

With now a few of the hellhounds by her side, she took off with a pep in her step. She surely missed Varin; but she wouldn't mind it burning to the ground.

** ** *

Princess Anya sat on her chair, humming to herself as her maid combed her hair. Her maid was the same age as her with long blonde hair and ocean blue eyes. She looked at the princess through the vanity mirror and asked with her head cocked to the side, "Is everything alright My Lady?"

"Hmm?" The princess jumped up and, when she realized that it was her maid, she shook her head and smiled. "Yes, yes of course. Just got something on my mind."

"Something, or someone?"

The princess smirked. "Maybe it's a bit of both."

The maid stepped to the side of the princess with a shocking look on her face. "You must tell me more about this lucky person."

Princess Anya shifted to face the maid and smiled widely. "He's from the human realm and just arrived to Varin today."

"Go on My Lady."

"I don't know what it was about him, but I felt a connection to him. Like we were supposed to be with each other." She put her hand up just in time to stop her maid from talking. "It can't happen I know, but still...there's something that turns me on about him."

"Be careful My Lady. You don't want to upset your father. Goodness knows what he would do if he was to find out."

"Which is why you must not tell a soul about it. I mean it Dana."

"I won't," the maid said as she smiled widely once more. "You can rest assured your little secret is safe with me."

"Thank you." Princess Anya yawned, putting her hands in the air as she did so. "I have to be awake early tomorrow so I'm afraid I'm going to be retiring for the night Dana."

"Yes My Lady. See you in the morning."

With Dana now gone and the princess in her bed, she stayed awake for a moment trying to find out just why she felt so connected to a stranger that she had just met today. Was it really destiny? Meant to be? She did not know, but what she did know was that she had to get to the bottom of it fast. She dozed off, drifting into a deep sleep and thinking about it no more.

** ** *

FIVE

Daniel woke the next day to the sound of someone rambunctiously knocking on his door. Groggy and still feeling as if he had been deprived of sleep, he threw the covers off of him and made his way to the door. A soldier greeted him on the other side and he knew that today really was here. Today was his first day of training.

"Balisnor is waiting for you at the ground sir," the soldier said. "Get ready and follow me so we can be on our way."

Daniel nodded as he shut the door and got ready. After twenty minutes of almost falling on his face because his pants kept getting stuck, he finally made it out in one piece and followed the soldier down the hall, down a couple flight of stairs and out of the castle.

The sun was beginning to come over the peak of the mountains to the east but that did not stop the beautiful purple and orange blend of colors from painting the sky. It was a bit chilly as a cool breeze kissed his face. He crossed his arms as the breeze reached his bones and froze them on impact, causing him to violently start shivering.

“It’s not bad once you get used to it,” the soldier said from the side of him. “You think it’s cold now? Wait until the snow hits here in a couple of weeks. You’ll be in trouble then Mr. Shivers.”

As they made their way past the marketplace, he saw people prepping to open their stands; restocking, setting up their tables, some conversing about how their business was either booming or was being an inconvenience.

“If I don’t make enough uniki before the winter storms, my family won’t have enough to sustain,” he heard one person say.

“If I were you, I would start thinking about heading to the human realm. It’s dangerous, yes, but it beats being frozen when the storms are at their peak.”

Finally, when the last shops on either side were behind them, he could see that they were heading to the back of the castle and towards a small patch of land. Standing at the entrance and waiting for them was Balisnor and the King beside him.

“Morning,” Balisnor boomed when they had reached him. The guards broke off and went on their merry way, leaving Daniel in Balisnor’s care. “How are you feeling today?”

“Nervous. Anxious. I don’t know,” Daniel replied, feeling as if he had given Balisnor an honest response. He had a million and one emotions flooding him at once that he suddenly felt nauseous.

Balisnor laughed as he placed his hand on his shoulder. “Don’t worry. I’ll take it easy on you for your first day.”

Daniel nodded, the nerves shaking him awake and making him go jittery instead. Whether it was the cold or not, he wasn’t sure; he just began shaking violently.

“Right. So, uh, let’s get started.” Balisnor led Daniel to the training ground. He tossed a wooden sword Daniel’s way. Once he had picked it up from the ground, Balisnor rushed and swept his leg, causing him to land on his back. “Lesson one, be prepared.”

Daniel got up and held the sword with both his hands, the wetness of his shirt soaking to his back. This time, he was the one to rush Balisnor, but he got his sword whacked from his hand and Balisnor’s weapon was quick to slash against the back of his leg. Had it been a real sword, it would have shredded ligaments and tendons, rendering the leg completely useless. Thankfully, they were wooden and didn’t have any damage.

“Lesson two. Never rush your opponent. You want to study him, get to him mentally. If you get in his head successfully, that’s already half the battle that you’ve already won.”

He got to his feet again, retrieved the sword once more, and waited patiently, doing his best to read what Balisnor would possibly do. After a minute of nobody advancing towards one another, he felt a sharp pain erupt from the base of his neck. He turned around and saw that one of the guards was the culprit who had done it. “And lesson number three,” he heard Balisnor say from behind. Daniel rolled his eyes and didn’t bother turning around. A second later, he was thrown from Balisnor’s back and he landed on his side, making him lose wind for a minute. “Never expect a fair fight.” He extended his hand, helping Daniel to his feet and dusting off his shoulders. “I think that’s enough for today.”

He saw the princess looking from the side and rage filled him. Rage that he was being humiliated in front of her, in front of people he never seen before. He put down his sword and said, "I'm done."

Balisnor nodded. "Indeed. Time to get some rest. We'll pick it up tomorrow. Guard, show him to his chambers."

** ** *

That night, Daniel laid on his bed, his body sore from the so-called training Balisnor had put him through today. He was pondering his life choices, debating whether staying was really worth the humiliation.

A soft tap on the door woke his senses as he lazily made his way to the door to find the princess waiting for him. "My Lady," Daniel mumbled as he stood with the door ajar.

"Thought you would enjoy the company," she said almost in a whisper, a smile on her face to try to cheer him up. "Let me in. Please."

Reluctant but not wanting to anger her, he stepped aside and let her pass by. The sweet smell of her hair still managed to get him tingly inside.

She sat down and had her hands on her legs. "I know it can be difficult to adopt to how we operate. It will be all worth it though, when your training is done and you're officially one of us."

"With all due respect My Lady, I don't know if I can ever be what you expect me to be."

The princess got up and went next to him, putting her hand to his heart. His cheeks turned a rosy red knowing that she could feel his heart quicken, as if it would explode out of his chest at any moment. "You need to look deep within yourself and find what you are made of. My father wouldn't waste his time with anyone who thought wasn't the savior to our people."

"If you need me to do this, I need to see my family. See how they're doing. That's all I'm asking." He backed away, his heart rate returning to normal. "If not, then I'm afraid I can't help you."

Princess Anya sighed, turning around to stare out the window. Finally, after a minute or so, she said, "I'm not supposed to do this because it can be dangerous...but for you, I will make this one exception." She turned to look at Daniel, this time with a look of confidence. She outstretched her hands, palms facing him. "Hold my hands and close your eyes," she instructed. He did so, hesitant at first but finally succumbing. There was a blinding white light that almost caused him to open his eyes, but he resisted. When the white light had faded, he opened his eyes and realized that he wasn't in his room anymore. The dark candlelit room had disappeared and was replaced with birds chirping and the sun glowing on his face. He couldn't believe his eyes: in front of him stood his house, sunlight beaming through the windows, a bird or two resting on a branch of a tree that was close to it.

"Did you...really?" he asked, the emotion to cry constricting him for a minute before forcing it back down. When she had nodded, he smiled and ran to the door, not hesitating to open it. His heart was racing, a smile on his face; he just couldn't wait to hug his mom and dad finally...

There was blood all over the floor. Blood on some parts of the house as well as on the floor. He heard the cries of a woman come from the kitchen and when he stepped in there, it was as if something had paralyzed him. Like some force had suspended his way of moving about. There was pure and utter terror awakening within him as he walked ever so closely to where the

trail of blood was. To his utter dismay and horror, he saw that his mother was kneeled over his dead father, slash marks on his chest. He dropped to his knees and muttered, “No, no, no.”

His mother, head shaking as well as her hands, slowly looked at him with her nostrils flared. “You’re the cause of all this,” she whispered angrily.

“What do you mean?” Daniel replied with tears beginning to stream his cheeks. “I didn’t ask for any of this.”

“No, but you are the cause of what is happening. Of what did happen.”

“That’s not fair...”

“Not fair?” Daniel’s mom stood up so fast and began walking toward him. “Don’t come to me about what’s not fair! It’s not fair I sacrificed my living in Varin to protect the so-called prodigal son when his own parents don’t want him. It’s NOT FAIR that my husband is dead because of you. It’s NOT FAIR to know that you can’t say anything to the royal family without being threatened with your life.”

“You know that’s not what happened,” Anya said coldly, going next to Daniel.

Daniel’s mom ignored what the princess said, getting ever closer to him. In a cold, deadly whisper, she snarled, “Go back to your bastard parents and never come back. You are dead to me.”

Daniel stood up and walked out the room, the princess following closely behind. He went outside and breathed in deeply, exhaling slowly. Once Anya had shut the door, he turned to her and said, “Who are my parents, and why did they get rid of me?” Tears were now streaming richly down his face. It was uncontrollable now, no matter how much he tried to fight the urge not to. “I didn’t ask for this.”

Princess Anya put a hand on her shoulder and said, “The greater the challenge, the greater the warrior. You were born for this Daniel, yet you allow yourself to be incompetent and indecisive over what you want to achieve. The prophecy can still come true...you just have to believe in yourself.”

“You didn’t answer my question.”

Princess Anya sighed. “It’s hard to explain. I’m not sure if I should explain it to you, to be honest.”

“Then who can?”

Anya took his hand and together went back to Varin, Daniel hoping to find the answers to his question.

** **

Daniel’s mother, or should it be known his former mother, sat on the couch trembling uncontrollably, her rage still welling inside her. Her eyes on the floor, rocking herself back and forth.

“Bravo, bravo,” came a voice from the darkness of the living room. “The emotion, intensity...it was lavish to see him crumble.”

“Shut up Penelope,” hissed Mrs. Gates as she gritted her teeth.

Penelope tilted her head, her claws slowly growing out. “Now now. Let’s not get complacent. I am the Princess of Darkness. Remember your place.”

“I did what you wanted me to do. Now you do your end of the bargain.”

The Princess of Darkness smiled as her eyes turned red, walking to the corpse. Once her long claws had reached his chest, she muttered an incantation that she couldn't hear. After she had recited it, she stood back to admire her work. The corpse didn't move.

"Why isn't it working?" the woman asked impatiently.

Penelope held up a finger. It was then that the man opened his eyes; but instead of the whites around his pupils, it was all black. The woman stared at the man afraid, not knowing what to do or how to act. "Thank you for contributing to the cause Tabitha. Your sacrifice will never be forgotten."

"My sacrifice?" the woman breathed, almost in a whisper.

"Of course. I just needed you to break him and you did so extravagantly. Now I have no use for you, and I can always use another hellhound." Penelope snapped her fingers and watched with glee as the man absentmindedly attacked his wife, ripping apart her stomach and pulling out fistfuls of intestine. In a dark shade of light, Penelope was gone.

** **

SIX

As soon as he had landed in Varin, he immediately made his way back to the castle.

"You can't just demand to talk with them," the princess said as she tried to hurry to catch up to him.

"Watch me." He ran to the castle, down the hallway and pushed the door leading to the throne room open. He could see the King and Queen on their thrones talking among themselves.

Out of breath but finally within range to talk he said, "I want to know where I came from, where my parents are, and what's so special about me."

King Ereik looked his way, never breaking eye contact as he stood up and made his way to him. "I beg your pardon?"

"I think I made myself very clear Your Majesty. I want to know more about me."

Even the smiling King that he had seen before was nowhere to be found as he took a step closer to Daniel and said, "That is not how you ask, I'm afraid my child. You would do better to know your place."

Daniel could hear the princess approach him from behind, out of breath, and whisper, "What were you thinking?"

The King approached him; Daniel could see Balisnor behind him but in front of the Queen. King Ereik bent down and said in his ear, "Follow me."

Once inside the bedroom belonging to the King and Queen, Daniel stood up while Ereik walked past him, going to the dresser to grab two cups and fill them with water. "Sit. Make yourself at home."

He sat across from him at the table, folding his hands. "I'm sorry Your Majesty," he began.

King Ereik put up his hand and smiled. For a second, Daniel was taken aback. The King went to sit across from him, his hand outstretched to give him his water. Daniel took it, trying not to make eye contact.

There was a knock on the door. King Ereik sighed before getting up and walking. "Ah, Balisnor. To what do I owe you this welcome?"

Balisnor's voice thundered in the room. "Just making sure you're alright Your Majesty."

“I believe I’m capable of defending myself in my own room.”

“Yes, Your Majesty.”

When the door had been closed again and the King had sat down, he cleared his throat and took a sip of his water. “So, what do you want to know?”

“I want to know my lineage. Where my parents came from, where they’re at.”

“And what makes you so unique, am I right?”

“Yes, Your Majesty.”

The King cleared his throat and began: “You may not know it now, but you my friend are special. You may very well be our last line of defense against one of our most powerful enemies.”

“Who is he?”

“His name is Mortezan. He has three daughters, two sons, each with different abilities and ways in which they can kill. He used to be one of us, until word got round that he was forming a cult. A cult big enough to overthrow this kingdom. He knows of what you possess and what you will do if he doesn’t kill you now.”

“What is it that I possess to make me a target?”

“You possess the very thing he fears more: hope. Which is why he sent Penelope after you and when she came back without you, he had her kill your parents.”

“But they weren’t my real parents. They were a decoy...so who are my real parents? And why did they get rid of me?”

“They didn’t want to get rid of you Daniel.” Erek leaned in to make sure that the sympathy in his eyes reflected into Daniel’s. “They wanted you more than anything, especially your mom. But had they kept you, Mortezan would have definitely had you in his clutches.”

“What were they like?”

“Your mother had the power to conduct electricity in her hand, your father just had sheer strength. During your mother’s pregnancy, there was a prophecy that said that one that had not been born yet would be the one to unseat evil. So, Mortezan being Mortezan, tried to rid you. Your parents assigned some friends of theirs to look after you and raise you as their own. Unable to have children of their own, they humbly and graciously accepted. When Mortezan had come and learned of this, he was enraged and burned the whole village down.”

A lump formed in the middle of Daniel’s throat. Were his parents dead then? Did they escape knowing that Mortezan was coming? Daniel cleared his throat and asked, “Where is the village?”

“About a good day’s journey. Shinguard is the name of it. You can go there if you’d like.”

“I’d very much like that Your Majesty.” He leaned over and said, “I know I just got here, and I don’t know very much about your culture, but from this moment forward, I’m going to do my best.”

The King smiled. “I know your journey has been full of obstacles and pain, but this can be your moment to shine. I will make this oath to you: show me that you can do Balisnor’s training, and I will make sure that when you complete it, you can go to Shinguard.”

Daniel nodded his head, his confidence high and his focus reinitiated. “You got yourself a deal.”

They stood up and shook each other’s hand before Erek showed Daniel the door. “Good night Daniel. See you at training tomorrow.”

** **

“This is far too easy,” Penelope said to herself as she stood at the tree line, watching the wall for any sign of weakness. From what she could see, there were at least half a dozen openings vulnerable for attack. Her eyes turned red and at once she was met with her hellhounds at her side, snarling, their ears cropped back. “I could take all of them just with myself. Look at them my loves: pathetic, lustful, and so full of fear. They have been enjoying this disgusting peace for a hundred years. I say we feast on their fears and make them relive their nightmare again, yes?”

The hellhound to her right let out a deep growl in return, revealing its massive and sharp canines.

“Atta boy. But unfortunately, we can’t. We have to spy and hide like the shadows. Stay here and don’t let nobody know you’re here. Mommy will be back soon.” With a flick of her wrist above her head, a black cloak enveloped over her, settling on her head to where her eyes were covered and so were her hands. The cloak went to the bottom of her pants, inches from the ground. As she began to walk toward the castle, she looked up and saw the tower shining from the sun. She snarled herself as she continued through the gate, the guards oblivious to who had just entered. Step one is done, she thought to herself. Step two, look for the brat.

** **

When Daniel had made it back to his room, he closed the door and fell on his bed, rejuvenated over finally learning who he was and what he was meant to be. There were no more secrets, no more lies as to what his identity would look like, could look like. He, out of all the young men, was the one to bring down Mortezean. Now he felt like he had to learn more about his enemy and his tactics before anything else. Where he would get that information, he didn’t know, but he was determined to find out quickly.

“You seem happy,” came a familiar voice to the right of him.

Sporting a big grin on his face, he sat up and said, “I think you need to find a better hiding place My Lady.”

Princess Anya came out of her familiar hiding spot and said, “You need to be more careful.”

“Why do you say that?”

“Can I be honest with you and this stays between us?”

“Whatever is spoken, I won’t utter a word My Lady.”

Anya came closer, Daniel getting to his feet because he felt he was being rude sitting down. “I feel like I’ve known you all my life. There’s just something about you that pulls me toward you, and I can’t explain it. Whatever the reason is, I don’t plan on you straying too far away from me.”

“You barely know me though Your Grace.”

In reply, she leaned into his ear and whispered, “I know.”

Daniel walked the princess to the door, opening and standing to the side, doing his best to not make eye contact with her. “Good night My Lady.”

Princess Anya looked at him all the way through until the door closed in front of her and was locked. She stood there for a minute, then smiled from ear to ear as she made her way to her chambers to get some sleep.

** **

SEVEN

Daniel woke up early the next morning, washed his face, got dressed, and began to go downstairs to get to the training grounds before anyone else. Once there he began to stretch, bending down to touch his toes for a few seconds.

"I see someone woke up motivated," Balisnor's voice sounded from the distance.

Daniel shook his head. "Found out the people I've been staying with for sixteen years didn't even want me. That and the fact that they weren't even my parents and that they're some place else, well that lights a fire under your butt. Sooner I do your training and pass, the sooner I can go looking for them."

Balisnor looked troubled, but his voice would not betray him. Balisnor too shook his head and replied, the wooden sword outstretched in his hand for Daniel to take. "Very well. Let's get to training."

Two and a half hours later, Daniel and Balisnor were sitting at the stairs of the castle catching their breath. Balisnor got on his feet and patted him on the back. "Better today than you were yesterday Daniel. Keep it up and you'll see yourself in our ranks fairly soon."

Daniel nodded. He couldn't help but to smile. "Thanks."

"What was your motivation?"

Daniel shrugged. "I guess not being able to go home, that this is all I have. Might as well make the most of it and give it 110%."

"Keep that going because tomorrow you're going to fight for real. It won't be against me though. So, get some rest and I'll see you tomorrow."

As they separated for the day, they didn't get to see who was peaking from the wall behind them. Penelope had her eyes dead on Daniel, never wavering. When he had disappeared down the corridor, she put her head back down and followed.

** ** *

Mortezan tried his best to stand up, but he was still not at all strong enough to do so. He growled in resentment as he sat back down staring at his dark dungeon. This form is irritating me. I need to get back at full strength.

"Why do you do that to yourself Father?" a voice came from behind him on the side. "Beating yourself up over Penelope's failures. You're the Dark Lord."

"What is the reason of you being here?" He could feel her hands on his shoulders, rubbing them, her cold breath next to his ear.

"Let me finish what Penelope started. I, unlike her, will not fail you."

"You will get your shot soon enough. Besides, you know that your sister isn't as strong as you."

"Yes, but still." She let go and backpedaled her way to the darkness. "If ever you need me, you know where to find me."

Dark, silent, and alone again, Mortezan grew anxious, and rage filled instantly. He let out a deep yell that filled the abysmal dungeon he was in, waiting for the first opportunity that he would be at full strength.

** ** *

Daniel was in a fixated dream, unable to move. He had passed out as soon as he had gotten in his room from the intensive day of training, not bothering to take off his clothes and into his sleep attire. Now, embedded in the subconscious part of his mind, he was outside his house. The sky was a mixture of orange and yellow, the wind whipping his face with heat. Suddenly, a voice erupted from inside the house, but no figure was present along with it.

“How does it feel, knowing your parents didn’t even want you? Real or adopted?”

He knew who it was instantly, his senses now at high alert. “Why don’t you come on out here and ask that to my face Penelope?”

Penelope laughed, making Daniel even more upset. “Why, when bringing up your past is so much more fun than battling? Tearing up your psyche is what makes it so pleasant. Tearing you down is the thing I crave my young friend.”

“So you’re a coward?”

“Oh, far from it. Why would your real parents give you away? So sad.”

“Stop I...I’m sure they had their reasons.”

This time, Penelope laughed maniacally, the house ringing with her crazy laughter. “You’re so naïve young one. The only one who knows is my father. He knows all about you, Chosen One. Come with me and get all the answers to the questions your heart desires.”

“I’d rather die than be one of your cohorts. I’ve heard what your father’s done and want no part of it.”

“That can be arranged.” All he heard was the wind howl in the silence, then she leapt out with such ferocity that he had no time to react.

He jumped out of bed, beads of sweat profusely running down his face, short of breath as if he had just run a marathon. He tossed the blankets off him and to the side, making his way to his dresser where there was a pitcher of water and a cup beside it. Pouring it into his cup, he raised it to his lips to take a drink. The water was cool and fresh as it slid down his throat with ease, his mind couldn’t help but to think of how amazing it tasted so late in the night like this.

“You’re an interesting man my young friend,” a voice started from behind him. As soon as he turned around and realized who it was, he was up against the wall with a sharp knife to his throat. “You scream or cause a commotion of any kind, and I will drink your blood while you watch. And believe me, I’m rather famished at the moment.”

Daniel was awake, his heart beating faster than a car’s piston going back and forth. Looking into her slotted eyes and realizing she wasn’t playing with what she said, he nodded. Penelope slowly took her hand off his mouth and backed away, her knife still at the ready.

“I just came to chat,” Penelope said as she lowered her dagger, a bit more relaxed. “Having me travel all this way to this godforsaken land is not nice Daniel. You should’ve just let me capture you back in the human realm.”

“Why are you here?” Daniel asked, backing away to the window.

“First off, it wouldn’t be in your best interest to do that. I’m evil, not stupid. Second, I wanted to see how the Chosen One is doing in his training.”

“And?”

Penelope sighed. “And you, my dear boy, have a lot of training to do if you plan on beating my father.”

“The dream. You were talking to me in my dream as well. Why?”

She smiled her evil smile before bothering to answer back. "That's my idea of having fun." She took a step toward him, her knife now in its sheath. "My father knows everything about you Chosen One, from the moment of birth until now. My father knows the answers to the questions you seek, yet these people are restricting you because they're afraid of you acknowledging who you really are. Who you truly can be capable of being with the right training. Sure, they're training you nicely and tending to your every need, but that's because they don't know who you are, how powerful your lineage is."

"Why would I trust you after you killed...them?" Daniel closed his eyes. He couldn't bring himself to say parents even though that's who they were to him since the time of birth. They showed their true colors when stuff had hit the fan and now, he had to learn to turn away from them before it crippled him from the inside.

"Daniel." Penelope closed in on him, her smirk now clear as ever across her face. "Just because we're on opposite sides of the spectacle doesn't mean we don't share some of the common beliefs. We just...what's the word? Act out more. These people, these Varinians, are scared to see my father rise back to power. They're desperate to find an answer to his chaos once and for all, and all they have to show for it is you. Come with me. Talk to my father. Gain the answers you seek, and see what side is more sinister once you have been shown the Path Before. All you have to do is take my hand and we will go now."

Daniel thought long and hard about it. If it was a trap, then Penelope was laying the groundwork for him to come across it rather perfectly, waiting for the right time to lock the cage and trap him. However, at the same time, if she was telling the truth, then why not go and confront the villain himself? Why not go there and ask him the reason why he was being targeted? It sounded absurd and he knew this wholeheartedly, but he sure wasn't getting the answers from Erek or the Queen. He had to know. He outstretched his hand, touched hers, and together they disappeared.

** ** *

EIGHT

Daniel appeared in a dark room that was oblivious to the light. He could feel Penelope next to him but, other than that, he couldn't see past his fingertips. There were deep growls echoing all around him, off the walls and constant. Penelope guided him along the pathway, stepping on goodness knew what was crushing under his feet. Still, he had no choice but to trust her, even if it wasn't wholeheartedly.

They stopped and he could hear Penelope say, "Bow."

Daniel did what he was instructed and went on one knee. He heard laughter that was so cold that it made the hairs on the back of his neck stand up. He kept his eyes on the ground out of instinct, doing his best to keep his breathing under control despite his heart quickening.

"The Chosen One himself." Red eye slits suddenly lit up. "Tell me one good reason as to why I shouldn't kill you."

"Penelope told me you knew all about me. I want to know why."

"Why what?"

"Why my parents didn't want me."

“To answer that, you would have to understand the prophecy.”

“I don’t even understand myself. I didn’t ask for this. I just wanted my life to be perfect. I wanted to grow old and die a natural death, not thrust into something I don’t even fully understand.”

The Dark Lord laughed, which made him even angrier. “Sometimes we get thrown into situations and have no control over that. We just control the outcome. You not comprehending or even recognizing that you’re a part of a prophecy gives me an advantage. I can kill you and end this in a blink of an eye right here, right now. Your desperation is what’s sickening to me; going to me when my daughter is after you and trying to kill you and she ends up bringing you to me instead.”

“Why don’t you kill me then instead of mocking me about it?”

The Dark Lord’s eyes flashed red, the only thing being visible to Daniel in all this darkness. “Oh, I would love to, but your desperation is amusing to hear. Next time I see you, and it will be soon, I will most certainly kill you.”

Penelope nodded and, in an instant, took him out of the dungeon. Still so many questions and not sure if the Dark Lord himself would be able to answer them, Daniel began to think who would.

When they appeared in his room a second later, Penelope said, “Consider this a onetime thing. Next time I see you, you’re dead.”

Daniel acknowledged her with a nod. “Thank you.”

Penelope vanished instantly, just in time to see Princess Anya storm into his room. “Where were you?” she asked, out of breath.

“Getting answers that your parents haven’t given me yet,” Daniel replied, his nostrils beginning to flare.

“And who exactly did you go to?”

Daniel scoffed at the Princess, turning his back to her. “It doesn’t matter. Not like he was much of a help anyways. He wouldn’t tell me my purpose in all of this, why they left me or, for that matter, where they were.”

Princess Anya stepped toward him. “Who did you go to?”

He couldn’t bring himself to say who he went to, but his eyes betrayed him as she looked into them so deeply, it felt like she was staring into his soul. She gasped and took a couple of steps back. How could you? she asked in his mind. Before he had an opportunity to ask her, she turned to her guard and said, “Arrest him and put him in the dungeon.”

The guard did as he was ordered. He apprehended him, led him right out of the castle, down a flight of stairs, and into a torch lit hallway. The smell of mold quickly filled his nostrils as he was led down to a vacant chamber to the left, where the guard unshackled him and threw him into the cell. The metal clang of the door, followed by the click of the key told him that this was real. For the first time since arriving in Varin, he was now in jail.

** ** *

Balisnor was so furious, he was pacing rather aggressively back and forth, his hand on his sword and breathing heavily. “If he were a Varinian, he would be tried for treason and beheaded. What do we do since he’s not?”

“Beheading him wouldn’t be the best outcome,” the Queen said, eyeing Balisnor closely. “And under no circumstances are we beheading the only prodigal son who might be able to kill the Dark Lord for good.”

“Might.” Balisnor scoffed, his gaze now fixated on the Queen, his eyes crazy with fury. “There is a fine line between might and will.”

Princess Anya walked into the bedroom that instant and said, “He’s in the dungeon.”

“Let me beat it out of him,” Balisnor said instantly. “I will find out the reason why he did—”

“With all due respect Balisnor, I believe I am the only one capable of talking to him.”

“Princess, I don’t think that’s a good idea.”

“What you think is totally different from what I know I can do. I’m not a little girl anymore Balisnor. I was taught by the most excellent teacher. I can take care of him.”

Reluctantly, Balisnor nodded and huffed out of the bedroom to catch some air.

“Should I be your aid when you go to confront him, daughter?” the King asked, taking a step forward.

“No, but I think you should consider that the only reason he did this was to get the answers we weren’t giving him. He needs to know, and if we want him on our side, we got to give him that. We owe him that much.”

She turned to leave, her shoes echoing off the walls. She knew she was right in what she said, he would only stick around if he was given the answers to the questions that were haunting him. She felt, in that one brief second in his mind before putting him in the dungeon, that his mind flooded with so many questions that would in time drive him to madness. For that, for a single second, she had pity for him. She wanted to hear it from his mouth; maybe only then would she be satisfied.

** ** *

NINE

The Princess stood in front of his cell, not saying a word as she watched him lay on his marble bed. Watching him shiver and curl into a ball to attempt to stay warm was not what she wanted; she felt awful for doing this to him but...true Varinian or not, he was under the same guidelines as her people. No matter how she felt, she knew that she had made the right decision.

She cleared her throat and said, “I would not have expected this from you. Being able to glance in your eyes and see what you’ve been doing is my essential power. Why? Why did you do it Daniel?”

Daniel jumped out of his cot and made his way slowly toward her. “If you can read my mind, you know why?”

“Desperation gets you killed. I understand why you did it, I really do. But going to the enemy for answers was an idiotic choice. What did he tell you?”

Daniel scoffed, his hands on the bars. “A whole lot of nothing. Couldn’t even tell me why my parents didn’t want me.”

The Princess looked down, not wanting him to see her pity aimed at him. Maybe it was really time for him to know where he came from, what he was. After a minute of breaking eye

contact with him, she looked at him again and replied, "You deserve to know." Her hand appeared from her cloak that she had worn to avoid detection and in it was the skeleton key to his cell.

Once he had been unlocked, he stepped out of the cell and made his way out of the dungeon with the Princess, moving with her step for step through the shroud of darkness of night.

When Daniel had made it to his room, Princess Anya said, "Meet me in the hall room in half an hour."

Daniel nodded, then proceeded to shut the door.

Exactly thirty minutes later, Daniel was in the hall room with the King, Queen, and Princess, doing his best to avoid eye contact with Balisnor.

Despite what he had done, King Ereka greeted him with a smile. "Sit. We have much to discuss."

Daniel followed the King and sat across from him, the Princess and Queen sitting on either side of him. He did his best to not act nervous as he saw the Bodyguard slowly come up and stand behind him. His mindset was telling him that he wouldn't be surprised if he tried to behead him right then and there.

The King was the first to speak. "So, what would you like to know first?"

Daniel reached for his cup of water and took a sip before replying. "Why am I so important? Where did you come from?"

"My, my, you are filled with questions," Queen Guinevere said, laughing as she too reached for her water.

"Your parents were born here," the King started. "Ferocious fighters, loyal to the Crown...wherever they went, they made friends everywhere. Before we knew it, they had made unsuspecting alliances with the elves, dwarves, and the Sucrkai, Dragon People."

"What happened?"

This time, the Queen was the one who spoke. "When your mom got pregnant with you, Mortezaan had sent assassins to kill you. You see, every generation of Varinian is more powerful than the last, which means you would have been stronger than your mom and dad combined. Your mother was terrified and asked if she could hide in the castle walls until the threat passed, but your dad thought better of it. He talked her out of it and told her they would be safer among the Dragons. They ventured out to a nearby village, gave birth to you, and we never saw them again."

The King cleared his throat, looking down as if ashamed of what he was about to say next. "With your parents gone, it wasn't long until the bonds to the elves and other species severed. I, uh, forbade everyone to make contact with them ever again; I realize now how terrible of a decision that was. Forming a bond with the Sucrkai is challenging. We might never get the opportunity to do it again."

The Queen outstretched her hand to hold her husband's, looking into his eyes as she said, "We might have a chance to do right if you fulfill the prophecy."

"What does it say?"

The Queen looked at him and smiled in reply. "The prophecy states that there is but one who can unite the people and take down the Darkness of the World once and for all. You are the link to make the chains strong again. That's why Mortezaan fears you..."

“He didn’t seem like he feared me when I went to go see him.” Daniel took another sip before turning his gaze to the King. “You told me that my parents were here in some nearby village. Where exactly is it?”

The King fidgeted a bit. “I haven’t been entirely truthful since your arrival. I said that in order for you to stay. Your parents used to stay at the nearby village of Shinguard but, like my wife said, once your mother got pregnant, they decided to live elsewhere.”

Princess Anya shifted her seat to face Daniel, her piercing emerald, green eyes gripping his intently. “We’re desperate. People here are starting to lose hope. Even though it has been hundreds of years since the Great War, people still hear about the prophecy. We need them to have faith in us, or we’re going to lose what we’ve been fighting for soon.”

“Who’s Mortezan?”

“Mortezan—”

The King interrupted her. “Mortezan is the one who sent the assassins after your family. He used to be a Varinian until he was found by my father to be plotting against the Crown. He was banished, but he told everyone—man, woman, and child alike that he would one day rise from the Darkness and take the throne. You see, Varin is a part of the Five Kingdoms. It’s a stronghold; if we fall, the other Kingdoms fall as well. We can’t allow that to happen.”

With most of his questions that were bogging him down now asked, all Daniel could do was nod. He cleared his throat before continuing. “I’m sorry for what I did, to both you and the people of Varin. I won’t ever do something as rash like this again.”

King Ereik stood up, a big smile on his face. “And I am sorry for my inactions for not telling you anything that you deserved to know. Had I not kept what you wanted to know away from you, none of this would’ve happened. Are you ready to get back into training?”

Daniel stood up and said confidently. “I’m ready.”

Back in his room surrounded by some newfound knowledge, all Daniel was doing was making sure he had everything that was told to him processed into his head. Now that he knew the truth about where he came from, he could focus more on training. However, the very thought of the village of Shinguard being so close to Varin stirred some other ideas in him as well. Should he go there, even though he knew that his parents weren’t there? I just as well might he thought. No harm in trying. As he laid down for the night, he couldn’t help but to see his parents as ferocious warriors that fought for the same crown he was under. If they did it, then did that mean he had to as well, to live in their legacy? He wanted to think about it but for now, the answer was obvious. He would do it. As his eyes grew heavy and would eventually win the battle of closing, Daniel pictured his parents side by side fighting Mortezan. That in itself put a smile on his face.

** **

TEN

“I gave you a simple mission, and you can’t even accomplish that,” Mortezan fumed, his red eyes blazing.

“What do you mean?” Penelope asked, baffled by the fact that her father was saying; she had given him the opportunity to kill Daniel on the spot, yet he didn’t. And now she was getting the heat of it. “I gave him to you practically on a silver platter. You failed to act on killing him.”

Something from the darkness grabbed her by the throat and pushed her up against the wall; the impact that she had obtained caused her to lose her breathing for a second. It wasn't her father that was choking her. She could feel the arm that was doing it. No, it was somebody else.

"Watch how you talk to father."

"Raven!" Mortezean yelled.

The one known as Raven let go instantly, but not without staring Penelope down as well. Once Penelope had regained her composure and her throat was back to normal, she continued. "The boy is beginning to train," she said as she massaged her throat. "He's a quick learner, much like his father."

"Any signs of his powers?" Mortezean asked.

Penelope shook her head. "No, but their bodyguard knows how to bring them out. It'll be just a matter of time."

"Keep watch of how he progresses. Let me know of any changes."

"Yes Father."

Penelope disappeared, leaving Mortezean and Raven alone. Raven's eyes glowed a stunning violet. "Do you think she's capable of handling this?"

"Scouting isn't a hard thing to do when done right. Your sister knows what to do. She's more than capable of executing the task at hand."

"Her heart is soft. You know this."

There was a deep growling from within the abyss. "I will take care of her if it comes to that."

There was silence from the darkness. Finally: "If you need me to intervene, you know where to find me."

** **

Early the next morning, Daniel woke up before everyone else and made his way to the training grounds. The sun had not yet broken the horizon, an orange tint embellishing the sky, showering the mountains in its grace. The cool air that swept through helped to wake him up, brushing his hair ever gently.

Once on the training grounds, he retrieved his wooden sword and began going back to his previous lessons of parrying and working on his stance, trying to master the different techniques before he could see Balisnor coming from the hallway. Somebody in a cloak was walking alongside him, keeping up with the bodyguard's pace at which he was walking.

When Balisnor and Daniel were within proximity to each other, Daniel bowed to show his respect. Balisnor, however, ignored him and moved past, bumping him in the arm as he did so.

"No time for morning greetings," the bodyguard said bluntly, firmly. "Today, you will put your skills to the test." He nodded to the cloaked person.

The being in the cloak took off its head cover, revealing the princess. Daniel tried to keep a steady composure but the fact that Balisnor would even think about matching him up with the princess herself was ludicrous. Princess Anya, however, looked determined and ready to fight.

"Let's see what you've learned," Balisnor said with a smirk on his face. "Don't let the good princess fool you. She can dance with a sword better than most men in my army." Once his eyes met Anya's and he nodded, she ran toward him full force.

Daniel didn't have enough time to react; how he managed to block Anya's blow he did not know. She was quick, quicker than him in every regard, but he found himself being able to fend off her attacks. She spun to try to throw him off guard, but he grabbed her wrist and instinctively slapped her, making her lose her grip on her sword. She staggered, holding her nose, sniffing.

"Oh my goodness princess, I'm so sorry," Daniel started as he threw down his sword and ran over to her.

When he had gotten within a couple meters, she reached around and hit him in the nose with her elbow, causing him to lose his balance and fall on his back. Before he could have time to react, the tip of her sword was against the throat. His vision blurry from the tears and warm blood beginning to come out of his nose, Daniel wiped his eyes as he struggled to get to his feet.

"You're fast," Princess Anya said as she lowered her sword.

"Not as fast as you, Your Grace."

"Not yet, but you're very close."

Balisnor came from behind the princess. "Congratulations, you have passed. Your sword fighting skills could sharpen up just a bit more, but you're a good fighter nonetheless."

"So, does that mean I'm one of you guys?" Daniel asked, hopeful.

Balisnor sneered as he took a couple of steps forward. "Don't push your luck, traitor." He looked Daniel down from head to toe. "You might have them fooled, but not from me. Step out of line again, and I'll make sure my sword runs through your throat."

The bodyguard walked off, not bothering to look back as Daniel watched him exit out the gate.

"You alright?" Princess Anya asked from behind him.

"Wh—? Oh, yeah. Sure." Daniel scratched the back of his neck, doing his best to not make eye contact.

"Let's go to the lake tonight. Meet me here at sunset."

"Is that even allowed?" Daniel asked, but the princess had already walked off.

If I didn't know any better, I would say she likes me, Daniel thought as he traversed back to his room. The feeling of finally completing his training after so long was immensely satisfying. He was a part of something his parents were once, and to him he felt like he had honored their memory. But what about Balisnor? Would he ever come to terms that he was just trying to get what he needed? Only time would tell but, in this moment, not even Balisnor could take away this moment.

** ** *

Later that night, Daniel walked out of the castle walls in the shadows of the night, making his way to the lake. What she wanted he had no idea, but he was looking forward to it. The crisp air gently blew in his direction as he ran to the lake, the moon full and illuminating with so much light. It was beautiful to say the least.

He found Princess Anya waiting at the shoreline, the water gently hitting her feet before retracting back in. Though it was a full moon and the light from it made it to where Daniel could see her without any conflict, he only saw that she was wearing a dress that showed off her shoulders. Her hair whipped slowly in the breeze, her beautiful eyes fixated on him and only him.

"Any reason why as to you wanting me to meet you here My Lady?"

"Do I need one?"

"I-I guess not," Daniel stammered, his cheeks getting hot. Thankfully, though, she could not see it.

"I wanted you to come down here to show you the beauty of Varin, not just inside the gate."

"Won't you get in trouble?"

Anya smiled. "Don't worry about me. I can be quite persuasive. Sit."

They sat next to each other on the shoreline, silent, the scent of her skin filling Daniel's nose. He didn't know what to say, didn't know how to start a conversation, let alone the Princess of a kingdom. He cleared his throat and tried to break the awkward silence between them. "Varin is a lot bigger than what I thought."

The princess laughed. "It might be big, but I think it's small in my opinion. Though it may be because I've lived here my whole life and know basically there is to offer." Silence fell between them until she too cleared her throat and continued. "I asked you down here to tell you something. I just don't know how to say it."

"Just say it Your Grace."

Princess Anya smiled as she looked down for a second. "I feel a type of chemistry with you that I have never felt with anyone before. Ever since you've walked through that gate, there's just something that attracts me to you. I understand if you don't feel the same way, but I wanted it to be us so I could feel it again without interruption."

Daniel was taken aback, but the thought of Mary instantly reeled him back in. "I'm-I'm honored My Lady to have you feel this way, but I must kindly reject. Don't get me wrong, I feel the same way about you, but right now isn't a good time."

The princess nodded, though she looked disappointed. "I understand. I'm sorry if I went too fast. I just wanted to let you know how I felt about you. When you're ready, I will be too."

Daniel got up and dusted his bottom off. "This place is beautiful, and I will do everything in my power to protect it. I hope to build on the chemistry we have between us. Just please remember that since coming here, I haven't been to her grave. Have a good night princess." He bowed his head before departing, leaving her to herself.

** ** *

"I don't trust him EreK," Balisnor snarled, attempting to keep cool. "Him going to the enemy to seek answers...what's the chances of him doing it again?"

"Now that we've answered his questions, not likely at all. He is one of us, as we knew he would be."

"If you trust him, then that's on you. But for me, I'm not going to hold my breath that he stays on our side. His true colors will come out eventually and when they do, don't say I didn't warn you."

King EreK put a hand on his bodyguard's shoulder and squeezed it. "How long have we known each other?"

Balisnor sighed. "Since we were wee little ones."

"And I've always had your back no matter the choices, haven't I?" Before his friend could answer, the King continued. "I'm asking you to have my back now. He's the one we've been looking for. His questions have been answered. Now, he is our responsibility to mold him into what we need him to be."

“I’m with you to the end old friend,” Balisnor replied as he slapped his hand on the King’s shoulder as well. “Even if at times I think you’re making a bad decision.”

“Thank you.”

The door bust open and in walked an out of breath soldier, his hand on his waist so he could breathe. After a couple of minutes, the soldier regained his composure and said, “Shinguard is requesting help Your Majesty. Premiere Zucharia says there have been spies patrolling around the village. He says that they’re led by one of Mortezan’s daughters and apparently is toying with them.”

“Send a messenger bird and tell the Premiere my soldiers will begin getting prepared.”

The soldier bowed. “As you wish Your Majesty.”

With the door now closed and the footsteps and rattling of mail far off in the distance, EreK turned to Balisnor and said, “Let’s see where the prodigal son’s loyalty truly lies. Let us find out who’s right.”

“Do you want me to go with him?”

“No, I’ll have Anya and our new soldier go.”

Balisnor’s eyes were like daggers as he pierced the King’s after he had said that. “Your reason to be steadfast in your decisions will one day cost you.”

King EreK smiled, not worried about what Balisnor warned. “Ready their horses. They’ll leave by morning.”

** ** *

ELEVEN

Princess Anya sat to herself at the shoreline, reflecting on the conversation between her and Daniel. At least he feels the same way about me like I do him. There was still time, but to say that time was of the essence was an understatement. Next year, she would reach the age to marry. The rulers of the Five Kingdoms would send one of their eligible sons to fight for her hand. The winner would be able to marry her the following year. She was hoping that if she nominated him for Varin’s champion, he would accept it. She was serious about how she felt; the chemistry she had with him was special. Out of everyone who she had met and conversed with; she had never felt such a connection like that towards anyone else.

She looked at the sky, at that perfectly rounded moon staring back and closed her eyes. If it’s meant to be, then make it so.

** ** *

Daniel waited patiently for the King to knock on the door. He wanted to make him aware that he was going to visit Mary’s grave but that he would be back. He fixed up his quarters a bit, rearranging a few things on his night table until at last he heard a knock. He rushed over and opened it, King EreK in all his glory.

“How may I be of help to you Daniel?” EreK asked as Daniel stood off to the side to allow the King to enter. “Found your first spider? Little devils like coming out around this time.”

“Everything is fine Your Majesty. I just wanted to make you aware that I was going to go someplace. Somewhere I should’ve gone a long time ago.”

“Oh. And what is this place you speak of so secretly?”

Daniel took a breath and took this moment of silence to keep himself together. Finally: “My girlfriend’s grave. It’s been a while and I wanted to pay my respects.”

The King nodded as if he understood. “I understand, but I don’t think it would be a good idea to go out there by yourself.”

“I’m only asking for an hour. After that, I’ll come back and do whatever is required of me.”

King Ereik nodded. “Very well. At least take someone to keep you company. Grieving on your own while your heart is broken is not the best remedy, especially when you’re by yourself. I’ll feel better knowing someone is with you in this terrible time.”

“I’ll take Princess Anya if you don’t mind.” He saw the King look at him in a discerning way and quickly added, “To show her around.”

“Will you promise take care of her?”

“Until my dying breath Your Majesty.”

The King thought it was over, but he didn’t need long to think at all. He knew what his answer was even before he asked the question. “Come home safely Daniel. The fate of the Five Kingdoms rests on your shoulders.”

The King left, leaving Daniel smiling from ear to ear. He couldn’t believe that he had convinced the King to let his daughter go with him back to his home. His daughter, who had what he believed to have been a crush, would now be side by side. He knew she was an excellent fighter, so not being able to take care of herself in times of need was out of the question. Maybe her and I will be able to talk over this chemistry she feels.

He sat on his bed, anxious to finally be able to go home and pay his respects to what was his first love.

** ** *

Daniel and Princess Anya were ready to go an hour later, Anya in her usual green cloak. As they said their goodbyes, Balisnor pulled Daniel aside and pushed him up against the wall.

“What are you playing at?” Balisnor asked, his teeth gritted. “I should cut you down where you stand.”

“Man, you must not really like me,” Daniel replied with a smirk on his face. “Easy Gargantua. I’m not playing at anything. I told you, I’m not the bad guy. Just because I went to Mortezaan doesn’t mean anything.”

Balisnor leaned in, his grip tightened, threatening to tear the fabric of Daniel’s shirt. “If one follicle of Anya’s hair is missing from her head, I don’t care what the King and Queen say, I will have your head mounted in my quarters. Do I make myself absolutely clear?”

Before Daniel could answer, Balisnor let go of him and forced himself to smile, regardless of how painful it seemed to him. Daniel looked around and saw that Princess Anya was coming toward them. Come on Balisnor Daniel thought to himself. Don’t be a chickenshit. Not like a princess can tell you what to do, right?

Princess Anya, however, had different implications. She stared Balisnor in the eye and asked, “What is the meaning of this Balisnor?”

“I was only ensuring your safety My Lady.”

“If you have to push Daniel up against the wall to ensure my safety, then perhaps your training falters.”

“Yes-“

“I am more than capable of defending myself when the time comes. Put another hand on the Chosen One again, and I’ll make sure my father relieves you of your bodyguard duties.” She grabbed Daniel by the wrist and walked off, Daniel throwing up the peace sign as he kept up with her.

The Queen walked up to Daniel and gave him a hug. “I hope you find peace in your heart. Come back to us whenever you’re ready.”

“But not too long,” King Erek countered, putting up a finger to join in. “We need to have a ceremony to officially make you one of us.”

Daniel and the Princess nodded in agreement before being whisked away in a bright light.

** ** *

Mortezan fed in the darkness of his dungeon, being sure to drink every last ounce of blood he could muster from his helpless victim. He was tired of waiting on Penelope, to get information that would somehow benefit how his own progress was doing. He felt that as much as he ate throughout the course of a day, he was still weak. What did he have to do to get to where he was before? At what price?

Still, he would keep pondering these questions, hoping that there was something he hadn’t yet stumbled upon that would make him go back to his former self, a being everyone in the Five Kingdoms would come to fear. But, for right now, he was left to himself drinking his victim’s life source away.

** ** *

TWELVE

After some time, they had finally made it to the cemetery. Having to hide every now and again, as well as walking in the alleyway took them down a longer and bothersome walk, but they had finally made it.

“I’m here if you need me,” the Princess said as she gently patted his arm.

“Don’t worry about me My Lady,” Daniel replied, trying to collect his thoughts. He turned in the way of the Princess and was about to say something else when he noticed that his mouth was hung wide open, as if his jaw had been broken.

“What?” she asked. “Don’t like my new look?”

“H-H-How did you do that?” Compared to what she looked like back in Varin, her appearance was quite different in the human realm. For example, she didn’t have bangs as the Princess of Varin did. She also had lightly tinted silver eyes compared to her dark green orbs. He kind of liked it, but if he had to choose, he would still pick the Princess version.

“Do you not like it?” Anya asked as she moved closer to him.

Daniel wanted to answer but remembered what he had come here to do. Slowly, he walked down the road, trying to find out where she rested; the Princess was following closely behind.

Finally, after scouring what seemed to be the entire cemetery, he found her gravestone. **MARY WINCHESTER** were in big bold letters. Below that, in smaller calligraphy, were the words **BELOVED DAUGHTER**.

Daniel made his way slowly toward the tombstone and kneeled, the Princess staying back.

As the leaves on the trees freely danced in the wind and the birds sang their song, Daniel could not find the words that had been haunting him for such a long time. He could feel his heart beginning to break once more, like an old wound reopening; fresh heartbreak welling up in his eyes. What do I say? he asked himself. What do I say when I know that this happened because of me, of what I am?

Princess Anya's voice spoke softly in his head. Say what comes from your heart.

Daniel nodded, wiping his eyes and sniffing. "I'm sorry I wasn't there," he said quickly, before he didn't have a chance to say them.

Take your time the Princess instructed. We're not in haste.

Daniel took a deep shuddering breath before trying again. "I'm sorry I wasn't strong enough to protect you." Those words were the hardest to say in his opinion, but he did his best to keep going. "I think about you all the time. Your smile, your laugh...it feels so much darker and colder without you." He dug in his pocket and pulled out the square box that he planned to have given her the day that everything changed. "I wanted to give this to you to celebrate how much you mean to me. Hope you like it." He put it on the edge of her gravestone before getting up and wiping the grass off his pants. "I realize my calling now, and I promise to make you proud."

Daniel made his way back to the Princess, where she welcomed him with open arms. Her warm embrace was enough to stifle the tears and hurt he still felt, but the relief that he had done the impossible felt like a ten thousand pound had been lifted off his shoulders. There was just one more thing he had to do...

"I need to go to one last place," Daniel said, tearing away from the Princess.

"Where to?"

Tired. Their existence, it seemed, was dull. Pictures of their daughter hung in every available spot on the wall they could find; pictures of Mary laughing or smiling that angelic smile. Even pictures of him with her...

The dad was upset. He wanted his daughter's boyfriend to tell them what happened, hoping that it would help in the process of getting some type of closure. He didn't even make it to her funeral. Nor was he at the school or the church they had attended since they were toddlers. He just wanted closure...why was that so hard to ask for? Would he ever get it?

Her mom was less anger-filled. All she wanted was the same thing but was less worried about getting it. If she got closure from the man that her daughter loved, it would make her happy. If not, she didn't seem to fret about it as much as her husband.

The doorbell unexpectedly rang, causing their little dogs to get riled up and charge to the door. The dad got up from his chair and hurried over, but when he opened it, nobody was there. He looked down and saw a package that had their names on it. He retrieved it, looked up and down the street before shutting the door and making his way to the kitchen.

"Who was it?" the woman asked.

"Don't know. Nobody was at the door."

He opened the package and in it was a letter as well as a picture of their daughter and Daniel with Mickey Mouse ears attached to it. The man's fingers began to tremble. "It's from him."

Without hesitation, the woman seized the letter and began to read it to herself, tears forming in her eyes not a moment too soon...

** ** *

“I grow tired of your incompetence daughter,” Mortezan said darkly. “I should’ve put Raven up to the task. She would have yielded results by now.”

Penelope couldn’t help but laugh. In her head, she knew what she was doing. Toying with her prey, though slow and unfruitful to her father, was fun and exhilarating for her. “Yes Father, and where would we be? Daniel would be dead and it would be time to look for something new. Have fun.”

“I’m done having fun!” Mortezan snapped. “I want his head on a platter!”

“No fun,” muttered Penelope under her breath. “Very well. May I have my dogs now?”

“Get them out of my sight. Phase Two starts now.”

Penelope teleported out of there without another word, Raven appearing out of the darkness as soon as she left.

“Make sure she does her job this time,” Mortezan stated. “Otherwise, she will be my next meal.”

Raven smiled. “Yes Father.” With that, she too teleported out of her father’s chambers, leaving Mortezan once more to his thoughts.

** ** *

THIRTEEN

The walk back to the house was relieving to say the least. The anger and guilt he had been carrying around was gone; facing his demons and being able to finally do what had been eluding him for the longest time was so breathtaking. He could now get back to the task at hand: stopping Penelope.

They went down a deserted alleyway in the middle of town, few civilians walking the streets. Suddenly, halfway through the alley, a dark mist appeared out of nowhere. Princess Anya hurried to Daniel’s side and put her arm out to protect him; when the mist had cleared, Penelope was seen wearing a big smile on her face, her golden eyes penetrating his intently, her long claws ready to slice her prey apart. “I must admit, toying with you was the most fun I’ve had in a while. But I’m afraid this is where the fun ends.”

Daniel scowled, bending his knees ready to attack. Princess Anya, however, was quick to say something.

Don’t. She wants you to do something. You’re still unfamiliar with your powers. She knows this and still wants you to attack. Whatever happens, stay behind me. Let me do the fighting.

“But—” Daniel started.

Princess Anya snapped her direction his way. Her blue eyes enveloped her entire eyeball.

It was a bit disturbing to say the least. “I know what I’m doing!”

Penelope laughed. “Aw, the Princess of Varin finally fights. I think violence is a little too much for you to handle Your Highness.”

Anya whipped out her sai. “Try me succubus!”

She ran towards Penelope, issuing out a war cry as she did so. They met halfway, sai and claw locked in as one. Anya kicked her in the shins, weakening the grasp Penelope had. The succubus stumbled back but before she could regain her composure, Anya dealt a nasty right hook to the side of her face.

Penelope laughed, though a little more maniacally than last time. "You can hit princess. Now let's see how you fare with my babies." Penelope let out a shrill whistle and almost instantly they could hear howling and barking all around them.

Daniel and Anya slowly backpedaled but it was too late. Numerous hellhounds circled around them, too many for them to count. Their large scaly frames glowed a fearsome red in the sun, their large canine teeth sharp and ready to tear prey apart limb by limb. When they had reached a dead end, they turned around and looked at the advancing dogs, who now stopped and walked slowly toward them. Some licked their teeth, others growled menacingly, head and body low, getting ready to pounce.

"Too bad you won't be around to see what my father does to Varin Anya. He wants me to save you so you could be his Dark Queen. Daniel is already dead, making the prophecy die with him. How does it feel, knowing these are your last moments and its spent wasted here in the human realm?"

"I'm going down fighting," Anya said, her voice strong, her words ringing true. "You will not make me his Dark Queen. I'll kill myself before that even starts."

Penelope was about to say something in reply but pointed a finger at the Princess instead. "You're making me monologue!" She laughed, shaking her head. "You almost got me—"

Varin! the Princess yelled in her head. She grabbed onto Daniel and, in a wisp of smoke, disappeared.

It took a second for Penelope to realize what had happened before she screamed in anger and frustration. "Let's go babies! It's time to eat!"

** ** *

Daniel and Princess Anya made it back to Varin a few seconds later, sprinting from the forest back to the gate as fast as they could.

Balisnor was the first they saw once they had made it back safely. Daniel rolled his eyes; he already knew he was going to be blamed for what happened. He shook his head. I'm not going to roll over anymore. Let him blame me. See what happens.

Easy.

He shot a glance at Princess Anya and saw that she was smiling, now back to her regular self.

"How did it go?" Balisnor asked, eyeing Daniel suspiciously.

"It went well," the Princess replied. "Ready our soldiers at once. We might be having company real soon."

"Why do you say that?"

"Penelope was there along with her hounds. She wasn't playing either."

Balisnor turned to Daniel and advanced toward him. "What did I tell you would happen if something went wrong?"

Daniel didn't back down as the massive Bodyguard proceeded to get closer to him. He smiled, welcoming his advances. "I must have forgotten. You going to remind me?"

“Now you got some gall on you huh?”

“I’m tired of being blamed for something I can’t control.”

“That is enough,” Princess Anya intervened. “Balisnor, back down at once.”

Just then, one of the guards burst through onto the training ground. “You should take a look at this.”

“Where are my parents?” Anya asked, not taking her eyes away from the bodyguard until he was a considerable distance away.

“They’re doing some other things that need tending to My Lady.”

“Very well.”

Daniel, Princess Anya, and Balisnor ran to the top of the stairs leading to the wall. There, they could see the forest, the lake and everything between as far as the eye could see. Black smoke wafted from the right side, swaying to the heavens.

“What is that?” Daniel asked. “What’s on fire?”

Princess Anya’s next words came out trembling, as if knowing the weight of them would devastate the moment she let them loose. “That’s Shinguard.”

Daniel held his breath, his heart quickened, his hands and whole body beginning to tremble suddenly...his parents were there. Supposedly. He had to go and find them now. This instant. “We have to go,” Daniel stated, trying to keep his head clear but failing miserably. “We have to save my parents.”

“Could be a trap,” Balisnor replied, his eyes set on the black smoke. “We would be walking right into it.”

“I don’t care! The whole agreement between King Erek and I was that if I finished my training, I could find my folks. I’ve done your training! Now keep your end of the deal!”

“He’s right,” Princess Anya said. “I’m sorry that you have to hear it from me, but it’s clearly a trap. If she lures you out, that’s that. You still don’t know how to use your power correctly despite the training you’ve done. We would be at a disadvantage.”

NO! He couldn’t bear this any longer. He closed his eyes and thought about getting there to Shinguard now, gritting his teeth, clenching his fists. Tried as he might, he couldn’t get himself to do it. I’m sorry he said to himself. I’m sorry I couldn’t do nothing. “So, we just watch it burn, is that it?”

“We have no choice.” Princess Anya turned her attention to Balisnor. “Tighten security around the wall. No one gets past you or your men, understood?”

“Yes, My Lady.”

The Princess walked toward Daniel. Follow me.

** **

Penelope sat perched on a tree, overlooking the kingdom that she was focused on burning down. Since her father had told her not to come back without his head, she was more than intent on making sure she accomplished her mission. No more having fun. No more games. That was over.

Her hounds were ready to go at a moment’s notice; all she had to do was give the word and they would strike.

A rush of wind came over her and she scoffed; she knew who it was. “Why are you here Raven?”

“Father wanted me to make sure the job gets done. Plus, it won’t hurt to have an extra pair of hands.”

“You’re not wrong.” Penelope liked the idea of her sister being an extra weapon; her ferocity in combat was second to only Balisnor but once he had been taken care of, it would be easy. Penelope jumped from her branch on the tree and stared Raven in the eye. “I call the shots. You interfere, I leave you to die. Agreed?”

Raven scoffed. “If you think those pathetic Varinians can subdue me, you got another thing coming.”

Penelope laughed, then beckoned her sister to come along. “Let’s go plan our strategy.”

** ** *

FOURTEEN

As instructed, Daniel followed Princess Anya to her chambers; she hastily checked the corridor up and down to make sure nobody was coming before closing the door and locking it. “If I hear footsteps, I’ll talk to you telepathically.”

Daniel quickly nodded.

“You have to think of something that makes you happy or that makes you feel like fighting to summon your power. Once you do, it materializes into your weapon of choice and carry it with you wherever you go.” She took out one of her sai. “Like these. I thought of my people worth fighting for and it manifested into this.”

“It’s hard to picture what you fight for when the only thing you fought for is dead.”

“The answer to that is in front of you Daniel. You just have to look for it. The time is coming sooner than we both expect it to happen.”

“I’ll be sure to find it before it’s too late.”

Anya nodded, smiling. “Now, what’s your plan for getting into Shinguard?”

“I thought you said it was a trap.”

“I thought that’s where your parents are.”

“Doesn’t matter. We can’t just transport ourselves to it. The guards would see our light.”

“Let me worry about the guards and such. Be ready to go tonight. We’ll put your ability to use.”

Daniel left Anya’s chamber and headed towards his. If what she was saying was true, then he had to figure out what drove him. Time to do a bit of soul searching he told himself once he had closed and locked his door. Time to see if I really deserve being the Chosen One.

** ** *

Princess Anya stayed in her room, getting a small sack ready that would be filled with food. She was troubled and it was evident in her face, which was why she wanted to distance herself from her parents and, ultimately, from her bodyguard.

She was troubled at the fact that she had a liking for a boy she barely knew. She didn’t care about her being a princess; her gut feeling was telling her that he was the one. That he was the one destined for her for all time.

But he didn’t see it like she did.

No matter what she did to try and open his eyes, he would ignore her advances or was flat out not interested. Both these concepts were disheartening and, quite frankly, exhausting. She knew she had to tell him: tell him about next year when she was eligible for marriage. If she stood a chance, he had to know about it.

She stared out at the window; the sack laying abandoned on her bed as she glanced at the sky. The winter storms that had been avoiding them for quite some time had finally come angry, black clouds swarmed across the naked blue sky fast, engulfing the sun and casting a large shadow over all the Kingdom. Finally, she thought to herself as she looked down to see her people closing their shops. The right weather for my mood.

** ** *

“We don’t want them to know we’re here yet,” Penelope told her sister. “We stay in the shadows until dusk. Once in, we extract Daniel and teleport out of there.”

“Where’s the fun in that?”

Penelope could hear the mocking in Raven’s voice, and she was quick to put an end to it. Her eyes glowed golden as she lunged at her sister. “Father said if I didn’t come back with his head that he would kill me. If that means having a war, I will do just that. I need your help, not your sarcasm.”

Raven laughed, her eyes turning a deep purple before turning into a mist, reappearing behind her. “You need not worry. Father won’t be having you killed off today little sister.”

The clouds in the sky turned black, thunder moving freely as they slowly approached Varin. It’s going to be a long night Varin, Raven said to herself. Not even the rain will be able to put out the fires I start.

** ** *

FIFTEEN

“Shinguard is a depot for us in terms of resources,” Balisnor said to the King and Queen in their chambers. “We need to protect them, or else what was the treaty for?”

King Ereik was looking out his window, focused on the black smoke that was still lingering in the air. “The treaty was for keeping them in line. However, my gut feeling is telling me it’s a trap. A diversion for something bigger.”

Queen Guinevere was sitting on her bed, legs crossed, not saying a word the entire time until now. “Balisnor, how long has it been since we’ve been at war?”

“Hundreds of years Your Majesty.”

“Exactly. The Five Kingdoms has not had to strap on armor and defend what we love for hundreds of years. Why, the last war between us and the Assassins, I was just a little girl.” She got to her feet gracefully, making her way to her husband. “Perhaps our people need a reason to defend what they love again. They’ve been spoiled for too long. I believe it’s time to tell them what they should fight for.”

King Ereik turned to his wife. “How could you condone us to go to war?”

“If fighting for what I love is condoning us to war, then so be it. If giving our people hope instead of running in fear is condoning war, then so be it. Once they start attacking, and they will soon, they will be after Daniel. Why do you think?”

“He doesn’t know how to use his power yet,” Balisnor replied quickly.

The Queen smiled, never taking her eyes off. “Because he doesn’t know how to use his power. Right now, they have all their pieces ready to move. What will you do my love? Will we strategize better, or play freely and see where the dice may land?”

King Ereik looked at his wife. She was right. If the Five Kingdoms caught wind that they didn’t protect one of their villages, it would prove to be disastrous for them. The rest of the Kingdoms would see them like they had lost their touch, unable to defend what’s theirs and attack. He wasn’t about to let that happen. He cleared his throat, turned to Balisnor and instructed, “Ready our troops for battle. I believe it’s time to start fighting for what’s ours again.”

“Yes, Your Majesty.”

With Balisnor gone, Ereik turned to his wife and held her closely. “Will you be by my side once more?”

The Queen smiled. “What kind of question is that? Of course I will be by your side. Until the last wisps of air escape my lungs.”

“Let’s go motivate our people then.”

** ** *

Princess Anya and Daniel met at the common ground right outside the castle a little after the sun had set for the day. The air was frosty, the wind blowing consistently against them was nothing short of unpleasant, but they had already made up their minds. There was no going back.

“Are you ready?” she asked, her fingers curled into a fist.

Daniel nodded impatiently. “Ready as I’ll ever be.” He grabbed her hand and together teleported out of the safety of the wall, ready to confront whatever was out there.

When they had landed, they realized quickly that the only thing that was on fire was a nearby campfire. They had landed right where they instantly knew was a bad idea.

“Crap,” Princess Anya whispered under her breath.

Daniel pretended to be shocked, saying, “Language My Lady.”

Anya scoffed before pushing Daniel playfully, but low growls quickly caused them to be serious. From the trees glowed bright golden eyes to the right, as well as two purple orbs to the left. All around them, though, were smaller orbs of red outlining the trees.

Hellhounds he heard Anya say in his head. Whatever you do, don’t split up. You won’t stand a chance.

“That telekinesis ability sure does come in handy Princess,” he heard Penelope say from somewhere in the shadows. “One I envy even among my own.”

Princess Anya’s eyes turned a deep shade of blue, her fingers ready to retrieve her sai. “What do you want?” she asked.

It was apparent that they knew what she was trying to do, which is why both the sisters laughed at the same time. “You trying to buy you both some time is absolutely adorable.”

Someone from Daniel’s peripheral vision came from the darkness, but he had no time to react. He was pushed against a tree. A black haired purple eyed woman solidified in front of him, smiling widely. “You must be Daniel.” She turned to her sister, who had her claws elongated, her eyes on the Princess. “Do we really have to kill him? He’s cute.”

“I’m afraid we do.”

The purple eyed woman turned slowly back to Daniel with her smile still intact and replied, "Shame."

He glanced from behind his captor's shoulder and saw that Penelope was inching even closer to the Princess, saying words that he couldn't hear. I have to do something.

Penelope's eyes grew even more bright gold, her tongue out.

Something. He started struggling. Anything.

The succubus took the first swing, Princess Anya able to avoid the blow. Penelope rushed her, knocking the princess to the ground.

Come on, you stupid power. He said, gritting his teeth, fighting to get out of the woman's clenches. Activate! Do something!

"There's no point," the woman said as he saw her teeth grow out. "It's pointless. I'm going to have you watch the Princess die, then I'll drink your blood, and then attack your pathetic kingdom. I wanted you to watch it burn along with all their hope and joy."

He closed his eyes, not wanting to watch what might fall on the Princess. Stupid! I'm so freaking stupid! They said it was a trap and I didn't listen. He opened his eyes a little and saw Anya doing her best to fight off Penelope by kicking and punching wherever was open. She eventually would get overpowered, her hands pinned to the ground with the succubus' mouth open wide.

Anya's words of advice came to life from his head. You have to think of something that makes you feel like fighting for to summon your weapon.

As he looked on helplessly, he began to think about something worth fighting for. Of course! It was right in front of him, just like what she had said! He closed his eyes again, feeling the woman's fingers begin to tighten around his throat. As loud as he could in his mind, he proclaimed, Princess Anya is worth fighting for! Varin is worth fighting for! For the final time, he opened his eyes and shouted, "BEING FREE FROM MONSTERS LIKE YOU IS WORTH FIGHTING FOR!"

A blinding white light overtook all the village. The woman lost her grip. He could feel his whole body on fire, but not in a painful way. It was a tingly sensation to say the least, something that made his whole body turn numb.

When the light had faded after a couple of minutes, he saw the petrified faces of Penelope and her sister rather clearly. Princess Anya was on the ground on her hands and knees, her mouth hanging open in awe.

You've done it, he heard her say, her voice trembling with excitement. You should see for yourself.

Penelope's eyes grew red with rage as she shouted, "Get him!"

All the hellhounds, from all angles, began to pursue him. Their mouths were open, their canines ready to rip and tear.

Daniel could feel that his instincts had heightened, ready for whichever hound decided to pounce first. One poor hound misjudged his time and lunged for Daniel; he caught it with his bare hands and wrestled it to the ground, its mouth still open. Writhing and twisting the hound did, attempting with every fiber to break free, but to no avail; Daniel got up, dusted himself off and ran toward the Princess. "Let's go!"

He stopped long enough for the Princess to jump on his back before he ran with everything he had back to the gate, the rest of the hounds scared to pursue him any longer.

Varin!

Daniel's feet left the ground, the cold wind no longer stinging his face. I cannot believe we got out of there alive. That was way too close.

They touched down a second later, guards and soldiers strapped with their armor ready for battle. None of that mattered. He put Anya down as calmly as he could, making sure there were no scratches on her face or bruises. Not finding any, he put her forehead to his and whispered, "I'm sorry. I should've listened to you."

Princess Anya put her hand on his wrist gently, not wanting him to let go. She closed her eyes and was hoping this moment wouldn't end. "Don't worry about it. I would have done the same thing as you if I were in your shoes. What did you think about when you activated your power?"

Daniel could only smile as he parted ways with her, helping her to her feet. All he could say was, "You."

Before they could say another word, Balisnor, King Ereka, and Queen Guinevere walked up to them, their expressions grim, Balisnor's expression especially deathly.

Queen Guinevere looked at the both of them and said, "I assume that white light was you?"

Princess Anya looked down in shame. "That was us mother. I told him we would sneak out and go to the village to go look for his parents, but it was a trap. No buildings were on fire. We fell for it and almost didn't make it out alive."

King Ereka was next: "How did you make it out alive?"

The princess motioned her hand to Daniel, who was kneeling. "He was able to use his power to get us out."

The three of them were silent, staring at Daniel like they didn't expect it to be true. Then, unexpectedly, they all cheered and patted Daniel on the shoulder.

"Excellent job!" praised King Ereka.

"Splendid!" exclaimed the Queen.

"I knew you had it in you," Balisnor said dryly.

Daniel bowed. "Thank you."

"Mother. Father." Princess Anya took a step forward. "Mortezan's daughters are here. We have to prep for battle."

"Already ahead of you," the King said, smiling. He motioned for Daniel to follow. "I've been saving something for you for this day. Come with me."

They broke up, Anya headed toward the castle with the Queen shortly behind, Balisnor made his way to the troops, and Ereka and him walked toward what appeared to have been the dungeon.

** **

SIXTEEN

The sun had peaked over the mountains a couple of hours later, yet Penelope and Raven had been sitting on the ground reminiscing over what had happened hours before.

It was Penelope who had broken the silence a while later. "Unfortunate turn of events if you ask me. We had him, and still he got away. How?" She stood up, rummaging her hair. "How? I should've killed him when I had the chance."

“Should’ve, would’ve, could’ve,” Raven replied bluntly. “It doesn’t matter now. We must get him. I’m going to talk to Father, see if I can get the army ready.”

Penelope nodded, leaning back against one of the trees looking at the clear blue sky that had come for all to see. Another day. Another lost opportunity.

** ** *

Raven appeared before her father, bowing as she came near. “His powers are out My Lord. We have to attack.”

“I’ve been thinking a lot as of lately...what if I put myself into a hellhound? So I could do it myself what proves to be too difficult for two powerful women.”

“That’s not a bad idea My Lord. Plus, with you on the battlefield, it would give our troops hope.”

Mortezan scoffed. “Hope. What a disgusting word. My presence will be unbearable for the Varinians to take on full force.”

“Shall I get them ready father?”

“Yes, but first, fetch me a hellhound and leave me.”

Raven stood up and curtsied. “Yes Father.”

** ** *

Daniel followed King Erek past the cells and deeper underground. It was so dark Erek’s hand sparked a fire, making it a lot more bearable to see where they were going.

“Your father and I always snuck down here to cause trouble.” Erek laughed to himself. “One time, we got stuck down here and ate only ants and baby scorpions to keep us from starving. Fun times.”

“What do you hope to accomplish with the two of us down here together Your Majesty?” Daniel asked, wondering why Erek was being so nice to him.

Erek stopped in his tracks, turning around and smiling...or so Daniel thought. The flickering flame of his hand made it hard for him to see clearly. “I’ve seen the way you look at my daughter Daniel Gates. And I’ve seen how she looks at you. It’s no coincidence your power came to be back at Shinguard. You have to think of something worth fighting for and that something ended up being her. She has never shown that type of chemistry toward anyone else, so to see her risk her neck out for you is remarkable.”

Daniel blushed and put his head down. “She would’ve done the same for me.”

“Maybe, maybe not. However, I can’t turn a blind eye on the fact that the chemistry between you two is what brings out the best in you.” He put his hand on Daniel’s shoulder. “When we get back to the castle, if you’re willing, I give you permission to be with my daughter and fight for her hand next year.”

“It would be an honor, Your Majesty. Thank you.”

“No, thank you for saving my daughter’s life. I am in your debt.”

Twenty minutes later and unable to see his hand in front of his face, they had made it to a large room. Barren but having what looked to be a chest, he walked toward it, Erek allowing the fire to spread around the wall.

When he had reached the chest and opened it, he noticed something shiny. He grabbed it, pulled out a piece and realized that it was chest armor. It was a deep red color with a gold eagle encrusted in the middle.

“Your dad’s armor,” the King spoke behind him. “He was so ecstatic over your mother’s pregnancy that he did everything he could to save what he once treasured to you. I’m sorry he won’t see this day you wear it.”

“Don’t be Your Majesty. If what people say is true, he lives through me.”

The King smiled. “That couldn’t be more accurate. Come, let’s go back. We can’t leave the women alone for too long.”

** ** *

Princess Anya and Queen Guinevere were sitting side by side in the Queen’s chambers, the Queen making sure there were no marks or bruises on her daughter’s body.

“Mother, I’ve already told you, I’m fine,” the Princess scoffed, trying to wiggle free of her mom’s clutches.

Queen Guinevere sighed. “It really is remarkable Daniel was able to do what he did. Otherwise, goodness knows what could have happened.”

“Yeah.” She began to think about what he looked like in his form, shivering at the thought. “About that...”

The Queen leaned in closer. “What was it like?”

Princess Anya took a second to answer, then: “In lack of a better word, it was awesome. The last thing I remember is him looking at me. There was a blinding white light, then...his eyes. His eyes were an iridescent red, blue electricity going up and down his arms. And his strength.” Her voice was trembling now, though from fear or excitement she didn’t know at the moment. “He ripped a Hellhound’s jaw out with just his arms.”

“That is incredible. Though it’s obvious he got his power from you.”

“How do you think?”

“Think: he saw you in danger, didn’t want to see you hurt, and saved you from dying. He cares for you Anya, whether he wants to admit it or not.”

The Princess looked down. “I do as well. I went to his girlfriend’s grave to see if that would help, but I don’t think it did. I know I shouldn’t and that it might be a lost cause, but he’s the only one who gets me.”

“You have to keep doing what you can to make him see then, don’t you?”

“I worry that if I push too hard, I’ll lose him.”

“When your father and I were younger, he never gave up on trying to impress me.”

Guinevere laughed. “Even though I tried so hard to ignore his advances, I couldn’t.”

“Thank you, mother. I needed that.”

Guinevere smiled. “Go get what’s yours.”

** ** *

Mortezan stared at the hellhound wondering, debating, if this would really work. How he longed to be able to walk again! Though it wouldn’t be his own unique body, he would finally have the chance to walk again. It’s time. I need to do this. He outstretched his hand, saying out loud an ancient tongue that had not been used for hundreds of years.

After saying the incantation, he felt the same. No change. Then, piece by piece, he started to flow away into the hellhound; the hound itself was laying down whimpering.

A few minutes later, the hellhound had gotten up on its hind legs, its head still down and eyes closed. As more of Mortezean ebbed into the animal, the arms and legs began to grow double in size. Finally, the process was over. As the hellhound raised its head, it opened its eyes. It worked. He looked down at his armored hands, sharp talons at the end of them. It actually worked.

He admired himself, looking down at his legs and thanking the Elders that he was without the tail. He raised his hand, a thick red mist came to life; a wicked scythe forming in one hand, a sword in the other.

Let's see what this body can do.

For the first time in a hundred years, Mortezean was finally able to teleport out of his dungeon he himself considered a prison. He wanted carnage, and now there was nothing that would stop him from getting it.

** ** *

SEVENTEEN

Daniel was in his chambers admiring his father's armor when he heard the door knock.

Gently putting it on his bed, he jogged over to the door and saw Princess Anya waiting for him on the other side of the door, her smile wide. What is she so happy about? he asked himself. "My Lady."

"May I come in?"

Daniel smiled. "I don't know why you keep asking." He let her through, closing the door behind her. "What can I assist you with today Your Highness?"

"What did I tell you about all that? Please, call me Anya."

"My apologies M...Anya."

Anya sat on his bed, patting the side of her so he too could sit next to her.

Daniel did so. The extravagant beauty that the Princess possessed made him keep losing his breath, regardless if he wanted to or not. It felt common. It felt natural.

Anya broke the silence. "There's something I want to tell you. I need you only to listen."

"Of course." He still had the urge to say "My Lady," but he bit his tongue and looked down so she couldn't see his pain.

The Princess took a deep breath, exhaling slowly a moment later. "I know we've discussed this briefly before, but I like you. A lot, as a matter of fact. I know the pain you carry from your girlfriend dying is worse than I can imagine and I understand. However, I need you to understand that I've never felt such chemistry with anyone like I have with you. I feel..." She didn't know her hands were gripping each other until now. Why was she so nervous? She cleared her throat, shaking her head in the process. "I feel like we're meant to be."

Daniel sat there, smiling. Since he was able to go to Mary's resting place, he had been feeling a lot better. He felt like she would've wanted him to be happy, even if it wasn't with her. He grabbed for her hands tightly in his, looking in her eyes. "I'm sorry for being rude to you during my time here. Thing is, what you've been experiencing has been what I have as well. I've just...I've had a hard time putting myself out there since her death."

"It's still fresh too. Only a few months."

“That too. I want you to know that I do care for you.”

Princess Anya smiled widely. “That’s so excellent to hear. Next year, I’m eligible to marry. Its tradition that the Five Kingdoms have a legitimate contender to win my hand. If you accept my challenge, I will let Father know.”

Daniel thought about it for a long minute. He wasn’t lying; he really did have feelings for her, yet the thought of him letting Mary go forever...was that too much for him to do? Why am I still having trouble letting go of her?

The Princess’ smiled faded almost instantly. “I see.”

“No. That’s not it Anya.”

“Oh?” She ripped her arms away from Daniel’s, crossing them together and turning slightly away from him. “Here I am telling you what’s been troubling me and you still can’t let go. I get it, you’re still in pain, but I care enough to do something rather than let you be miserable.”

“I thought you understood—” Daniel began.

The Princess stood up, walking to the door. She turned around, her hand on the handle. “I do, but my time to spend time with you is running out. You need to make a decision: either let go of the pain that fills you up, or let it consume you to the point of no return. I can’t see you eat you alive. I can’t, I’m sorry.”

She walked out and ran down the hallway; Daniel let out an exasperated sigh before falling on his bed. What is wrong with me? Snap out of it man! You have got to let her go!

Before he knew it, he was fast asleep, his father’s armor laying next to him.

** ** *

Raven had her father’s army hidden in the Varinian trees, keeping out of sight. Once she had given orders to the general, she made her way to her sister. “We’re ready to attack if need be. Father gave me the army no problem.”

A thick red mist appeared out of nowhere, causing panic to rise in both women. They stood up, weapons ready, anxiously waiting to see who it was.

Mortezan came out of the mist, his eyes glaring at everyone as he stepped through. He stared up at the sky and closed his eyes, inhaling through his nose and out his mouth. “Varin,” he said coldly. “The place where it all started.”

“Father,” the two girls said in unison.

“Penelope. Raven.”

Raven looked at her father, smirking. “You did it.”

“It took some time, but yes I did.”

“How does it feel?”

“It’s not my body, but as of right now, it will suffice” He turned his gaze toward Penelope. “This is still your mission. Ready our soldiers. We’re going to battle.”

Penelope stepped forward, taking charge. “Yes Father.”

Mortezan looked behind him, a line of villagers trying to defend Shinguard. He smiled, recognizing the overwhelming sense of fear emanating from them. “But first...” His eyes glowed red as he charged maliciously toward the village...

** ** *

“They haven’t budged,” Balisnor announced to the King, Queen, Daniel, and the Princess. “That campfire has to be dead now.”

“They were literally camped right outside the village,” Daniel said. “It was a clever trap.”

“Complimenting the enemy now too, eh?” Balisnor asked. He slapped his hands down on the slab of rock and turned to face Daniel. “Why don’t you join them then?”

“I don’t want you guys to get wiped out.”

“Big tough guy now that you have your power, aren’t ya?” He grabbed his hammer from behind his back and walked toward him. “Why don’t you fight me then?”

“What’s your problem with me?”

“You know exactly what my problem with you is. Traitor.”

“It was one time!”

“That is quite enough.” Queen Guinevere stepped between them, Balisnor’s eyes still on fire. The Queen turned to him and said, “Hit him in any way, even unintentional, and I will strip you of your title as Bodyguard. He has learned from his mistakes. Let it go.”

Balisnor stared at the Queen intently, before bowing and walking off.

“Definitely not the guy to commit a wrong against,” King Erek said, laughing nervously. “That man can hold a grudge until the end of time. I would definitely try to make things right, especially if you want to do what we were discussing earlier.”

Daniel nodded, turning to make his way to the Princess. His dream from earlier made him wake up and make it his mission to get this done. He didn’t want to bother with telekinesis, though it would be much easier to communicate some of what he had to say to her. However, he felt like he had to say it from his heart, and that meant issuing those words from his lips.

He tapped her on the shoulder. “Princess?”

Anya saw him out of the corner of her eye, yet she still would not direct eye contact with him.

Daniel still went to go beside her. “I’m sorry, again, for hurting you. I’m sorry for pushing you away.” He turned to face her. “I’m sorry I let my pain and fear of being loved by someone else get in the way of what’s in front of me. After you left, I went to take a nap and I had a dream of her. About Mary. She told me it was time to let her go and she didn’t want to see me miserable. The thing is, when I see you or am around you, I see her. What I’m trying to say is, I want this to happen. I want this relationship to mean something. I know we haven’t known each other for very long, but considering that you’re stuck with me, now would be a great time to start. If you would still have me fight for your hand in marriage, I humbly accept your challenge.”

Princess Anya looked down, her face blank, making it hard for him to determine what she was feeling. Finally, when she looked back up, she said, “I wasn’t lying when I told you I care for you. I feel your pain. I feel your anguish. Whatever you feel, I feel too. That doesn’t just happen Daniel. The way I’ve felt about you since you have arrived is more than what I have felt towards anyone else.” She turned to face him, her eyes locked on to his, her hair blowing in the wind. She put her fingers on his forearms, closer than usual. Daniel could see out of the corner of his eye that the King and Queen were sure about this, though Balisnor looked as though he were going to have an aneurysm at any moment. “I forgive you.” In an even louder voice she said, “Daniel Gates, I hereby choose you, in the presence of my parents and all of Varin, to fight for my hand in marriage. Father, do you bless this decision I have made?”

King EreK stood tall, chest out and declared: "I, King EreK of Varin, accept and bless your decision daughter."

"Mother?"

Queen Guinevere did the same thing as her husband, except she bowed her head in return. "I, Queen Guinevere, also accept and bless your decision my daughter."

Princess Anya turned to Daniel and said in his head, Do you accept this blessing I have bestowed onto you my future King?

Daniel went on his knee before the Princess and said, "In the presence of your parents and all of Varin, I accept your blessing and decision for me to fight for your hand."

Very well, Princess Anya replied. You have come so far Daniel. I'm so proud of you.

Before any more words could be said, one of the soldiers from his post yelled out, "Movement from the trees! Black smoke everywhere!"

All four of them rushed upstairs and could see smoke billowing far bigger than what it was before. Hellhounds raced out from among the trees and into the open land. After the Hellhounds came, the soldiers themselves marched out to form their vast formations.

Finally, after all the soldiers had made their way into their ranks, three individuals strolled out. Daniel knew two of them at once, but who was the one in the middle? It was buffier than the two girls and looked oddly reddish. To the right of the massive being was of course Penelope, her eyes red. To the left, Anya mentioned that her name was Raven. Her claws were also out, her purple eyes taking full control of her eye sockets.

"Who is that?" Queen Guinevere asked. "The one in the middle. It doesn't look to be any of his three sons."

Although they didn't know who it was, King EreK did know. Yet the thought of having to tell her, let alone the people of Varin, that he was in fact alive was something that he couldn't bring himself to do.

"Who is that?" Princess Anya, echoing off what her mother asked.

The King ignored the question and turned to face Daniel. "I told you this opportunity would present itself sooner than we both liked or expected it to. The prophecy lives within you."

Wait... Daniel thought as the King made sure his armor was good to go. Is that...is that MorteZan?

Princess Anya gasped. She looked at the man more carefully. The spikes on his arms, the reddish glow...something was off about his appearance.

Balisnor growled. "He fused himself with a hellhound. I can see why. They're powerful creatures; deadly and lethal and merciless. But fusing one's body with a hellhound is the most unholy. An abomination."

From the ground, MorteZan walked toward the wall, his hands in the air. When he spoke, his voice boomed. "Daniel Gates! The Chosen One, or so they say! Come down here to fight me or I will make sure I eat the Princess in front of you!"

All Daniel did was watch. MorteZan's army was massive; even if the Varinian army could fight them off, they would be overwhelmed eventually. MorteZan was giving them a chance. He only wanted Daniel. If Daniel fought him, then Varin would be safe. If Daniel cowardly walked out of MorteZan's challenge, then all of Varin would burn.

MorteZan's voice boomed again. "Do you really believe you stand a chance against my army? The remaining four Kingdoms are not with you. You don't have a chance. Fight me. You

know you want to!"

Daniel walked toward Balisnor, not caring if the bodyguard was still upset at him or not. "Whatever I have done to you to have you mad at me, I ask for your forgiveness. If I'm to die today, I want you to remember me by owning up to my mistakes and transgressions I may have caused you. Thank you for training me. I will make you proud."

Balisnor grabbed Daniel by the shoulders and shook him, his eyes still like daggers, his face still contorted with rage. "You're just like your father. He was always asking questions, always got into trouble, but always did the right thing." His eyes began to tear up, making his grip a little tighter. "If it wasn't for the fact that he married my sister..." He wiped his eyes fiercely, sniffing. "Make her proud, as I am. You have her ability to never give up. Defeat him. Keep fighting."

Balisnor pulled Daniel in for a hug before escorting him to the gate, their hands around the other's neck.

When they had reached the gate entrance, they ripped apart, Balisnor holding out his hand. Daniel shook it without a second thought. For the first time, Daniel got to see Balisnor smile. "Kick his ass for your parent's sake, eh nephew?"

Daniel laughed. This can't be real, he thought to himself. The Bodyguard of Varin is my uncle! "Will do."

Balisnor nodded his head, and a second later the doors finally opened. Daniel lowered his head and closed his eyes. "I'm not one for religion, let alone praying. All I'm asking is for you to protect me if it's not too much trouble. Whether it's you, my parents, a random somebody, I don't care. Just get me through this and we can talk about what happens next in terms of us."

When he opened his eyes, the gate was open. He glanced up at the Princess and nodded. I will come back to you. I promise Anya.

He could see her smile, which made him fired up. You better. Who else will be my King and by my side? As he made his way slowly toward the battlefield, he heard Anya say I love you.

Daniel looked back and saw her leaning against the wall in anticipation. I love you too. Watch out!

It was too late. Mortezan bumped into him, knocking him several meters back. His side hurting, Daniel struggled to his feet, his sword serving as a cane.

"You want to play dirty?" he asked, throwing his sword down and activating his power, his teeth gritted. "Let's play dirty!"

** **

EIGHTEEN

Daniel let out a yell as he transformed into his enhanced self. Once Mortezan had closed the gap, Daniel punched him in the stomach, knocking the Dark Lord back. Daniel, however, wouldn't stop. I need to keep pressuring him. If I let off once, I'm done.

As every one of his punches found their target, he noticed that Mortezan was laughing. "Is that all you've got Chosen One?"

Mortezan swung behind him, wrapped his arms around his waist and leaned back, smashing him into the ground. With his head buzzing, Daniel lay defenseless with the Dark Lord

beginning to claw at the back of his head. There was ringing in his ears, blood dripping from the sides of his head.

The Dark Lord had finally stopped, leaving Daniel somewhat conscious, but the need to close his eyes was weighing on him more and more by the second. He knew that if he closed his eyes, that would be the end.

“Your prodigal son is no more Varin,” he could hear Mortezan saying. “Now all of this wretched Kingdom will burn!”

Daniel.

Anya’s voice came awake in his head, the ringing somewhat dissipating. Daniel. You have to get up.

He wasn’t strong yet. He did his best, sure; but his best ended him laying on the ground clinging to life.

You have to get up!

He could hear the urgency in her voice now, sterner than before, desperation as well.

Get up!

“I can’t,” he said to himself. The hell you talking about you can’t? Your parents didn’t die for you to give up on yourself! Get up!

Get up Daniel!

Get up!

His arms that were on his side began to inch forward; intense pain shot from both his shoulders all the way to his fingers, yet he still fought to get them above his head.

When he finally had gotten his hands above his head, he dug his fingers in the dirt and put all his might, all his remaining strength into standing up once more. “Hey sleazebag, is that all you have?”

Before Mortezan could turn all the way around, Daniel kept giving the Dark Lord everything around. He could see him getting irritated, growling in protest, but Daniel didn’t care. Every time Mortezan attempted to counter, Daniel would grab the back of his head and pound it against the ground several times.

Mortezan began to slip into unconsciousness. Daniel lifted his hand one last time to give the final blow when something tackled him down.

Penelope had rolled off Daniel and stood up, hissing. “It was fun while it lasted. Now it’s your turn to die.”

She lunged at him with her sharp claws; Daniel sidestepped out of the way and broke her elbow, rendering her arm useless. He then put his leg behind hers to push her, making her fall to the ground. He sensed Raven coming his way and waited for her patiently, anticipating her arrival at any moment to save her sister. When she had finally shown her face, Daniel dealt a blow to her face with his elbow, breaking her nose and causing her to fall to the ground.

He went on top of Penelope and, like Mortezan, began dealing blows left and right to her face.

“Please,” Penelope begged. “Please stop.”

The anger inside Daniel had reached its peak. He dealt one last blow to her before screaming, “Who are you to beg?”

He stood up, looking around him to make sure no one was trying to save her. With no one coming from what he could see, he helped Penelope to her feet. "Come here." He then dealt a blow to her stomach, causing her to go on her knees.

"I'm not done with you yet." Daniel once again put Penelope to her feet. "You shot Mary Winchester because she was willing to fight you. I had no idea who I was or what I was capable of at the time." He pushed her back down and gave her a punch to her eye.

"I was...I was only doing what...what my father wanted done." She put her hand in the air to defend herself with; Daniel, in turn, grabbed it and broke her wrist. "And now I'm doing what I should have done that day." He finally had her next to her father, who was rolling on the ground on his back. After, he would lift his arm and wait for his sword to materialize. Once it happened, he made sure Mortezan was watching. Just like he had to watch Mary die, he wanted him to cradle his daughter.

"Any last words Penelope?" Daniel asked, raising his sword above his head.

"Go ahead," he heard Mortezan say weakly. "Go ahead and kill her. If that's what will make you sleep better. Your girlfriend is still dead, your death is still certain."

Daniel's sword began to shake. He shook his head in retaliation. No! Enough fighting with myself about what I should do! He let out a yell and stabbed Mortezan in the chest.

Red mist began to richly come out when Daniel had taken out the sword. "You're right," he told Mortezan as the Dark Lord looked at him in shock. "Mary won't come back, but you won't either. Not for some time anyway."

Mortezan looked at Daniel as the red mist evaporated completely from his body, leaving the Dark Lord to turn into a black mist himself before disappearing for good.

He had done it. He fell to one knee, exhausted, his vision becoming blurry. He tried to stand up but couldn't. He was just too weak.

With Mortezan and his army now gone, Daniel collapsed just as the King and Queen, Anya and Balisnor were getting there, some of their soldiers present as well to serve as the royal's first line of defense.

They dragged him to the wall, Princess Anya never leaving his side.

** ** *

NINETEEN

When Daniel had finally awoke, he found Princess Anya and Balisnor at his bedside. Anya had his hand in hers, his uncle keeping a keen eye on him.

"How are you feeling sport?" Balisnor asked, walking to the Princess' side.

"I feel like I have a headache from hell," Daniel replied. Truthfully, not only did he have a severe headache, his whole body was sore. "Did we win?"

"Oh yeah, we won. After Mortezan had disappeared, his daughters and army did likewise. One of them anyways."

"How long have I been asleep?"

Princess Anya was the one to answer. "Two weeks." She looked up at him, her eyes swollen and red, black bags under her eyes. "I haven't left your side in two weeks."

"Anya, you look like a zombie. Get some sleep."

She stood up. "Yeah, I think I will. I'll send for you when I'm awake and ready to talk." Anya was so tired, she teleported to her room, not trusting herself to walk all that way.

Balisnor took her seat. "You slipped into death a few times. Luckily, our nurse was able to bring you back. Nurse said you have a severe slash on the back of your head, but nothing to really worry about."

"That's why she looks like that."

His uncle nodded. "Afraid so. There's something you need to know though. The remaining Kingdoms are heading this way right now. They all should be here around nightfall."

You said earlier that Mortezan, and his daughters had left except one."

Balisnor sighed. "We captured Penelope. She's in our dungeon as we speak. Why didn't you kill her?"

"I didn't kill her because we need information we don't yet have."

"Worry about healing up first, and then we can worry about everything else. As soon as you're out of here, we have to get you prepared for battle."

Balisnor stood up and walked out of the hospital wing.

Daniel attempted to sit up in his bed, but an immense pain shot through his arms instantly. The Chosen One is bedridden. Depressed and livid at the same time, Daniel closed his eyes and drifted off once more.

** ** *

We underestimated the Chosen One's ability, he could hear Raven's voice in his head. And now they have Penelope. What do we do Father?

Mortezan had not spoken since being forced to come back to his dungeon. His eyes were the only thing one could see, and they were blazing red.

Father?

We do nothing. We wait for the right time to strike again.

What if she tells them where we are? Where you are?

Then so be it.

Raven looked at her father in a puzzling way. It didn't make sense that he wanted to wait again for another opportunity that would never show its face. Was he scared? Everyone, including her, had underestimated the power of Daniel's gift; but he had used it haphazardly and almost died from it. The time to strike was now. She knew it, she knew her father knew it, but he didn't want to take it. Reluctantly, she said, Yes Father and began to walk off.

She didn't take more than a couple of steps before her father bellowed, "RELEASE THE ASSASSINS!"

Raven bowed. "Yes, My Lord." She walked off, a smirk on her face.

** ** *

True to Balisnor's word, they got notified of the four Kingdoms arrival shortly before the end of the day. Their shadows were long as the sun began to set after a long day.

"Open the gates!" Balisnor roared.

From up on top of the wall, it was a mirage of colors spreading across the open land. From white on one side to black on the other, everywhere the King looked was like a rainbow.

The army that was positioned on the far left came through first, riding at full speed as their horses stormed to the front of the gate.

“Are you ready for this?” Queen Guinevere asked her husband.

The King laughed. “Of course not. I don’t want to see this, when we just all come together to see who takes my daughter from me.”

“Don’t fret about it dear. She’s going to stay here because Daniel is going to win.”

“I hope so. The only one I truly fear is Alvaro’s boy Alane. That boy scares me.”

“What’s the difference between you fighting for my hand and people fighting for your daughter’s?”

“Times were different Guine. I loved you before this whole thing started. People are different though; if they don’t win, they wage war on each other.”

“It’s tradition.”

“It’s ludicrous. I have half a mind to say its been cancelled and risk war since our men are ready for it.”

Erek proceeded down the steps to greet his newcomers, pausing the conversation between them for the time being.

“If it isn’t the new the new King of Varin himself!” roared a man with ocean blue armor on and sporting a round midsection. “Is the food good here or what Erek?”

They embraced like brothers before stretching their arms out to admire each other.

“The food is always good here brother. How’s Mirador?”

“A disaster, but when you got a strong Queen like Daria here, it makes it worthwhile.”

King Erek looked up to the top of the wall, staring at his wife. “You have no idea. Guinevere keeps me grounded in doing this every day.”

“If she can put up with your anger, she must be the one for you hothead.”

They both laughed. “Come inside and have your men rest up,” King Erek said after he had quit laughing.

The next army that came through was adorned in silver armor with white trimming, headed by their King and Queen. The King had short wavy hair on top, his sides buzzed off. As he came nearer, Erek could see his black eyes, no color in the middle whatsoever. His wife had flowy red hair with matching red eyes; they stopped before him on top their horses, looking down at them.

King Erek cleared his throat. “Alvaro. Abelina. Thank you so much for coming.”

King Alvaro put his hand up, silencing Erek. “Let’s not make this any more painful than it needs to be. Where can my men sleep?”

Erek went to open his mouth in reply, but somebody from behind King Alvaro asked, “Where is the Princess?”

“She’s resting,” Queen Guinevere said simply.

“Too bad.” The person behind the King ended up being their son. He had wholesome white eyes that matched the color of his hair as well. “I was wanting to see her.”

“Alvaro, how’s E-Emberlight?” Erek asked.

“Give me your strongest warrior and you’ll find out,” he replied as he whipped his horse to move.

I can’t stand them he heard Guinevere say in his head as Emberlight’s army filed past them. Even if Daniel loses, as long as Alane gets in last, I’m happy.

King EreK laughed to himself, waiting for the next King and Queen to arrive. I feel the same way. But could you imagine Anya with him?

Or their offspring?

Well, that image is stuck in my head. Thank you my love.

“Greetings from Rolbrook!” the King said, leaping off his horse and hugging EreK. “How are you treating my sister?”

Rolbrook’s King, Liolias, was a charismatic individual. He had a bright smile on his face; if he had to face the sun, he could have blinded EreK easily. King Liolias had wavy brown hair, brown eyes, and had a long sword on his back. His wife, Queen Amelia, was an exact reflection of her husband, but with flowing black hair and piercing silver eyes looking at EreK.

King EreK stretched out his arm and said, “As you can see, she is well. Excuse the black smoke. We had some company a few days prior to your arrival, but they’ve been dealt with accordingly.”

Liolias nodded, stopping in his tracks. “I heard you have the Chosen One here. Is that true?”

“You need not worry about anything like that. Enjoy your time, have your men enjoy themselves. Try not to delve into anything that doesn’t need no delving into.”

Rolbrook’s army was of pure white armor. White helmets, spears, everything. If Rolbrook’s army was able to grab the sunlight in battle, their enemies would not see them coming until it was too late.

The last army that came up was headed by just a Queen. She had luscious deep red hair mixed with midnight black hair as well, black metal tips to a point covering her fingers. As she met EreK and Guinevere, she bowed her head. “EreK. Queen Guinevere. How humble it is to be here in Varin at last.”

We’re glad to have you here, Queen Momonet,” EreK replied. “You haven’t found a suitable husband I see.”

“Husbands drag you down and expect you to pop out heirs at a moment’s notice. I do not have time for that now. Probably never will be, but thanks for caring.”

Queen Guinevere stepped forward. “Make yourself at home Momonet. You and your soldiers. Get some rest.”

As she led her soldiers away, the guard waited until the last of Momonet’s army was through before closing the gate. EreK and Guinevere made their way back to the top of the wall, admiring the view.

“We get the report back tonight on what’s left of Shinguard,” King EreK asked. “It’s still not like him to burn it down and trap us.”

The Queen put her hand on her husband’s shoulders. “Try not to worry about it too much my dear. He’s gone, that’s all that matters.”

As she made her way down the steps and back toward the castle, EreK stared down at where Daniel had killed Mortezean. He knew fusing with a hellhound was unholy, yet he did it. Why? What is wrong with you brother?

** ** *

TWENTY

Moonlight was pouring in when Daniel opened his eyes. He felt refreshed, no headache pulsing in his head, no pain radiating in his body. He moved his arms and was relieved that it didn't cost him any amount of pain. He was healed.

He sat up in bed and waited for his sight to not be as blurry. He rubbed his eyes and his vision got somewhat better; in turn, he got out of bed and stumbled. His legs gave out, making him fall to the floor. Haven't used my legs in goodness knows how long he thought. I'm like a baby deer.

When he was certain that he wouldn't fall on his face again, he slowly walked out of the wing. The hallway was empty as usual, but as he made his way to the throne room, he noticed that the guards that were usually posted at the doors were gone too. What the hell?

"They're all outside in the castle grounds," came a voice from the side of him.

Daniel turned around and saw a young man leaned up against the wall, cutting off pieces of an apple. He had white hair and pure white eyes. His very appearance was creepy to say the least, yet there was something about him entirely that Daniel didn't like. It could've been his aura, but his presence alone made him extremely uncomfortable.

"Who are you?" Daniel asked sternly.

The white eyed young man got off the wall and nonchalantly made his way to him, his expression blank and his eyes never leaving Daniel's. "I am someone who you don't want to get in my way of claiming that which belongs to me."

"And what is it you claim?"

"Princess Anya."

Daniel smirked, not backing down from his advances. "Sorry to tell you this, but so am I."

"What is your name?" The young man threw his apple to the side, wiping his blade on the bottom of his shirt.

"My name is Daniel. And yours?"

"Prince Alane of Emberlight. I look forward to seeing you on the battlefield." He outstretched his hand, waiting for Daniel to shake it. "May the best person win Anya's hand."

Daniel reached out and shook, never leaving Alane's eyes. "Likewise," he muttered.

With Alane gone, Daniel proceeded to go out of the castle. If what he was saying was true, Princess Anya would be down there.

Indeed, they were. After a couple of minutes of remembering his way, he could hear laughter and kids screaming joyously. He leaned over the wall and could see the King and Queen by the gate talking to what he assumed was another King and Queen.

He slowly made his way downstairs and was immediately embraced by the Princess; he had not seen her coming but could smell the sweet succulent smell of strawberry filling his nostrils.

"I've missed you," she told him as she buried her face in his chest.

"I've...missed you too," Daniel replied, struggling to breathe. "You...do you mind letting me breathe? I feel like you're about to crack my rib."

"Oh, yes sorry." She let him go and backed away a couple of meters.

Daniel, as per usual, lost his breath in seeing Anya's disappearance. She had on a long blue dress that dragged to the ground and, like the rest of the dresses that he saw her in, hugged her

curves at just the right angle. On her head was a slick headband that was adorned with emerald stones around the front. "You look stunning Your Grace."

The Princess slightly bowed. "Thank you."

King Ereik and Queen Guinevere appeared from between them, Daniel lowering his gaze out of respect. "Your Majesties."

King Ereik put his hand on his shoulder. "It's good to see you out of bed and walking around again."

"It's a great feeling to be alive."

"Daniel," the Queen said softly, making him look up. "There is someone we'd like to introduce you to." She turned to face the King and Queen to her side. "This is King Liolias and Queen Amelia of Rolbrook."

The one known as King Liolias grabbed his hand and shook it without warning. "It is so good to meet you, Daniel! How are you enjoying Varin?"

"I love it a lot Your Majesty," Daniel replied. When the King had let go of his hand, he could feel static running up and down his arm.

"That's good! That's good!" King Liolias said exuberantly. "I look forward to seeing you in the arena soon."

"Aye!" King Ereik agreed, ushering King Liolias along.

The Princess grabbed his hand and teleported quickly out of Varin, towards their usual place.

** ** *

Balisnor stared at Penelope intently, looking as she didn't struggle but was limp in her shackles. He ignored the sounds of kids laughing and screaming just above him, of idle conversations between common folk. He was intent on making her talk. When she looked up, her face was bruised, her left eye sporting a large purple lump just underneath.

"For someone who likes to play games, you sure are keeping your mouth shut," Balisnor said, leaning over his chair. "Tell me what I want to know, and I won't have to inflict more pain on your body. Don't, and I'm going to have fun playing my game with you. Deal?"

When Penelope talked, her breathing was wheezy, every now and then wincing as she took a breath in. "Torture me all you want Bodyguard. I'm not telling you anything."

Balisnor got up, twisting the key in the lock before going in and closing the gate. He looked up at her, delicately putting a finger on the side of her rib to see where the pain was originating from. "The body can only take so much pain, before it gives out and shuts down." He caught her wincing as his finger lay over one of her lower ribs. "Amazing what the body can do, isn't it?"

Penelope opened her mouth slightly as Balisnor pushed against her damaged rib. It was a short stabbing pain that shot through her whole body in a matter of seconds. She tried to utter a syllable, but the pain quickly turned unbearable. Tears began to drop from her eyes. "P...ple."

Balisnor stopped. "Why did you slaughter Shinguard? What did they do to deserve such a travesty?"

"Orders. I was following orders."

"Who gave him the idea of doing something like that?"

"H-His."

Balisnor smiled. "You know, I've been dreaming of this day for a while. Does Mortezean still believe his parents, my sister, are alive?"

Penelope didn't answer. She licked her lips, trying to not let her mouth dry out. "I don't know," she said after a minute. "He closes his shell when I try to get him to answer. He might be looking through all the villages to make sure they're dead, but I don't ask. I just do what he wants me to do."

Balisnor, one of his soldiers said in his head.

What? I'm busy down here. What do you want?

The officer just came back with some grave news. You aren't going to like it.

Balisnor gritted his teeth, a new fire erupting from his eyes. I'll be there soon. He turned back around to face Penelope. "Your games are over succubus! I swear in all of Varin, if everyone is slaughtered because of you, for every soul you reaped, I will deal that many blows!"

He exited out of the cell, locking it before running up out of the dungeon and into the morning sunlight. His fists were balled up, unconsciously not thinking about it until one of his soldiers confronted him about it. He went to his chambers, locked the door and waited for a knock from the officer in charge of conducting the report.

** ** *

Princess Anya and Daniel were still holding hands even as their feet hit the ground and raced to the shoreline.

"Anya," Daniel called out. "Where are we going?"

They stopped at the wood line, admiring the beauty of the forest but mostly for the privacy between them and the Kingdom.

"How are your injuries holding up?" the Princess asked. "I was so worried when you didn't wake after two weeks. I knew you weren't dead, but still..." She hugged him again, but instead of tearing apart, they kept close. She ran a finger down his cheek. "Do you think we're moving too fast?" she asked softly.

Daniel smirked. "Not at all."

"Good. Because I didn't care if you were to have said yes anyway."

"Happy birthday Anya. I'm going to the human realm to get you something."

Anya scoffed. "You don't have to."

"No, but I want to."

He was happy to know that his feelings hadn't changed; in fact, they had just gotten deeper. He was determined, hell bent, on winning her hand and he wouldn't stop until he did so. His heart racing at a thousand beats a minute, he slowly began to lean in toward her while closing his eyes.

As their lips met, it felt like his brain had exploded. He lifted his hand and put it to the back of her neck, stroking her hair until he at last, reluctantly, departed. She looked at him and blushed, her cheeks so red it made him laugh.

"I love you Daniel Gates."

"I you too Anya."

Hand in hand, they walked back to Varin, wanting to take their time to cherish their moments together, away from people with nobody but each other serving as company.

** ** *

Later that night, as the sun set, numerous tables were lined up in the throne room, utensils and plates clinking as both royalty and peasant ate under the same roof, celebrating the Princess' birthday.

Daniel was seated next to the Princess, as per her request, and as he watched from on top so many people eating, he began to wonder...out of all the places for Mortezan to attack, why did he attack Varin?

The King on the other side of him nudged him. "That young man right there is probably going to be your most challenging adversary in the tournament. He's a fighter."

Daniel looked in the direction to where the King was pointing and found that it was Prince Alane he was referring to. "Don't worry Your Majesty. I'll take care of him in due time."

King EreK laughed. "I know you will."

Underneath the table, Princess Anya and he were holding hands in secret.

EreK stood up, taking his glass in one hand and spoon in the other to cling it, causing the glass to ring a single tune as it echoed over everyone talking and laughing, enjoying life. "Now, now," he bellowed.

The room got silent instantly, allowing the King to talk without interruption. "On behalf of all of Varin, I welcome the rest of the Four Kingdoms to my home to celebrate my daughter's sixteenth birthday."

"As per tradition, when a daughter reaches her sixteenth birthday, the rest of the Kingdoms unite to battle it out for the right to marry the host Kingdom's daughter. Considering that we only had three suitable young men, I figured to make it even. Therefore, with the blessing of my wife and I, we have decided to put a fresh face into the competition." King EreK beckoned Daniel to stand up by looking his way and nodding.

Daniel put down his glass and stood beside the King. He could feel all eyes set on him, making him suddenly sweat and make his palms sweat profusely themselves.

"Daniel Gates, Warrior of Varin, has been selected to compete for the right to win my daughter's hand in marriage. He is blessed by my wife and I and has been selected by Princess Anya herself. Prince Victor, Prince Alane, and Prince Henry, here is your competition."

King EreK lifted his glass and bellowed, "May luck and fortune be on your side!"

The throne room erupted into cheers as King EreK sat down, the doors bursting open as dancers and musicians came in to liven the mood.

As they watched people dance and drink and live, King EreK tapped Daniel on the shoulder. Beckoning him to follow him, Daniel got up and walked briskly behind the King, the Princess trailing him shortly after. They walked to the chambers where the King and Queen resided, the Princess locking the door behind them, the music and laughter now mute.

A man with a gold cape stood inside waiting for them, his helmet on the table. The man was bald and looked to be bulky under all the armor, his brown eyes piercing as he held a rolled up piece of parchment.

At the sight of the royal figures, the man went down on a knee and lowered his head. "Your Majesties. Sorry to be the bearer of bad news."

The King outstretched his hand, and the man gave him the parchment right away. He tore off the tie that held it together, hastily reading each line from top to bottom. There was one line, however, that Daniel could see the King's eyes slowly go over...King EreK cleared his throat and said in a shaky voice, "After careful analysis, there is reason to believe that the Dark Lord's army

wiped out the entire village of Shinguard to include every man, woman, and child. Shinguard, a village entrusted to Varin, has fallen.”

The whole room was silent. No one moved from their places. No one talked. Daniel put his head down in shame; he knew he should've stayed and fought those hellhounds head on. Had he done it, those people might have still been alive.

Princess Anya was behind him the entire time and put her hand on his shoulder. You can't blame yourself my love. You did all you could.

Tears welled up in his eyes. I should have done better. Now they're all dead.

We would be too if you didn't turn. If you hadn't, neither of us would be here and would be in this report.

“What do we do?” Balisnor asked. “I believe the people deserve to know.”

“If we tell the people now, all we'll do is start a panic. It's better to wait until the end of the tournament,” King Ereik replied, putting the report down on the table and walking away.

“Your Majesty, with all due respect,” Balisnor began.

“I meant what I said bodyguard!” King Ereik retaliated before slamming the door behind him.

Queen Guinevere put up a finger to shush Balisnor. “Just give him time to simmer down. Be vigilant, and double security at the gates at night.”

“Yes, Your Majesty.”

Daniel waited until the Queen had left before going to Balisnor. “Teach me to use my power more effectively. Please. For my sake.”

“For your sake?”

“I half-ass know how to control it. The next time I face Mortezan, I might not be so lucky. Not only will it help me in the tournament, it'll also help in my future fights with him.”

Balisnor thought about it for a second before saying, “Very well. Meet you at the training grounds tomorrow.” Balisnor teleported out of the room, leaving the Princess and Daniel to themselves.

Raven isn't going to just roll over Princess Anya said, coming next to him and holding his hand. She will be back, and she's going to bring hell with her.

Daniel held out his hand and watched as a ball of blue electricity came to life, his eyes also a dark blue to match the flames. I'll be ready.

End of Book 1: The Storm Within

Epilogue

She was in a war-torn castle, bits of stone missing from what used to be an extravagant building. Debris was everywhere, yet she still called this place home. How could she abandon her birthplace? She had been born here, had seen this place blossom into something unbeknownst to her at the time...until the untimely downfall. She was the rightful ruler of this place, and she would protect it with her life.

As she sat perched on the highest beam of her beloved home, she heard rustling from outside of leaves, followed by twigs breaking and voices coming from just outside the walls.

After a few minutes, two soldiers came inside and began looking around, as if searching for something.

"These spider webs are huge," she heard one person say to the other. "They're too big to be just a normal spider."

"Could be remains of the last Spider Army," the other said.

"Spider Army?"

"You really don't know your folklore, do you?" When his friend didn't speak, he went on. "They were led by a powerful Queen who trusted the wrong people and, in turn, got slaughtered by them."

"Who was their Queen?"

"Queen Islanzadi. She was thought to be the most beautiful in all the land. Now, if she's alive, there's nothing left of that pretty face."

She had heard enough. When she spoke, it was loud and clear: "Is that part of the folklore too? Because I believe you have me entirely mistaken."

They looked around, staring up at the ceiling, but it was so dark they couldn't see her even if given her vision. "W-W-Who are you? S-Show yourself!"

The woman cocked her head to the side. "Are you challenging me?"

"Show yourself!" the soldier shouted even louder than before.

"Very well." She leaped from her hiding spot and landed in front of the petrified soldiers, whose legs gave way and they crumbled to the ground. Her face was hidden, yet her eyes glowed a searing yellow. "The soldier who knows about the Spider Army, what was Queen Islanzadi known for?"

The soldier to the left was the one who answered. "She was known for her mercy."

The woman growled lowly. "What brings you here?"

"We're just scouting. We wanted to check out the ruins for signs of enemies."

"Nobody's here. Get out, and don't return."

The soldier on the left took a step closer. "A-Are you Queen Islanzadi?"

"Leave before you find out."

The soldiers took off without another warning, leaving the woman to her beloved castle once more.

"My Queen."

The woman turned to face a large tarantula looking back at her. “We need to make a comeback. We can’t hide in the shadows forever.”

“And do what? Get hurt again? Lose the last bit of dignity we have left?”

“Hiding in the shadows is not dignity filled Your Majesty.” The tarantula’s pinchers clicked together. “Our spies have reports of the Chosen One living here in Varin. If he’s anything like his parents, he can make it right again. Bring respect and honor back into the Spider Army. Just send me, and I will have him here in no time.”

The Queen thought about it. Was it worth it? She didn’t want to send her best soldier if it meant him getting injured, or worse, killed. But what if the reports were true? Then this opportunity could be the last. She had to take the risk, and she knew this. “Go. Be swift about it as well Oman.”

The tarantula bowed before running off. The Spider Army was all she had left. If the remaining members of her army were to die, then all she would do is blame herself for trusting her second in command to such a suicidal journey. Still, she had to do something to give her people hope. Now, as her stomach growled, she leapt back to her hiding place, waiting for her next prey to stumble about.

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It was late at night when Raven had made her way to the local tavern. The scent of human is beyond repulsive. I need to get this done quickly.

She kept her head down as she went inside, past the first few sets of tables, and went to the bar. She looked up at the bartender with her purple eyes, dropping a small sack of uniki on top.

“They’re in the back Princess,” the bartender said, pretending to clean out a glass.

Raven got up and proceeded to the back of the bar, through the door and used her eyes to traverse the dark room that for a normal person would be difficult. She saw the four of them sitting at the table playing poker, each to themselves, concentrating.

“It’s been a while since a Dark Princess has been in our presence,” the one in the middle said without looking up from his cards. “To what do you owe us your presence?”

“The Chosen One is alive. We need you to kill him and anyone else who gets in your way.”

All four of them laughed. We don’t work for free they said in unison. Give us payment or get the hell out.

Raven unlaced the satchel strapped to her side and threw it down, a couple of uniki falling out.

The only female in the group grabbed the satchel and smiled before throwing it to her comrade, pulling back her hood and revealing pointed ears, her cold silver eyes meeting hers and never parting. “Where is this Chosen One, and how painful do you want the death?”



Perspective
Amber McCallister
Merited Work

“Hey, Ms. Haeli Renee; You will never fade away; You...will always be” – Eternal Heartbeat

“Pink petal, yellow petal, watch it fade into blue Smiling...I know it’s you” – Petals

“The huge skirt spun like a top as he made his way from table to table, encouraging audience participation.” – Khan el-Khalili

“Yet The Mirror stood tall and unharmed. Were The Mirror's answers right all along,” - But the Mirror Said

“Defeat and survive this calamity; To remain strong-willed, and earn my degree.” – Collapse with the Dawn

“You love her craziness; Together yall were blessed” – Dear John

“Together on the waves of the sea, so glad you were there with me,” – Hello Goodbye

“Gotta be this or that, so I gotta know!” – Hello, World

“I have been forgiven; You have been forgiven;” – My Psalm 23

“Tell me, why is this not working?; We’ll just keep trying.” – Parley

“Should its body be hard as a shell yet so soft on its inner core.” – Summer Fails

“You know what, this is it; I will not lose here! I’m going to beat you no matter what it takes!
“ – Please, just call me Ton.

“To a writer, words mean so much; But nobody would understand his.” – The Glass Sentence

“If we come together, we make the sum.” – Two is Better

“I am free; Express Me; Without confinement.” – Who Am I?

“BEING FREE FROM MONSTERS LIKE YOU IS WORTH FIGHTING FOR!” – The Storm Within

