

VALENTINE'S  EDITION

MANA



ASHER
TENSEI





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Copyright © 2012 by Asher Tensei
Edited by Felicia Cook and Laura Vaillancourt
Cover Art Copyright © 2012 by Chaz Olave
Published by Paramance
ISBN: [978-1623750190](https://www.isbn-international.org/product/9781623750190)

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Second Edition

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Dedicated to my mother, for giving me the courage to publish, and to my family for keeping my faith high against the odds. Lastly, to the readers: this story would just be a thought without you.

I thank you all sincerely.

1. Old Friends, New Strengths

A gentle wind wound its way through the brisk morning. Sunlight glistened, turning the leaves into brilliant emeralds and casting an immense shadow that overtook most of the ground. Playing in the middle of the street were children. Their laughter filled the air, echoing as if traveling alongside the breeze. It was a pure scene. No cars were present and the busted open hydrants created a rainbow that seemed to stretch over the entirety of the concrete. With a faint crack of thunder, a light drizzle began to pour down from the heavens. As darkened clouds began to swirl and mask the sun, the rain began to fall at an increasing, almost violent pace.

Suddenly, the peaceful children scattered in all directions, holding their faces in terror as the rain turned a horrifying crimson. A hissing sound echoed from the ground as the red rain collected in puddles, clouds delivering a fiery maelstrom. Almost instantly, a dark haze of smog filled the air, arising from the mix of burning puddles and singed bodies. Bells rang, a monotonous clanging, as the fire droplets seared the ground. The storm grew fiercer and the sound louder as the agonized children gradually burned into nothingness, leaving behind only the throbbing melody of ringing.

“Eurich!” a strange voice called. “Eurich Aurion...”

The voice was swallowed out by the increasing, almost unbearable, sound of the bells in a matter of seconds.

Gasp!

Eurich’s eyes shot open and he looked around his room. Sitting up perfectly erect, he glared at his old-fashioned alarm clock.

“Ugh...dammit, you ruined my dream.” He plopped on his back and smothered his head with his pillow, trying to drown out the alarm instead of just turning it off.

He sighed.

“Seriously?” With the alarm still obnoxiously ringing, he found it hard to continue sleeping. He slammed his arm into it, knocking the clock down to the ground and forcibly silencing it.

The bits of sunlight that shone through his blinds forced his eyes open. Groggy and awake, he put his hands over his face and exhaled as he bent over his bed to pick up his abused alarm clock. He was excited to start his first official day as a senior, but the look on his face said otherwise.

“Eurich, you up yet? Don’t want to be late on your first day of school,” his foster mother yelled from downstairs.

“I’m up!” he countered. He looked around his room, which was abnormally brightened by the sun. Still partially blinded, he walked to his dresser and picked up a photo encased in a sterling silver frame. Memories of his guardians flowed throughout his room. *Foster* was just a word. They *were* his parents.

“I forgot, today is our twelve year anniversary.” He smiled and set the photo down.

“Eurich!” His mother yelled again. “I don’t hear you moving up there!”

“I’m exiting my room as we speak,” he said sarcastically, then actually left. Somewhat prepared for the day ahead of him, he walked sluggishly down the hallway, still riddled with the normal wake up symptoms - bed head, crusty eyes, and slightly impaired speech.

Eurich walked down the hall and into the bathroom. After getting in and tuning the dial, steam hazed from the showerhead, frizzing his auburn hair. He had no interest in washing. He

only wanted enough to be woken up since he had taken a shower the previous night. The misty heat of the water reddened his skin with a slight stinging sensation, which was exactly what he wanted.

The dial squeaked as he turned the water off.

“Ah!” Cool air wafted against him as he exited the shower. Eurich wavered slightly after grabbing a towel off the rack to put around his waist as he walked back to his room. The vision impairing steam did not make a friendly combination with the overbearing radiance of his room. The brightness was almost enough to knock him out.

“Man, that’s bright.” Ready to accept the day now, he pulled back his curtains and opened his blinds fully.

He scrunched his eyes shut as hard as he could.

“Now that that’s over…” He fiddled with a bin that was on the ground, full of clean clothes.

“That works fine.” He pulled out an ironed blue shirt along with pressed jeans and slid right into them. After fixing his hair, he flung his backpack over his shoulder and rushed downstairs.

In the kitchen was an ordinary sight, accompanied by the aroma of eggs and bacon. Serra was slaving over the oven and Albert was in his old-fashioned rocking chair reading a newspaper in the den.

“Eurich!” Albert seemed very excited to greet him. “Any new plans for this year?” He asked, setting down his paper, hoping for an engaging conversation.

“Not really, just gotta hang in there until I graduate,” replied Eurich. “But I do feel pretty good about today. It’s been too long since I’ve last seen Raine and Jason.”

“Raine, huh?” Albert grinned obnoxiously.

“Yeah…Raine…that’s all.” He was unsure of what he really wanted to say. He wanted to talk about her, but the words would never come out right.

Albert looked at him and just nodded. Eurich did not give him the engaging conversation he had hoped for, but the tone in his voice explained much more than his words could. “If you don’t want to talk about it, I have never pressured you before.” He smiled and picked his newspaper up and began reading it once more.

“Thanks, dad.” He grabbed a chair at the table and sat down. He threw his backpack down to the ground and got comfortable. The chairs were of antique wood, but the seats were cushioned in carefully stitched satin, prepared by Serra.

“Just don’t get in too much trouble,” said Serra as she was serving breakfast.

“You know me,” Eurich said jokingly, about to pick up his fork. “It’s not like I’m gonna try to save the world or something.”

“I don’t know,” Albert stretched and adjusted his thick frames. “You take that vigilante stuff to heart.”

“Is that bad?”

“You have a good heart, but don’t let it get you in trouble. You can’t save everyone all the time.”

Eurich grimaced and looked at Serra.

“He’s right. I don’t want any phone calls,” she smiled and started walking back into the kitchen.

“Yeah, yeah.” Eurich said leaning back on the chairs hind legs. “Oh man!” he shrieked, suddenly looking at the clock. “I have to go!”

“Not before you finish breakfast!” Serra scolded.

“I don’t think I have time.”

Serra returned a glare and Albert chuckled silently into his paper.

Eurich sighed and quickly ravaged his meal, eager to catch the bus and finally see the friends who seemed to elude him all summer. He quickly gathered his things and bolted towards the front door, when Serra’s voice called out to him.

“Wait! Your stone, you almost forgot it.” She sighed. “Why do you always forget this?”

Eurich searched the inside of his pockets and looked around the floor where he sat.

“I have it,” Serra said, reaching into the kitchen drawer. “It slipped, so it’s my fault.”

“I don’t mean to keep forgetting it,” Eurich pleaded.

“I know. It’s just that this stone means a lot.” Serra approached Eurich and presented the stone to him. “I made it into a necklace for you. This way, you’ll never forget it!”

“Thanks mom,” Eurich’s cheeks reddened with slight embarrassment.

“Mhm,” Serra wrapped the necklace around his neck, smiling gingerly at his eager face. The stone was a brilliant onyx with amethyst smoke trapped in the midst. Though it was cut like pristine quartz, it was aged and jagged as if it had been through a war. In comparison, the necklace was more impressive. It was lustrous silver with dragon claws holding the stone. Not a bad piece altogether, but the age of the stone and the metal did not really match up.

“This stone has a legacy,” Serra started.

“I know…” Eurich had grown tiresome from hearing the same story from her.

“If you did, you wouldn’t be forgetting it. This stone has generations of war passing through it. It’s a force to be reckoned with.” Her rosy, lined cheeks flared as she put the jewel around his neck.

“I get it. It’s a good luck charm. Can I go now?”

“Yes,” Serra said cheerfully.

“Be careful,” Albert added.

“Wait!” Eurich turned around as he was headed to the front door. “I almost forgot,” he said, glancing over to see Albert with his eyes wandering the table like he was expecting something. “Twelve years, was it?”

Eurich instantly saw the glow return to both of their faces. Albert smirked and well, Serra could not do much to hold back some tears. He was glad to see them like that because it reminded him of how they looked when was just six years old.

“Happy anniversary you guys! An orphan like me couldn’t ask for much, but you two gave and continue to give me everything. So thank you.”

“Oh, Eurich.” Serra was shocked that he remembered such a thing. Her knees shook, so she kneeled to the floor to catch balance.

Eurich smiled, feeling accomplished that he just made his parents’ day. He opened the door, then waved to Albert in appreciation. Kneeling now, Eurich faced Serra and embraced her in a warming hug.

“I would never forget all you have done for me.” He grabbed her face and kissed her on the cheek. “Now, I don’t wanna miss my bus.”

“Have a good day, Eurich,” she said while holding her cheek.

“Will try,” Eurich sprang out the door, leaving for the bus stop as quickly as possible.

The air outside was calm with a breeze that gently moved through his hair and tickled his face. He flew to his destination with his speed only rivaled by his anticipation to start the day. He turned the corner and fell harshly to the ground when a stiff blockade halted his passage.

“My apologies.”

Eurich looked up to see a strange man staring down at him, hand extended.

“Nah, it was my fault for going too fast...I didn’t see you.” Eurich wondered where the man came from. He was wearing a cloak with a black hood, of all things—and it wasn’t as though people wore those every day. He took the offered hand and rose to his feet. Rather than releasing him, the man held on firmly.

“Your grip is a little tight.” Eurich’s face twisted and the joints in his fingers popped.

“Hmm...” The man did not let up. His grip became tighter as he pushed himself into Eurich, grabbing his arm—examining it.

“I’m in a hurry.” Eurich yanked his arm back suddenly, surprising the cloaked man and escaping his taut grip.

“My apologies again.” The man’s voice was creepy and carried with cracks in a strange, rigid form of speech. “If I may?” He sounded as if he did not know he was doing anything wrong. He hunched over, in another attempt to grab Eurich’s arm more gently this time. After pulling in closer to Eurich, he analyzed the scrape on his elbow, then slowly changed his gaze to the onyx around Eurich’s neck.

“Listen!” Eurich’s irritation increased and it was clearly heard in his voice. “I really have to go.”

“That’s a nice hex...you’ve got there.”

Eurich backed away and tried to move around him slowly. “Hex?” He echoed, trying to throw the attention off his movement. “This was a gift from my mom—just an old stone.” Eurich held his elbow and continued to move slowly around the man. The stone around his neck warmed, creating a tingling sensation around his wound.

“Hmm...” The man shrugged. “May I-may I touch your *stone*.” He narrowed his focus on the gem, giving off a crazed demeanor. “*Did the stone really just heal him?*” He thought to himself.

“Huh? ...Never mind,” Eurich’s gut was telling him that he needed to leave soon. Staying there any longer would have meant missing his bus and facing his parents. “Listen, I gotta go. I advise that you don’t come here again.”

The man just laughed and took one more look at Eurich’s elbow. “Fate sealed this day...” without any indication of movement, the man sprinted off, harshly nudging Eurich’s shoulder and disappearing into a nearby alley.

“Damn...people in this town are crazy,” he said to himself. “2012 doesn’t seem like the year...” He dusted himself off and glided to his stop to make up for lost time. He was relieved that a few students congregated there. It calmed him from the encounter a little.

“Hey, Eurich!” A soft declaration came from the small crowd of students. A girl with light mahogany hair pushed her way through the minute gathering. She skipped through the crowd with her hazel eyes fixated on him.

“Patricia!” Eurich shouted excitedly. He ran over to her and picked her up, twirling her in a hug.

“No touching...don’t think you wanna do that,” she allowed.

“Why not?” He set her down and took a step back.

“I’m sick.” She frowned, then covered her nose. “You think I would be wearing this to school?”

“I can’t tell,” Eurich reassured her. “But now that you mention it, those shorts are a little too short for dress code.”

“My mom thinks it’s bad, I have to go home...and I really don’t know how long I’ll be out.”

“Why’d you come here then?”

“Cause,” she blushed. “Maybe I wanted to see you.”

“You coulda texted me,” he laughed.

“Well, you *coulda* told me you had a phone,” she chuckled sparingly. “I would hug you, but...ya know.”

He smiled. “You know I don’t get sick that often. But I hope you get better soon! Need me to walk you home?”

“Nope, I’m good. Just wanted to catch you before you left...” She turned and saw the bus turning the corner. “Well, the bus is here, better get on.” She coughed, and then waved to Eurich. “I won’t die, promise. I’ll send Raine a text, and I’ll leave Jason in the dark. I think he should worry every once in a while.”

“Don’t I know it? Hopefully, I’ll see you soon?”

“Maybe.” She turned and walked off into the brush.

“That girl, I swear,” he smirked, watching her walk away before he boarded the bus.

Patricia was instantly pushed out of his mind as he sat in the bus. He could not stop thinking about the mysterious man. The other students instantly became invisible as he vanished into his own thoughts.

Suddenly, he gasped and reached into his pocket.

“Damn, the note! I must have left it at home...” He sighed with gratitude. “Maybe it is a good thing that Raine won’t see it.”

The thought of Raine instantly cleared up the negative feeling from his earlier encounter. She was his muse.

He arrived at Winbrook High School with about twenty-three minutes left until the tardy bell rang, and headed towards his usual lounging spot, the courtyard. Eurich turned the corner with a big smile on his face. There, he found Jason and Raine sitting at a rounded table. He could no longer hold his excitement.

“Jay, Raine!” Eurich shouted enthusiastically, running through crowds of others.

Jason turned around first and saw Eurich jogging towards him. He took the preemptive, getting up to intercept Eurich before he reached the table.

“Still too slow,” Jason allowed, catching him in a headlock.

“Hey, bully, let him go!” Raine chuckled.

“Thank you.” Eurich regained posture and combed through his hair with his fingers. “I’m upset that you two avoided me all summer,” Eurich said sarcastically, grinning because he knew he was humoring Raine.

“Well,” Raine began. “You were on a trip to Washington, for the Young Student Ambassadors of America. So don’t blame us,” she said giggling. “Not all of us want to be smart all time--actually, come to think of it, we were all busy. You were on your trip, Jason went to visit his dad’s oil rig, and I was busy mapping out my dream wedding.”

“Dream wedding?” The grin on Eurich’s face slowly began to fade into a disgruntled look of uncertainty and rejection.

“Yes, don’t you remember? Before school ended I was hypothetically engaged to Patricia, we had big plans.”

“Oh...that.” Eurich was relieved. Raine would always joke around like that, but the word marriage threw him for a loop.

“Don’t take things so hard, yo,” Jason’s sheepish smirk began to emerge.

“I’m not...I’m just really excited that this is the last year of school!”

Jason laughed. “You’d think you’d change your fashion.”

“What do you mean? I’m dressed fine, not much different than you.”

“That stone,” Jason pointed to it and the sheepish grin was back. “No matter how you wear it, a piece of junk will always be a piece of junk,”

“It never stops with you does it?” Raine intervened. “I think the new addition to that stone looks very nice.” She leaned over and punched Jason on the arm. “He’s just being a jerk, don’t listen to him.”

“Don’t worry, I never do,” said Eurich. “Let me give you two my cell phone number. I finally got one.” He smirked. After he gave out his number, he started walking inside. “I think I might wanna head to class a bit early. Good seats are always hard to find.”

“Wait, hold on a second,” Jason called out as Eurich was walking away. “You just gonna ignore the semi-annual tradition like that?”

“Tradition?” He looked over to Jason and noticed he was rolling up the sleeve on his right arm. “Ha ha...you just want to make me look bad in front of the girls out here.”

“Let’s see how the summer has treated you.” Jason raised his arm and placed his elbow on the table, waiting for Eurich to take a seat across from him.

Eurich took off his bag and sat down across from Jason. He wore a short-sleeved shirt, so he was already set up. With utmost confidence, he raised his arm and placed his elbow on the table.

Raine walked over and rolled her eyes. “I can’t believe you two still do this. I personally think it’s unfair. Jason is an ox compared to you.”

“Thanks for the confidence, Raine.” His sarcasm spiked. “You may not understand, but this is like a rite of passage.”

“Hey ladies, if you two would stop talking we would get out of here a lot faster.” Jason was religious about this event and it was clearly seen in his face.

“Fine, fine.” Raine leaned over the table to line up their arms so that no one would have an unfair advantage. Students who were outside joined around as if it was a school fight.

Eurich’s deep ocean eyes became locked into Jason’s auburn gems, staring him down as if he had stolen something. He was serious at this point.

Tension rose. Students around them were already making bets on who would win, and of course, the bets were on Jason.

“I’ll bet for you,” Raine whispered in Eurich’s ear. His face became blood red, overcome with a blush. He knew that Raine was just telling him that to make him feel better. He and everyone else knew that Jason would pulverize him.

They locked their hands together. It was a familiar feeling to Eurich, having his hand completely covered by Jason’s with Raine’s on the top, holding them steady. For years, they had arm-wrestled and the result had always been the same: Jason parading victorious with a smug look on his face.

“Are you two ready?” Raine asked.

“As ready as I’ll ever be,” Eurich replied. The embarrassment of being beaten by Jason was overcome long ago. He was in it for the thrill and unusually enough it was a bonding experience for him and Jason.

“GO!” Raine lifted her hand and the trial of might between friends began.

Eurich’s face was stressed and twisted. Just to move Jason’s hand a centimeter was

impossible, given the difference in stature. The veins in his arm stood out in high relief as he breathed unevenly.

"I have to try my best," Eurich thought to himself. He knew he would not win, but impressing Raine meant lifting the Earth itself. He would go to any length.

The crowd around them began to cheer on Eurich. They were complimenting him on his attempt to do the impossible.

The focus then turned to Jason. Usually, he could just sit there and poke fun at Eurich, but this time was slightly different. His face was just as red and his veins were stretched to the same extent.

Their arms remained stationary. Neither was able to make the other budge. A few seconds later the first movement was made, and to everyone's surprise, Jason's arm shifted backward.

Eurich persevered. His blush from earlier had deepened into a stressed crimson, but he was still determined to best his friend. Muscles that he did not know he possessed tightened as he continued to move Jason's hand closer to the table.

Jason was surprised, but his face made it hard to tell. Playing it cool was not something that he could do. He was preempted by Eurich's fortitude. He opened his mouth and gasped for fresh air, exhaling in equal intervals. With his left hand, he grabbed the table to get a better grip and to release strain on the hand that was being dominated by Eurich. He pushed on the table, giving him an unfair advantage and enough room to reclaim the match. The table skidded slightly, knocking Eurich off balance and giving Jason the perfect chance to slam Eurich's hand down.

"Looks like it's my victory again," Jason smirked.

As expected, Jason won, but no one had fathomed that Eurich would put up such a fight. The crowd around them was silent, but within seconds they were brushing Eurich's shoulder, giving him praise.

"Eurich?" Jason whispered to himself, contemplating the fact that he cheated. He scowled and in seconds, it turned into a smile. "Impressive stuff, Eurich. Still got a long way to go, though."

Eurich held his bruised wrist. "Yeah...if you say so. It was fun and all, but I really need to get going."

"Wait..." Raine grabbed his hand as he made an attempt to get up. "You're hot, are you ok?"

"Yeah, nothing that won't heal in a couple days." He halfheartedly smiled.

"Well..." She blushed and began twiddling her fingers. "You did well. I'm proud of you, Eurich Aurion."

"Thanks...no hug?"

"Nope, off to class for you. I think I'm going to stay here a bit."

"Did I really get that close to beating Jason?" Eurich asked himself. He picked up his things and left with the dispersing crowd to their first period classes.

"Take your seats," the teacher, Mr. Andrews said firmly with a welcoming smile. "Now, I know this is the first day, but can anyone that was in my class remember where we left off before summer?"

"Fables and fantasy," said a classmate, obviously wanting to be the first to answer. He leaned back in his chair while annoyingly chewing a piece of gum.

"Dragons and wizards," Eurich cut in fervently. He had recognized some faces from previous years and knew they would expect him to be the smart ass.

"Hmm?" shrugged the teacher, holding a book open with one hand. He walked up and down the columns of desks, staring down each student, trying to intimidate each student to learn.

"Dragons and wizards," Eurich said again. "Magic and purity...that's where we left off before summer." This time more loudly, with utmost confidence in his voice.

"Great job. Remembrance is the key, students." Mr. Andrews quickly slammed his book shut to wake those who were nodding off. "We have a long class ahead of us, sleeping will just put you behind."

Eurich laughed to himself and looked around the room. He did not see his teacher return to his desk, let alone have the time to pass out books.

"This is a class set, so remember to return them after class," Mr. Andrews took his seat again at his desk. "Class set, Richie, you understand?"

"Yeah yeah," he replied, slipping the book into his bag.

Mr. Andrews sighed and nodded. "Eurich, would you mind coming over here for a second?"

"Sure." Scratching his elbow, he made his way over to the teacher's desk.

"Everything okay?" asked the teacher.

"It's nothing...I fell earlier and thought I had a scratch."

"Really?" The teacher seemed oddly intrigued. "And it's gone just like that?"

"I never really looked...anyway, what's up?"

"I'm glad you're okay," assured the teacher. "I've been wanting to talk to you about your interest in fantasy."

"That all? I thought I was in trouble," Eurich let out a sigh of relief.

"It's still just the first day," he joked, then bent over to reach into his messenger bag. "I want to give you something."

"Last year, it was a detention," Eurich grimaced.

"Nothing like that, I promise." Out of his bag, he set down a thin, almost archaic book and set it on the desk. At first glance, Eurich actually thought it was a spell book.

"What is it?" Eurich asked in a whisper, not really understanding why the teacher gave it to him of all people.

"Between you and me." The teacher paced his index finger back and forth and leaned over his desk. "It's a book." He smiled and then sat back down.

"Thanks?" Eurich was not sure what to say.

"I'll quiz you later," said the teacher.

Chatter began to rise as Eurich was walking back to his desk. Everyone looked at Eurich's newly acquired book, wondering why he was the only one to receive it.

"Unless the rest of you want to take the quiz too, I suggest you stop staring and focus on your own textbooks." Almost immediately after the teacher said that, their noses were buried.

Eurich was intrigued, but he did not want to open the book just yet. Still, he had plans on reading it later in the day, so he slipped it in his bag. He looked up, just seconds later, and was shocked to see that the teacher was standing over him.

He placed his right hand on Eurich's desk and kneeled. "I really need you to study this book, understand?"

“Why me?” he questioned back.

The teacher focused heavily on the stone. “You seem to understand the most.”

“Well...okay.” Eurich did not know what else to ask...maybe one more thing. “What exactly is in there?”

“Surprise, dear boy.” He had a serious look about his face as he stood up once more to walk to his desk. “Free time until the end of class. Just not too loud.”

Everyone rejoiced and immediately started moving around the class—except Eurich, he just sat there, glancing at his bag until class ended.

The next few classes went by quickly, before he knew it, the bell rang to release him to lunch. He rushed to the cafeteria, eager to finally have a sit-in with Jason and Raine. As expected, they were there, sitting, with their lunches packed. The taste of cafeteria sickened them, and the thought of it had the same effect. Eurich opened the glass door and walked out into the courtyard. Jason was laughing with some buddies and Raine just closed a book.

Eurich walked up with a gradual speed, looking at Raine. Time seemed to have slowed down as he watched her golden hair sway in the breeze and her emerald green eyes shimmer in the sunlight.

“Raine, you are unrivaled in beauty, spontaneous and eccentric,” he thought to himself. Sadly his thoughts were to remain just thoughts.

“Hey, guys!” Eurich shouted eagerly. He drifted over to Raine and Jason, trying not to nudge anyone in his path. “Mr. Andrews gave me this book!” He had never been so excited about a book, but he could tell something was different about that one. Immediately, he reached into his back and tossed the book on the table. The book had no picture on the front cover. It looked as if vines had been cast in bronze and stuck to the book itself.

“What kind of book is it?” asked Raine.

“I don't know. I really did not get a chance to look at it. I wanted to open it with you guys,” replied Eurich. He took a minute, lost in personal thought, to stare into Raine's deep emerald eyes. He then focused his attention to the book that lay on top of Raine's grey mini-skirt. It was a vampire novel. Eurich thought it was a bit odd because he knew that she hated vampires. He just figured it was Raine's natural quirkiness, so he said nothing.

Jason smirked, still holding some of the animosity from the arm wrestling match. “You never do anything by yourself, scared the pages might bite you?”

Raine sighed and rolled her eyes. “I swear one of these days you'll get it.”

Eurich sneered. “Is there something wrong with wanting to share a gift with friends?”

“Not at all, I was just messing with you...well, open her up.”

For the first time, Jason felt bullied. “What are you waiting for, I think we all want to see what's inside,” he said impatiently. Eurich opened the book to the first page. It read:

The divine blood marks the mana of the two worlds.

“WOW!” exclaimed Raine. “I'm already in love with this book.”

“Just after reading the first page?” asked Jason, interested in the book at the same time.

They skimmed through the book's pages, stopping at pictures that caught the eye.

Eurich's face lit up like a child in a candy shop. Jason and Raine were not as into magic as he was, so the pictures in the book did not catch them by storm. It was just another book to them. The book held no title, but it did have extremely detailed drawings and descriptions of creatures and other mystical beings that seemed almost unfathomable. Eurich's eyes widened at

every turn, every flick of the page. He was amazed at all wonders the book seemed to hold for him.

"He should've given me this book before school ended last year," he thought to himself briefly.

While skimming through, Eurich found one page especially that interested him. He quickly snatched the book from the others.

Completely engrossed in the book, he almost did not hear the bell ring. He quickly tossed the book into his bag and left the courtyard, heading to his next class, completely disregarding the friends he left behind.

"Dumped by a book," Jason laughed.

"Speak for yourself," Raine chuckled, then followed Eurich inside. "C'mon, Jason, class is starting!"

The rest of the day until the final bell rang was silent. All he could hear was the prevalent sound of the clock ticking.

"Come on, just five more minutes until three o'clock."

Eurich anxiously counted down the time until he was able to catch the bus to go home.

He was to spend the time he had left daydreaming about the wonders inside the book. He eventually drifted into a sleep as he watched the clock.

2. Phantasm

The bus proceeded slowly to Pace Falls, Eurich's neighborhood.

"Why is it so hot in here?" he complained.

"Just a few minutes until we get to your stop, so just chill out." A fellow student answered his plea, voice trailing off before he added a final thought, "But it is a little hot in here."

"Look over there!" Another student seemed astonished while looking out the window.

"What?" Eurich moved up the bus to look out of the same window as the student was.

"No way..."

An intense orange glow was consuming what used to be Pace Falls. The only thing that could be seen over the horizon was waving lines of heat.

"STOP THE BUS!" Eurich screamed at the top of his lungs.

The bus came to an abrupt halt in the middle of the street, about a quarter of a mile away from his home.

"Everyone remain calm," instructed the driver.

Of course, no one heeded his instruction. The students began to move in a chaotic fashion.

"...Everyone stay in your seats, we will abide by safety regulations!" He spoke with more bass than that time. Everyone instantly sat down and awaited his next instruction.

Eurich's gaze was fixated on the burning buildings. He sat back in his seat with anxious, relentless eyes, unsure of whether he should follow the directions as driver instructed, or follow his instinct to go out alone and save anyone that was caught up in the blistering flame. Fear shook his body, but he knew standing there would do nothing. Memories came flowing back from his childhood in foster care. A fire is what separated Eurich from one of his other foster families, there was no way he was going to have a repeat of the same tragedy.

"I can't be here!" Eurich yelled loudly with tears in his eyes and a shaking voice.

"Eurich, you aren't responsible for their deaths," the driver said coldly.

"Huh?" Eurich wiped his eyes and looked strangely at the driver--it turns out he never spoke a word.

The possible fate of his current family ate him alive to the point that he could no longer bear staying on the bus. His hesitation was over...his mind was made up. It was better to risk everything in the loathsome flame than to sit around and watch his only tie to family die. With impulse surging through his veins, he grabbed his things and dashed toward the back emergency exit.

"Hey, stop!" The driver yelled.

Eurich pried the door open, getting out to face the harsh remains of what used to be his neighborhood. He ran for about five minutes through the blaze and ash until he found his home in the ruin.

"No..." He fell to his knees and tears ran uncontrollably down his face. "What happened?"

"Eurich, be strong," a female voice arose from in the scattered and singed ruins.

"Mom, Dad!" Eurich shouted, smiling because the voice sounded a little like Serra's. He walked around in the area where his living room was once vivid and bright. The little things were still perfect, such as pictures. Even the gargoyle that rested on the table was as pristine as he

remembered. The upstairs was completely blown out. The fires raged indignantly, almost as though they were mimicking his exact emotion. It was impossible for Eurich to even think about going up there. The remaining foundation of his home started to come down and it was no longer safe to be in there.

He covered his head, dodging the pieces of the chandelier and crumbling ceiling. The fires evicted him from what he once called home. There was no hope of winning the battle against the flames that seemed to intensify as his emotions rocketed. Giving up seemed like a good idea, his spirit was being crushed, slowly. He turned sullenly and faced his home from the outside, wondering why such consequences were falling upon him...again.

Eurich's impulse and bravery had been short-lived. There was no sign of his parents in the house, so he decided to turn around and head back to the bus. That seemed like a better idea to him than being scorched and never heard from again.

Eurich was starting to distrust his senses. It had been the second time he heard what was not really said. He assumed his parents were safe because the car was not in the driveway. At least this time, he knew his foster parents had gotten away from the danger. Being too young to remember his former family, all that mattered to him was their safety—no one wants a repeat of a horrifying incident.

With no other options, he abandoned the notion that he could do it all on his own and walked back to where his bus was forcibly stopped. The path was literally a shadow of what was, the neighborhood was dimly grey. As the wind grew stronger, ash fell lightly from the burning trees, dropping in clusters that looked like rain. His surroundings were now as empty as he felt. There was no visible sun in the sky, but despite the monochromatic, menacing, tone of the environment, he was not deterred from finding salvation.

He finally reached into his pocket and pulled out his cell phone, though he had a feeling that it wasn't going to do him much good:

NO RECEPTION

"No reception, what in the hell is going on?" He murmured to himself, fatally throwing the phone to the ground. "Dammit!" He ran as fast as he could to the site, but as he approached it, he was perplexed by what he did not see.

The bus was gone and there was no evidence that it had ever been there. No driver, no students standing outside, not even any tire tracks. The burning desire to scream enflamed throughout his chest, but he resisted for his own good.

Eurich needed time to assess what was happening, so he sat down on what looked like a foundation piece to someone's home and laid out what he knew. The neighborhood was steadily crumbling down from the blistering flames and no one was around. The hissing blaze he was forced to listen to while sulking in eerie silence was the thing he could hear—his only company. Explosions triggered as the fires grew fiercer, but as the fires began to engulf everything, the flame traveled nowhere next to Eurich. The flames roared with angry sentiment, but bent around Eurich at every chance.

Eurich looked down to his feet and decided to take a gamble. "The fire can't touch me!" He smiled crookedly and closed his eyes, preparing himself to take a leap into the fiery path back home. He jumped into the static flame and laughed when the fire just opened a path for him to walk down.

He ran with invincibility back home, still careful not to push his luck with his theory.

“Mom, Dad!” He called once again as he got closer to his awfully dreadful abode. Though he did not expect an answer, even a small reply would have restored some hope.

He turned around to glance up at the sullenly dark sky, but something to the side of him caught his eye. In the debris in front of his home was a flickering purple light. Almost instinctively, Eurich reached for the stone around the chain on his neck and to his surprise that too, was gone. With nothing else to go on, he moved closer the debris that bled heavy amethyst light.

While cautiously looking at his surroundings, he carefully sifted the charred wood and blown-out glass.

“When did my stone get here?” he whispered to himself. He staggered a little as he reached for it, quickly pulling his hand back as if touching a hot stove. He fell back as he saw the necklace fade into silver light, then occupied his neck once more.

Swiftly, Eurich grabbed the warming stone and suddenly snapped it off, throwing it back to the very place it had been salvaged. He quickly stood up, backing away as he dusted himself off. The stone had other plans, dissipating again to appear around his neck.

“The hell?” Eurich grabbed the stone again and looked at it strangely. In the midst of pulling it off again, he stopped, caught off guard by the sky. The moon was ready to come out. Though it was not much, the radiance in the sky faded quickly, easily turning the flames into the only light source.

He turned his head sharply, hearing a rustle in the ash-covered leaves that fell from the trees above.

“Hello, is anyone there?” He asked hesitantly, not knowing what to expect at this point. “I have Twinkies. C’mon, Twinkies!” Eurich chuckled, and then sighed.

It was just a cat messing around in the shrubs. Upon closer inspection, he saw it was a black cat with piercing golden eyes, carrying a piece of paper in its mouth.

The cat brushed up against his leg, dropped the paper, and bolted around the corner. Eurich leaned down to unfold the paper, which was tattered and singed:

I’ll see you soon. Just try not to die before you get here.

At the bottom of the paper, it was signed with an X that had hearts around it.

“What does that even mean?”

Disregarding the note, he continued to walk around aimlessly. His resolve was weak. He coughed a little. His throat was on fire, dry from the acrid atmosphere. After figuring there was nothing else he could do there, he thought to leave the neighborhood, on the off chance that people were watching from the outside.

“*I just can’t believe that no one is here...*” He thought, jogging to the entrance of the neighborhood.

He finally smiled after seeing the arch that read ‘*Pace Falls,*’ giddy that he would finally leave and solve his dilemma. “Whoa!” He made it to the arch, but quickly flinched back, falling and taking a second to catch his breath. He touched his face and chest, making sure he was not as cadaverous as he felt.

“What the hell is this?” He scurried back in a cold sweat. “This isn’t real, this isn’t real. No, no, no.”

He found the strength to stand, but did not find the vigor to stomach what was becoming of his neighborhood.

He placed his hand where the concrete should have been outside the arch.

There was nothing.

“C’mon, Eurich. You can do this.” He looked over the arch again, trying to open his eyes fully.

“No way...” His neighborhood was floating, separate from the rest of the Earth, hovering in a boundless anomaly.

“I got it!” Eurich exclaimed. “Maybe...if I try to jump off, I’ll wake up. This has to be a dream!” He was out of feasible options and was ready to call it, all or nothing. Before Eurich was able to carry out his idiotic decision, a voice called out to him, the same one from before.

“Samsera,” the female, childlike voice echoed. The voice was faint, but it was enough to grab Eurich’s attention and stop him from killing himself.

“Hello?” Eurich had a look of uncertainty on his face. He glanced around cautiously, but he saw no one on the ground, or in the sky for that matter.

“Okay, so I lied about the Twinkies...Patricia?” She could have been the only person that fit that voice profile, but still, he was unsure.

“Samsera,” the voice echoed again.

Eurich turned around and began to walk in the direction from which the voice carried. Teal specks of sparkling light dropped from the sky to buzz around Eurich’s face. He fanned away the colorful lighting and then looked above to see a translucent figure of a female child with a long flowing gown.

He gasped and just stared, shocked at the near invisible silhouette.

It was not Patricia or Serra. It was not anything or anyone that he had seen before.

She floated down from the sky and held out her arm as far as she could in an attempt to touch his onyx stone.

He winced away, stricken with a bellow aching fear.

“Be calm,” her voice was serene. The translucent child wrapped her hand around the onyx, pulled herself closer to Eurich’s face, and whispered to him. “Samsera is the key to avoid a future at fault.”

“Samsera...” Eurich echoed with a frightened gulp. “What of my parents—who are you?” He persistently, but carefully questioned.

“Your...parents...” She cringed a little, then went on to answer his questions. “I am Syrehnity. And your parents are safe for now. This is your time...fate has sealed this day.”

“Fate has sealed this day?” He questioned softly. Those words were bothering him since he met the hooded stranger.

“Samsera is the place where you must go to save them from the Chaos...and Chaos from them,” she sullenly replied. Her voice grew faint as she began to disappear.

Eurich clenched his fists and dropped to the ground, eyes red from sorrow and frustration, feeling confused and helpless. She was the only one that could help him, but she did not seem to care. Her message for him was as vague and mysterious as the note.

Eurich felt a little pressured by the dense air around her, so he held his tongue.

As he stood there trying to make a conscious decision to talk to her, she faded away slowly.

“Wait!” Eurich said assertively as Syrehnity’s image almost faded away completely.

“If I find Samsera...will everyone come back?”

Syrehnity’s voice gently carried through the wind. Appearing in front of him, she touched his face with her smoke-like hands.

“You will find Samsera, so that no one has to leave. Find the eyes filled with mana, but it may hurt you as much as it will help.”

“Mana, I’ve seen that word before!”

He remembered that he had seen that in the book he had recently received from his teacher.

Eurich rushed through his bag to find the book. “Wait, don’t leave yet. I’ve got a book. I’ll show you!” He looked to check to see if Syrehnity was there, waiting for him.

She was gone, only the teal sparks remained in her wake.

“Damn, she left.”

He turned back to his bag and continued to look for his book. Since Syrehnity mentioned something from the book, surely the book could better explain what was going on around him.

“Where’d it go?” He threw everything out of his bag, but there was no book to be found. Eurich sighed, “I think I left it at school.”

The fires around him grew fiercer.

He grabbed the stone around his neck and whispered to himself, “Samsera?”

Immediately, the amethyst smoke inside the onyx started to glow and absorb the fires that engulfed the neighborhood.

“What the…” The force of his stone pushed Eurich back. All he could do was watch the flames rush towards him. He flailed on the ground, unable to get up. The flames that were being drawn into his stone were a force stronger than gravity.

His questioning was useless because he could not find any answers as to why his home had become a world of horrific fantasy.

Eurich found the strength to get up after the raging fires nearly caved his chest in and sat on another piece of foundation, taking off his necklace to look at the jewel. He watched as the smoke inside chased itself, forming what looked like a dragon’s eye.

“Syrehnity, if you can hear me, please tell me what is going on.”

A cry for help was all that he could summon at the moment, but sadly, there was no answer to his plea.

Eurich tried thinking about the things in his life that made him happy. He was grateful for such a supportive adopted family, Raine’s unrequited beauty and friendship, and Jason’s loyalty and spirit. And though he could not remember the face of his former family, he thought of them and prayed.

As the thoughts started to form in Eurich’s mind, he noticed an opening through the darkness in the sky, a silver lining. Eurich thought it was a bit odd to see a clichéd ray of light, but everything else seemed to be outside of reality. Taking it as a sign, he started to walk to the point at which the beam touched the ground.

With the fires doused, Eurich was able to move a bit more easily, though he still stumbled over some of the debris that crossed his path.

“Syrehnity, that’d better be you over there. I need some answers…”

The glare from the raging luminosity blinded him as he grew closer to the beam, and it only grew fiercer as he moved forward. Holding his arm over his face to shield his eyes, he trudged on, determined that he would find hope at the end of the light. The light dimmed as he approached a gazebo in ruin, ravaged with the scorch marks of two thousand degrees.

In the middle of the jewel-encrusted floor of the gazebo, he found the book that seemed to have been lost. The object that he believed would answer everything for him.

“Syrehnity, I have it now. We can speak again.” He reached over to grab it, but he was

nearly knocked off his feet by an ominously blowing wind. He held his arms over his face, protecting himself from the knife-like airstream, but he was not the object of interest.

The wind rushed to the book, lifting it graciously into the moonlit sky. It stopped, but the pause was brief. The air current began flicking its pages and the teal sparks were clearly visible.

“So, you are here...”

The book fell to the ground and in the same instance, and as the dim light became absolute darkness, a luminous purple light shined from the stone that lit up his immediate area.

“Is there something about this stone that I don’t know about?”

The light from the stone guided him to the open pages of the book.

“This is the page I saw at lunch,” he said, taking the time to get a better look

Centered on the page in old style characters, the page read:

DRAGOON OBLIVION

“I’ve never learned about dragoons in class...so why did Mr. Andrews give me this book?”

He continued to read the text on the page:

Dragoons are creatures that exceed the fortitude of any living being. Dragoons are marked with divine soul of a dragon and gifted with the ability for marvelous enchantments. With dragon blood infused in their veins, dragoons have surpassed the limits, life span, and abilities of even the most gifted of magic users...The power of this dragoon lies in the stone’s wielder, but the stone is needed to make the transformation complete.

The picture accompanying the description was of a man enfolded in mystical black and purple armor with medium length, dark hair. There was a purple aura around him, vibrant and natural. The dusky amethyst light inside the stone embedded in the armor appeared to move in a free-forming pattern. His armor was light, with wings that wrapped around his body as if they were his own appendages. A large scythe in his hand completed the image.

“Is this what a dragoon is?”

Eurich continued to read, putting aside how cool he thought Oblivion looked:

The stone that holds the power of Dragoon Oblivion was forged out of intense hatred and power. Oblivion has a strong will, but the user of the stone must choose how to use its power. Because Oblivion’s power lies in a single object, its power is fragile and must be kept intact.

Eurich looked closely at the image of Oblivion and noticed one thing in particular. The onyx that was around Eurich’s neck looked exactly like the stone that lay embedded in the dragoon’s armor.

The book instantly closed as Eurich made the inference. Teal sparks rose again, this time, closing the book.

He reached for the book again, but it instantly dissolved into sand. The gale then came back and blew the particles of sand into the air.

What was left of the book was now out of his reach as the sand formed into a hovering ball.

“Speak to the stone and receive your power.” Syrehnity was nowhere to be found, but her voice echoed in the silence.

“What do I say? Huh?”

“Say 'oblivate,' Eurich!” She appeared behind Eurich and hugged him gracefully around his neck, then disappeared again.

“Why? What is it?”

“Your first spell. Now do as I say.”

“Okay...oblivate...”

Intense amethyst light flew out of his stone, shimmered upon the orb of sand, and started to heat the unnatural occurrence.

The sphere crystallized, shifting slowly into glass before falling to the ground. It shattered, but something was left in its wake. Something so pristine and beautiful in the way that it shined, there was no way it was glass. It was magical.

“What is that?” He picked up the bangle that was left in the wake of the mystical orb and held it up to the moon.

The bangle was in the shape of a butterfly and the band that wrapped around the wrist was black. Thinking that the bangle was a gift, he stuck it in his bag.

Eurich was pleased to receive such a favor, but he grimaced. As much as he found solace in the world he was now in, he could only think about the one person that he would not be able to share it with...Raine. As he placed the bangle in his bag, the fires that set blaze to Pace Falls started once again.

Smoke grew heavy and Eurich found it hard to breathe.

“Syrehnity, help...please,” Eurich begged. “Oblivate...” He called to his stone, hoping it would catch the flames like it had before. “...Oblivate...” He coughed, unable to get the words out.

“Sephrym, Eurich. She may become like me, but maybe you two can become like us.”

“Like...who?” Eurich was blacking out. “...Help me...” His vision blurred and his environment became complete darkness as he fell unconsciously to the ground.

He heard a muffled voice that sounded almost like Syrehnity.

“Wake up,” she called.

“...Eurich, it's time to leave.”

“...Please wake up.”

3. Secrecy Broken

“Wake up, sleepy-head.”

Eurich opened his eyes slowly, but everything around him was still a blur.

“Geez, you can’t sleep at the school. The bell rang a few minutes ago,” said Raine cheerfully.

“What?” Eurich asked, looking around the classroom in confusion. “Where did you come from?”

“Your teacher didn’t want to wake you, so he let me in. He thought it would be better if a sweet little girl woke you instead of a nasty old man.” Raine chuckled again.

Eurich shook his head, adjusting to the light in the classroom. “I guess you’re right.”

“Of course I am, now c’mon. Don’t want you to miss your bus.”

“How come you’re so happy?” Eurich looked into her permanently smiling face.

“I often think about that...I guess it’s just how I am, now get up!” She pulled him by the arm and led him out into the hallway. His feet were dragging, as if a chain was holding him down, but Raine knew he was just being lazy. “It seems like you’ve been asleep for ages. You sure you weren’t passed out the entire period?”

“I’m pretty sure it was only like six or seven minutes. It’s just that I had this weird dream...”

“Oh, what about?” Raine seemed intrigued by his response. She stopped Eurich in the middle of the hallway and pushed him into a locker, to get out of the way of other students trying to get by.

“Sorry about that, continue please.”

“It was magical...and maybe there was some sort of prophecy,” Eurich replied.

“Remember that book Mr. Andrews gave me? Well, my dream was about that book and it seemed real.”

Raine sighed.

“I told you that you read into magic way too much, it’s starting to consume your brain.” she said, while making movements and sounds like a zombie.

“Obliviate!” He pointed randomly to a student passing, which got him stared at weirdly for a second.

She laughed. “What are you doing?”

“A spell...trying to see if it worked.”

“Well, it didn’t. Maybe this first day was more tiring than you thought. Rest your brain so you don’t become a zombie.” She began making the noises and movements again.

Eurich laughed sparingly. “Perhaps you’re right, but-”

“Nope, no buts,” she interrupted. “But I’ll talk to you later. I have to meet Jason at the field. We’re going to stay after. The counselor is going to announce new electives and schedule changes at seven o’clock, so be there or be square.” She giggled once more, then turned around and started to walk towards the field.

Syrehnity’s words played in his head as he walked to his bus.

“Just a dream.” He exhaled, then picked a seat after he boarded.

Eurich sat by himself on the bus and turned on his iPod, as usual, before looking out the window. The bus roared its diesel engine before it headed for Pace Falls. He couldn’t help but watch carefully out the window as they approached his neighborhood, checking for any signs of

destruction--but he didn't have to look for very long. Everything was perfectly fine. It had just been an extraordinarily vivid dream.

"There was no way that could've been just a dream, there is just no way," Eurich whispered to himself. He looked at his necklace and began whispering 'Samsera' and 'oblivate' to it repeatedly, hoping he could achieve the same effect from the dream world. Even that was to no avail.

He did not want to accept that all of it was just an illusion.

Eurich arrived at his bus stop. He walked very cautiously on his way home, for the event that his dream did turn out to be real. The front door was normal, no scorch marks nor glass blown out. Everything was as it had been before he left to go to school. His fist balled as he reached to knock on the door.

"Better not do that..." He halted in his action and reached into his pocket and instead, grabbed his key, twisted it in the lock, and opened the front door.

He made his way to the front of the stairwell. Albert was in the same rocking chair, but reading a different newspaper and Serra was in the kitchen washing dishes.

"Hello, people!" Eurich happily announced his entrance, still a bit on edge because of the dream.

"Come on in, boy, take a seat," Albert said. "There is something that I think I need to talk to you about. I know you're getting older and I know you'll get urges." He reached into a bag that was next to him and pulled out a box of condoms.

"I see how you look at that Raine gal."

"Dad! Shhh!" Eurich was surprised and a little embarrassed. He looked around hesitantly.

"Put those away before mom sees. I would rather not have the growing up talk with her."

Albert laughed, reached into his pocket, and pulled out a piece of paper. "I think you meant to bring this note to school today."

"What note?"

Eurich walked over to him, took the note, and started to read it:

Dear Raine,

I enjoy you as a friend, but I have been admiring you from afar since the moment I laid eyes on you. Your beauty is different from anything that I have ever seen, the curves on your face to the glare in your emerald eyes. I cannot compare your beauty to anything. Not a cheerleader, not a supermodel...and the reason is, it is because your beauty is innocent...an untapped marvel of nature, as if you were the product of the freshest rose. Raine...I love you.

Eurich balled up the note and started to blush. The note was in poor hand writing and riddled with marks where he had tried to cut out words--not to mention it was saturated with cologne.

"I...I don't know where you got it from...I did not write that..." Eurich was hesitating, lost for words, and clearly lying.

Albert winked and put the condoms back into his bag behind the chair.

"Oh, I gotcha, I'll leave them under your pillow.

"Raine wanted me to remind you about the schedule changes," said Serra in the kitchen. The running water made it a little hard to hear her.

"She doesn't let me forget anything," Eurich said. He was normally just happy that Raine kept him in her thoughts. "I'll be there, don't worry," Eurich reassured his mother.

“But, I wanna tell you about this dream I had ...about this book that Mr. Andrews gave me. Something about dragoons and this place called Samsera that I apparently have to go to, it was weird.”

A loud crash came from inside the kitchen, the sound of a dish breaking.

“Honey, is everything ok in there?” Albert hollered.

“Yes dear, I’m fine, a fly just buzzed in my face,” Serra said while trying to catch her breath. “Do you mind if I see that book, Eurich?”

“Sure thing,” he replied.

He reached into his bag that he had placed on the table to grab the book, but pulled his hand out quickly.

“What’s wrong with your hand?” asked Albert.

“Nothing, I...think there might be sand in my bag.”

“Sand?” Albert questioned. “Not in this part of Roanoke, and the beach is about three hours away. You didn’t skip, did you?”

“Of course he didn’t, Albert,” Serra snapped. “They sell sand in stores, probably a friendly prank...”

“Could be, I was asleep at the end of the day.” He was still going through the bag, trying to get a grip on the book.

“Is there anything important in your bag?”

“Just the book,” Eurich quickly replied.

“Flip it over...I’ll clean the sand later.” Albert leaned in for closer inspection.

Eurich flipped his bag upside down and the contents began to spill: his Philosophy book, ruffled papers, pencil pouch, and the mystical book encased in bronze leaves. However, there was no sand anywhere.

Eurich apologized and then chuckled sparingly. “Heh? I thought there was sand in here. Sorry about the mess.” With a few things still left in his back, he tossed it to the ground, which created a strident bang. It sounded like he nicked a very fine piece of crystal.

“What was that?” Serra asked, generally concerned that it wasn’t something he shouldn’t have.

“Not sure exactly,” he replied, reaching into the bag. He was just as confused as they were, but absolutely perplexed after he pulled it out.

“Oh, what’s that, boy?” Albert leaned in closer when he saw the shimmer.

“Um...it’s a bangle...” He shrugged. His parents understood most of the things he did and said, but telling them it came from a dream spoke of craziness.

“Well it must be made with some really strong crystal, a drop that hard didn’t even notch it,” Albert got up and went in to grab it.

“Don’t touch it!” Serra yelled, then looked to Eurich and cleared her throat. “Sorry...I’m sure Eurich doesn’t want your fingerprints on it. Go put it away upstairs.”

“Sure...” Eurich took the bangle and went upstairs, staring at it with a puzzled look.

Serra moved closer to her husband, reaching for the book. “Honey, I know it has been a while, but try to recognize a substance like that next time.”

“I didn’t know it was sephrym until I almost touched it.”

“Just...don’t be so reckless. Who gave him this and the book?” She stomped and then looked around the corner, making sure Eurich was not standing there.

“That bangle shouldn’t even exist, and what the hell was a teacher doing with the Book of Noland? It’s been lost for ages.” Albert adjusted his frames and flicked through its pages. “Do

you think Eurich noticed anything about Oblivion?"

"Let's hope not. I don't want to ruin his chance for a normal life. We'll take him to the school later and sort out this ordeal," replied Serra. "I think we need to have a talk with this... teacher."

"Agreed," said Albert.

Upstairs, Eurich sat on his bed, in awe that he had an item that was given to him in the dream world. He rubbed the edges of the butterfly's wings--it was unremarkably smooth and clear. He touched and examined it in every way possible to make sure it was real, and even pinched himself several times to make sure that he was awake that time.

"Zombies... not this time Raine, I knew I wasn't crazy."

He held the bangle next to an open window in his room to let the light hit it. The radiance brought about a rippling water effect inside of it, cascading like a fresh water spring.

A resonating harmonic noise came from the bangle as the light ran through its edges.

"The wall." Syrehnity's voice rose in between the chimes of the bangle. "One step closer to the future."

The bangle gleamed and transmitted a beam of light onto the wall, illuminating a phrase:

The child generated from the gathering of the storm clouds will prove to be both your vice and the source of your benevolence. I trust your judgment.

"I don't understand."

He immediately connected the strange happenings to the match with Jason earlier in the day. That could have been the only explanation for him winning

Eurich's phone rang, and oddly enough, it was Jason.

"Jay, hey man, what's up?" Eurich voiced enthusiastically. "I was just about to call you."

"Isn't that sweet, you're thinking of me," Jason said smugly. "Anyway, our little meeting was bumped up a couple of hours, think you can make it here in thirty minutes?"

Eurich grabbed the bangle from the windowsill before walking over to and opening his drawer. He placed the bangle into the drawer in a hurry then quickly made his way to the bathroom, another appearance before Raine was a big deal.

"I'll try, but I'm not the one with the driver's license."

"Alright then, see you in about thirty minutes. Oh, and by the way. Nice match today, you actually made me work," Jason said quickly, then hung up the phone.

Eurich slowly dropped the phone from his ear to his waist.

"So...he wasn't letting me win," he thought to himself. "I'm scrawny compared to him. There is no way I was actually winning." He flexed his muscles, checking to see if they had gotten bigger from his obvious lack of exercise.

Downstairs, Albert and Serra were still looking through the pages of the book.

"Paladins, Sorcerers, Druids. I don't care about them!" Albert's voice rose, slightly angry. "Do you think that it's activated... the stone?"

"I doubt it, but hopefully we'll find out more when we go to the school...besides there should be no reason to activate it now. Times are peaceful."

"Well, what do we do? Oblivion is the only one that's here, the others are gone. They are not on the pages."

"Nothing for right now" replied Serra. "We'll just give the book back to him. I noticed that the others are missing as well, but no harm done so far."

“What about the sephrym? Do we just let him keep it?”

“Yes, I have a feeling I know who gave it to him. He’ll know what to do with it.”

“Are you sure?” Albert was not happy about the situation.

“No other choice,” she closed the book and walked back into the kitchen.

“As we were, then. We are too old for this.” Albert picked up his newspaper and sighed.

“It’s not polite to peep, Eurich,” Serra said with her back turned to the stairwell.

Eurich jumped and then continued downstairs as if he had nothing to be guilty of. “Oh, I wasn’t peeping I—I wanted to know if I could go to school a little bit early. There is supposed to be this meeting to get schedule changes, Raine and Jason are there already.”

“I actually think that going to school earlier would be in our best interest,” Serra said with a smile. “And make sure you leave that bangle home. You wouldn’t want to lose it.”

“Mhmm,” Albert agreed. “It’s definitely a rare find.” His old bones cracked as she stood up, after tossing his paper aside

“You have the keys?” Serra asked Albert.

“I’m good to go,” he said, dangling the keys in front of his face.

“Alright,” Serra opened the front door and was the first to leave. “Let’s go.”

With no further preparations, they headed out to their vehicle--a lustrous black SUV with slight tints to the windows. The engine purred gracefully and the wheels were in perfect alignment with the new layer of tar on the roads.

“Seatbelts please.”

Eurich knew that Serra was talking to him.

“You know these kill more people than they save?” Of course, Eurich put it on anyway.

“Not hearing it!” She snapped.

Albert laughed. “Listen to your mother...and always wear a seatbelt when she drives. You’d be wise to learn that lesson quickly.”

4. History Lesson

Eurich was surprised at how soon he got to the school, never in his life had he seen Serra drive that fast.

The flag with their school mascot was being drawn down. It was depicted as a skeletal figure with a black and gold robe and a weapon with a misty, black hilt--the Hallow. Despite the time of day, only a few people were leaving their cars and heading towards the field. It was not what Eurich expected. Usually assemblies were more involved, with many students and parents.

Serra grabbed the first parking space she could find. She was anxious to get out, but tried to hold her excitement until she was alone with Albert. The last thing she wanted to show Eurich was that she and Albert were hiding something from him.

“Eurich, why don’t you head on in? I think Albert wants to wipe off the windshield, so we’ll meet you in a few minutes,” said Serra.

“Hold on!” Albert was sure he did not agree to that, but quickly changed his mind after Serra hit him on the arm.

“Better do as she says, Dad.” Eurich tugged the handle and got out the car. “You two will be able to find me, right?”

Serra laughed. “We’re not that old!”

Eurich closed the door and with a final wave, he followed the other students to the field. “Geez, I just came from this place.” Being at the school once again was not ideal, but there were two things keeping him there: Raine and the possibility of getting an easier class. He moved about the crowd, looking for familiar faces, but as soon as he saw flowing blonde hair being carried by the wind, he knew his search was over. His footsteps were light and Raine was turned in the other direction. This was a perfect attempt to sneak up on her. Two years ago got him a black eye, but he figured he would try again.

Raine’s ear twitched as Eurich crushed the blades of grass to get to her. She pivoted as Eurich raised an arm to touch her. Her deep green eyes boldly stopped him in his tracks.

“You knew I was coming?” Eurich asked, slightly disappointed, but glad he didn’t get hit again. He really wanted to surprise her.

“Of course I did! Your aura sticks out like a sore thumb.”

“So, I’m that predictable?”

“In a way, yes, but you keep me on my toes. Moving to Virginia has its ups. Guess I could say you’re one of them.”

“Where’s Jason?” Eurich looked around the assembly, trying to ignore what seemed like a compliment. All he saw were white folding chairs; a majority of them were still empty.

“He drove to the gas station to get us some drinks, just in case we’re here for a while.”

Eurich exhaled. “If I had a sports car like his, I’d be driving everywhere too. I mean, he got that new Lexus a few days after it came out.”

“Jealous, are we? He’ll be back soon, so fear not...and...the car does not make the man,” Raine said in an upbeat, suggesting tone.

Serra and Albert were dead set on finding the teacher. Questions need to be answered.

“Excuse me, dear,” Serra said as she passed a student. “Can you tell me where the school

directory is?”

“Sure,” she replied, taking her headphones off. “Just go by the front office and it should be there, just around the corner.”

“Thank you!” Serra grabbed the girl’s hand and smiled.

“You’re welcome, ma’am.” She plugged her ear buds in again and before long, she was gone.

“Ma’am?” Serra wanted to make sure Albert heard the same thing.

Albert snickered. “We don’t exactly look that age anymore.” He was looking at the directory he was pointed to.

“Quiet, you! I don’t look like a ma’am.” She rolled her eyes and crossed her arms. “Have you found the teacher yet?”

“I think so...”

“Wait, Albert!”

“Hmm?”

“Do you see that?” Serra was stunned by what her eyes saw—a smoky color that trailed down the hall from the directory. She nudged Albert on the arm and pointed to it. “Do you see that mana?”

“Barely, but yeah,” he replied, focusing hard. “That’s one strong trail.”

They were both now more eager than ever to confront the teacher that seem to know more than he should. Moving as inconspicuous as possible, they approached the teacher’s door with caution. Not only did he know too much, but he was definitely strong.

Albert prepared to knock, but Serra stopped him. “We don’t know what to expect, you sure we’re ready?”

Albert smiled and nodded. “You’re the one that said we don’t have a choice, right?”

“I guess I did...”

“Don’t worry,” he kissed her on the forehead and closed his eyes. “Nothing we haven’t handled before.”

“You saw that trail!” She quivered, generally concerned for both of their safety.

“Then we’ll be extra careful.” Albert knocked softly on the door. Though he didn’t know what could possibly be in store on the other side of the door, he was ready for anything.

“Come on in,” Mr. Andrews said graciously with a welcoming voice.

They opened the door slowly, peeking their heads around the corner before completely walking in.

“Hello,” Mr. Andrews said with a big grin on his face. He was in a rather large chair, more like a throne, at his desk in the front of the classroom. “...and what brings you here today?”

Serra replied, “Our son, Eurich, speaks highly of you. You’re his favorite teacher. He brings all sorts of tales home with him.” She was trying to avoid an obvious argument between them. “His tales get sillier by the day...”

“Well, your son is a good kid with a great imagination. He’s one of the few who pay attention in class,” replied Mr. Andrews. “He actually teaches me a few things. I should let him teach the class one day.”

“Well, at least he pays attention,” Albert said jokingly to his wife. “But...Mr. Andrews was it-?”

“Please, call me Gala,” the teacher interrupted.

“My wife and I would like to have a word with y-“

“I know,” Gala interrupted again. He gave them both a serious glare, then the pitch in his

voice changed. He raised his hand toward the open door and closed it without budging.

Serra and Albert were not the slightest bit surprised. The trail he left behind already told them what they needed to know about him.

“Decepto.” Gala’s eyes went from dark brown to red. With a flick of the wrist, he erected a barrier around the classroom. “To keep out any intruders, our activity will be masked from the outside. It will appear as an empty classroom. Surely, you know this...Serra.”

“I may be older now, but such a rudimentary spell won’t catch me of guard,” she snapped.

“I know you two traced my mana. Is that what brings you here?” Gala’s look was now empathetic.

“The Book of Noland, why was it given to my son!?” The bass in her voice boomed. It was clear that she did not want to waste any time. “There is no reason for him to know about any of this!”

“You should know as well as I do that Oblivion needs to be born again.” Gala began to walk about the classroom. “The seal placed on Chaos is weakening, causing an imbalanced mana shift. Soon enough it will be turned into a rift that will consume this world.”

“Chaos?” Her eyes pried wide open and a chill ran down her spine. Never had she imagined that she’d hear that name resurface again, let alone have it be associated with Eurich.

Albert grabbed her shoulder and joined in. “Chaos was dealt with.”

“Not as one would think...” Gala cleared his throat and batted his eyes at Serra. “My... rudimentary spell is quite strong. Assume your proper forms, and then we’ll finish this conversation under the protection of my barrier.”

“And how would you know we could do that!?” Serra was really looking for any reason to become defensive.

“Because,” Gala started. “Your mana trail isn’t exactly a weak one. Plus, if you know what I’m talking about, there’d be no way you’d actually live long enough to make it to that age.”

“Fine...,” Serra allowed, sounding as if she had been defeated. “I’ll go first,” she smiled and placed her hand over Albert’s. “Watch my back, I don’t trust him...”

“Anything,” he let go of her and stood back, still keeping a close watch on the teacher.

Serra inhaled deeply and touched her chest with her right hand as she held her forehead with the left.

Gala leaned back on his desk and smirked, happy to help unleash her true potential.

“Vizard...” A cross like pattern began to glow on her forehead and her eyes lit up like fire. Seal barriers, in the shape of floral petals blossomed from underneath her feet and she herself began to glow. It did not last long. Within a few seconds, her glow dissipated. She moved her hands through her long, golden hair and exhaled. The lines from her face were gone. She was magnificently beautiful now, with smooth skin, slightly pointed ears, and strikingly orange eyes.

“Are you alright?” asked Albert, catching her before she collapsed due to the energy she expunged for the transformation.

“Yes, I’m fine...can you help me to stand?” She asked weakly.

Albert walked her over to a desk and sat her down. “Guess it’s my turn.” He assumed the proper position of his hands.

The teacher just sat there, without making the slightest of movements.

“Vizard.” The same glow consumed him. In wake of stepping out of the light, his age dropped significantly as well. His eyes turned orange and his hair took the same shade of gold

but shorter in length.

Albert examined his wrinkle-free hands before walking to Serra. "I haven't looked like this in ages. Unfortunate circumstances aside, I'm glad to be back." He stretched and popped the joints in his knees and neck.

"Your true forms are nothing to be ashamed of..." Gala said, pushing himself off the desk.

"It makes us easier to track. I'd gladly stay elderly if it meant keeping Eurich from harm." Serra stared deeply into him with her piercing orange eyes.

"Serra, calm down..." Albert kissed her on the forehead then sharply turned to the teacher. "I take it Chaos is being released," he addressed firmly. "That could be the only reason for the imbalance."

"That may be, but over the last few years, the seal that banished him has been getting weaker and weaker."

"Weaker and weaker?" Albert repeated. "If it was becoming weaker, Serra, if anyone, would have noticed, especially if it has been over the last few years."

"My apologies," Gala leaned back against his the desk again. "*Few* years are an understatement. Barriers all over the world have been getting weaker, especially the one surrounding Roanoke. It's been the weakest here, since the late fifteen-hundreds..."

"Surely Serra, at least, would have noticed something from that long ago..."

"No, he's right. The settlers on North Carolina's coast, Roanoke Island..." Serra was still catching her breath.

"You mean...the myth?" Albert was a little confused.

"It's not a myth." Gala raised his eyebrow. "The sudden disappearances of the colonists were partially blamed on the Croatoan tribe. Scholars speculated the colonists assimilated, joining their ranks, leaving behind the settlement. But, in all honesty, no one really knows what happened."

"What are you getting at?" Albert had a little trouble grasping Gala's explanation.

"The Croatoan chief had a right hand man, a westerner who shared the same blood. He was a druid, a spell caster prepared to sacrifice himself for the betterment of his tribe." Serra spoke up again. "He befriended many of the Europeans, offering them shelter and riches to appease them, in an attempt to save the tribe from losing its customs and prevent wrongful deaths. Raleigh was his name. He vanished along with his cittyie."

"Vanished?" Albert did not feel as if he was a part of the conversation, but was trying his hardest to keep up.

"Vanished." Gala took over once again. "He led them to the weakest spot in the barrier, on Roanoke Island. Over a hundred colonists were with him, thinking that he would lead them to utopia. To their surprise...utopia was the last thing Raleigh had in mind. His power was massive. He broke through the barrier with the humans, into Samsera."

"Humans actually crossed the barrier?" Albert was entranced by the truth of the mystery that not even historians had managed to fathom. "That's forbidden!"

"Raleigh knew he would be punished for bringing humans to a land where they are forbidden, but it was the only way to save the tribe. He used the consequence of mystery to shroud his actions. The Seraphim dealt with him and the settlers swiftly...they are the peacekeepers after all. They were all killed. Their disappearance was only guessed at by humans. Since then, the barrier has been mended, but is still weakest there...and the same weakness expanded onto these school grounds."

Serra cringed, knowing what a weakened barrier would lead to.

“Why would he willingly have himself killed?” asked Albert.

“He was a druid. A proud warrior with Croatoan blood has a great sense of pride. He would rather die than watch his tribe become overrun.” Gala spoke defensively. “As anyone would do.”

“Interesting folklore, but Euri-“

“As for the boy...I requested your son to stay in my class. I have been watching as the onyx amplifies his mana. He’s becoming quite strong. I don’t know if you’ve heard, but he’s already healing and he has also bested his friend in arm wrestling.”

Serra’s energy returned, not a moment too late. Her eyebrows narrowed and instantly, a look of fatigue became one of anger. “That stone shouldn’t even be active! Don’t you remember the decree that was placed on dragoon hexes after the war?”

“Yes,” replied Gala calmly. “I am well aware of that, but the decree only demanded the deactivation of mana to these relics as long as the mana seal that is binding Chaos is kept in constant flow.” He paused, almost feeling suffocated by the powerful gaze coming from Serra. At that point, he knew that anything he would say would trigger her—and he concluded he was not a match for them together. His explanation continued after he cleared his throat.

“...The mana balance has been interrupted because Chaos’ seal is weakening...I understand that education is important for your son, so I’ve taken the liberty to orchestrate an event that will announce that he, and a few select others will graduate in the winter because of prior AP courses they have all taken.”

“You’re trying to bribe us with education?!” Serra shouted. “He *will* finish school and after that, he still will not be a part of any of this! There is no way you can expect him to do what thousands of others have failed at. There is no way Albert or I will agree to this!”

“You know that if Chaos comes back, it will be the end of this world!” Gala pleaded, trying to match her tone. “Eurich is our only hope. Chaos can only be brought down by another dragoon. If Oblivion does not surface and Chaos is released, you will have no son to protect!”

“No!” Serra interrupted. “Chaos can only be brought down by another *Omni* Dragoon. As far as I know, Chaos is the only *Omni*. There is a reason we could only bind him in the first place. Dragoons are the world’s most powerful beings, and Chaos rendered the entire population extinct. You must be sick if you think a seventeen-year-old boy can defeat someone like that. You know what else...do you honestly think that Eurich will want to fight him after he learns of Chaos’ origins?”

Albert had not seen Serra that angry in such a long time. He knew that if she continued the way she was going, the entire school would have ended up feeling her wrath.

“Serra, calm down, I am sure we have lots of time to make a decision.” He turned back to Gala. “The mana seal has only been up for two thousand years. It should not be weakening. Someone must be tampering with it.”

“That could be the case, but no one is currently that strong...” Gala looked away.

“Gala,” Albert’s voice was stern. “Only druids have the ability to manipulate the flow of a mana seal...and, you are a druid...your mana swirls to the left. What do you know about this?”

“There are others like me. Valkyries, for instance. Besides, my power is not great enough to take down a barrier of such magnitude, even if it is weaker here,” Gala stated. “But Chaos is the issue at hand. Pointing fingers won’t do anyone any good.”

“Unfortunately,” Serra grabbed Albert’s arm and pressed his fist against her lips. “He’s right...”

“I know you don’t think this is a good idea, Serra,” Albert whispered to her, “but we both knew that Eurich would be the one to activate the stone. He would have found a way, even if this were not happening. We, as sorcerers, can only do so much. But as parents, we can support him. We have to give him a chance. It is his destiny...after all.”

“Eurich isn’t an Omni! What part of that don’t you understand...?” Serra asked with sadness in her voice. “He’ll die if Chaos returns. We cannot put that burden on him. It’s our fault that we failed two thousand years ago.”

“Honey, please,” he wrapped her within the warmest hug and moved her flowing, golden hair behind her minutely pointed ears. “We tried our best, but we’re not dragoons and we stood no chance of winning,” he paused to look her in the eyes. “I love you and Eurich both, but if Chaos comes back, Eurich is not the only one who will be killed...and we won’t be able to stop him like before.”

“This is happening too soon...” She held her head and fluttered her reddened eyes, slowly taking a seat. “I don’t know if I can handle this. What about his future? And his children...and...”

“Serra, please. I know you want Eurich to love at least once, and I know he will find it in the search for Chaos. If he’s lucky, he’ll fall in love with a lovely sorcerer, just as I did.”

Serra blushed, but that did not stop her melancholy thoughts.

Gala sympathized with her, bowing his head. “We’d better leave. Graduation preparations are about to start.” He released the spell and walked to the door. “Hurry and change back.”

“Man...” Albert was not too enthralled. “I guess this means that we have to be elderly again.”

“This changes nothing,” she said, again staring at Gala. She put her hand to her chest and walked close to Albert. “Vizard.” Her chant caused Albert to change back as well.

“You’d better hope you’re right about this,” Serra threatened, glow dissipating.

“I know how you feel,” Gala countered, opening the door.

“Just follow me to Eurich. His mana trail is just like his father’s.” She led them out of the room. With help of the trail, they found Eurich swiftly. It was no surprise that he was already trying to put his arm around Raine.

“Eurich!” Albert waved.

Eurich jumped and put his hands in his lap. “Didn’t think that it would take that long to wipe off a window,” he said mordantly.

“Well, we don’t move as fast in our old age. Plus you were hard to find.” Most of the crowd was situated similarly, but there were still a few roaming around in search of a good spot.

“Ladies and Gentlemen,” announced the counselor over the microphone. “Please take a seat.”

“Jason isn’t here yet,” said Raine, worried that he would miss the event. She tugged Eurich’s arm as if it were his fault for Jason’s delay.

“He’ll be here,” Eurich assured. “He has a knack to show last second, ya know?”

The counselor on the podium looked stiff, pressing her collar to loosen the wrinkles around her neck. “Before we begin-”

A loud rev of an engine caught everyone’s attention and cut off the counselor. Of course, Raine and Eurich knew who was responsible for the noise. They turned around to see Jason pulling into a parking space like a mad man. Jason exited his caviar-black coupe and used his automatic key to lock the doors. He jogged towards Raine and Eurich, wearing his favorite attire

of a plain colored shirt and shorts.

“Did I miss anything?” Jason pasted a smug look on his face.

“Actually, you’re right on time,” Raine responded. “We saved a seat for you, so hurry and sit down. I think the counselor is pissed at you enough.”

The counselor continued, despite being rudely interrupted by Jason’s vehicle. She gave a long speech about the importance of education and seniors aiding the future, typical textbook graduation speech material.

The principal of the school then took the microphone and began to speak. He looked just as stiff as the counselor. “We have been preparing the list for the early graduates since the beginning of summer and I see that the invitations found all of you. Seniors at this school only need twenty-three credits to graduate. All the seniors here currently have twenty-six or more credits. I am sure that you bright Hallows can figure out what I am trying to say, but I will let the counselor solve the mystery for you.”

“There was an invitation?” Eurich asked Raine.

“Oops,” Raine responded, she reached in her purse and pulled out a letter to hand to Eurich. “I guess that I forgot to give it to you.”

“How long have you had this?”

“Since about June, I just forgot to send it to you. I had no idea where your hotel was in Washington. If you had just got a cell phone like normal people, we wouldn’t even be having this conversation.” She smiled. “But I’m glad you have one now.”

“Well, thanks for giving it to me.”

She closed her eyes and smiled, letting go of the invitation. “No problem.”

“Hold on!” Eurich opened the letter and immediately found something wrong. “Does that mean Jason has twenty six or more credits?” He laughed.

“Funny, Aurion.” Jason nudged him in the shoulder. “I’m not all looks.”

The counselor then took the microphone again. “Ahem... The board of education, the principal, and myself, have felt it necessary to expedite your graduation to the winter. Instead of waiting until summer to become full-fledged adults, you will each have an additional six months to mend your options.”

“Wow!” Jason exclaimed, “It is August now, that means we only have about four months of school before graduation.”

“Good observation.” Eurich laughed.

”Hell yeah!” Jason stood up and immediately triggered applause from all the other students.

Raine tugged his shirt and sat him back down. “What do you think you’re doing?”

Eurich laughed again. “He’s just excited. Let him have his moment. It’s not often that Jason is this stoked about something other than his car.”

A freckled, red headed girl raised her hand. “What about prom?”

“It will be just as extravagant,” the counselor replied. “But instead of a traditional prom, a winter ball will be thrown.”

“Oh, winter wonderland!” said Raine ecstatically. “I’ll have to get the perfect gown.”

“Well,” the student raised her hand again. “What about valedictorian?”

The counselor smiled, almost as if she was waiting for that exact question. “They will be chosen the same way as normal, by GPA. Once you have all graduated, another valedictorian will be chosen for the full school year. Not only does this recognize students as the bright young adults you are, but it will also give another student the chance of becoming the valedictorian for

their graduating class.”

“Any other questions before we conclude?” The counselor followed up.

There were no questions and shortly after, the gathering was dismissed.

School staff began to pick chairs up and take down the podium. Excitement was still on the faces of all the students. Leaving school earlier was ideal for most.

The clouds above moved in closer together, producing a light drizzle that breezed through the grounds.

“Eurich,” Serra called out. “Albert and I will be waiting in the car. Just come by when you’re ready to leave.”

“Be there in a sec.” Eurich replied, turning to face them.

Serra and Albert began walking to the parking lot, covering their heads so they would not be caught by the rain.

“Can you believe it?” Jason asked excitedly. “We are graduating early! Who woulda saw that coming?”

“It’s just that being smart pays off,” Raine smiled. She paused, looking up into the sky, concentrating hard on the clouds.

“Whatcha lookin’ at?” Jason looked up with her to see what was so interesting.

“It’s just that...each rain drop has a different color.” She took in a deep breath and let the gentle mist waft against her pores.

“Each rain drop has a different color?” Eurich asked. He was intrigued.

Jason chimed in as well. “They all look the same color to me; all clear.”

“Well, maybe it’s just me...” Raine added, and then changed the subject. “But anyway, this early graduation is really exciting, especially the winter ball. I’ll have to go shopping with Patricia.”

“Speaking of...” said Eurich, “did you get the text from her?”

“I did. She said that her mom wants her out for a while. It’s bad. Her fever is higher than earlier this morning,” said Raine. “Let’s cross our fingers.”

“Hold on... You two spoke to her?” Jason tried not to blush. Something about Patricia intrigued him to no end. “She did get an invite, didn’t she?”

“Of course she did. Her GPA is higher than Eurich’s after all.” Raine put her focus back to the sky.

“Gee, thanks Raine,” Eurich tried to not let the comment bother him.

“Yeah...no problem.” She did not speak with any tone in her voice. Her attention was fully occupied by the light drizzle.

“I think I want to head home.” said Eurich. “I really want a better chance to look at that book.” Eurich walked towards the parking lot to meet his parents. Jason and Raine followed shortly after.

“We’ll see you at school tomorrow.” Jason said as he opened the door on Raine’s side.

She got in with a blank look on her face. Something was bothering her and Eurich could tell. He wanted to say something as Jason and Raine left, but held his tongue. Raine and Jason were his closest friends, and as much as he liked Raine, he knew that he was no contest to Jason.

Eurich sighed as he watched Jason’s car move further beyond brush along the road. He looked down and shook his head before getting in the car. “...Maybe one day.”

He sat quietly in the backseat until he got home.

The first thing Eurich did when he got into his house was go straight upstairs. He was tired and wanted to sleep off the day. The first day of school had taken more out of him than he

had originally anticipated.

He grimaced as he felt a strange warmth around his neck. He wrapped his hand around the stone and hurried to his room. Looking at himself in the mirror, he noticed that his eyes had become darker from fatigue and the smoke inside the stone was starting to chase itself.

“My...head.” The pulsing became unbearable. He stumbled to the mirror, trying to make as little noise as possible. The last thing he wanted to do was alert his parents.

“Don’t...feel so well...” A glint of purple light shined in his eyes. With arched eyebrows, he looked into the mirror, leaning on it for support. The feeling of restlessness burned into his chest. He let out a gasp, and then it became a scream that only he could hear. The mirror cracked and a strange purple light started to glow around his body.

The mysterious power surged through his veins. He had the urge to destroy something-- anything. The headache blurred his vision. He was close to unconsciousness.

“Obliviate...” The words were almost forced out of his mouth. The light that surrounded his body completely dissipated, shattering his mirror in its wake.

“What was that noise?” Serra shouted from downstairs, thinking that Eurich was hurt. “Eurich!”

“I just fell...everything’s fine...” Eurich replied with a malevolent, barely alert, smirk on his face.

“Just...fi-ne.”

He wobbled to his bed, completely losing consciousness as he fell on his feathered comforter.

5. Why Couldn't This Be a Dream?

The morning started as it usually did, with Eurich sluggishly waking up and soaking under the sizzling waters of his shower. The ivory towel that was taken off the hook on the wall hugged his steaming body. Hair still dripping wet, he walked out the bathroom with the towel draped around his waist.

"It's been three weeks, I think it's time to replace you," he said to the shattered mirror that towered atop his dresser. The glass was gone, but the broken frame still remained.

He picked up a glass shard on top of one of his shirts and looked at it. "Thought I picked up all the glass...I'll need to remind mom to stop singing," he chuckled, then sighed. "Oh Raine, why can't we be older?" He talked to himself more and more often lately. "It's hard to believe we're four weeks into school...maybe I'll ask you out when we graduate."

Eurich tossed on a short sleeve shirt and a pair of jeans that lay in a pile next to his bed. He flew down the stairs and turned the curved golden knob on the front door.

"We notified your principal that you are going to miss school today," Serra caught him on the way out, voice serious.

Eurich turned away from the door and walked a little towards them with a puzzled look on his face.

"You should be happy..." Serra added with half-smile. "You're missing a day."

"Good." Eurich walked behind the chair closest to him in the den. "Physics is sucking."

"Albert, let's just get this over with..." Her voice became serious again.

Albert looked at him and nodded. "There's something that we need to discuss as a family. We were just waiting until you were ready, and we see now that you are...your mother and I are thrilled that you will be graduating in a few months, so now is a good time to have this talk." Albert's face became concerned and his voice took a more firm tone. "Take a seat."

"Okay..." He looked around with uncertainty before sitting in the chair he hovered over. His parents had not taken a tone with him like that in a while. Things were changing and he knew his secret would be blown. "Whatever it is, I swear I didn't do it," he said apologetically with a little humor in his undertones.

"Is that book still in your bag?" Serra asked, cutting right to the chase.

"Yes mom, it is." Eurich reached into his bag and set the book on the table. He opened it up to first page. "You know, this is a really interesting book."

"We know," Serra replied. "It's really one of a kind." The pages she turned though seemed to have no impact on her.

Eurich watched as she coldly flicked through each page, surprised that nothing was surprising her.

She turned past everything: the druids, the dragons, the sorcerers, the manataurs, and even the rebellious groups that aid those who used evil, or black magic. The only thing on her mind was Oblivion, so naturally that was where she headed.

Eurich gulped and his eyes became fixated on the page. He wasn't sure what was going to happen. The room became silent and still as everyone gazed at Dragoon Oblivion. Eurich grabbed his stone and callously looked about. He never enjoyed the silence, it always reminded him of a time when he really had no one at all. He had a particular resentment for peace—it never existed. He removed his hand from off the stone and stifled the taciturnity.

"Isn't it weird that my stone looks like the same stone that's in the picture?" Eurich took

off his necklace and laid it on the table. “See, it also has the same purple stuff inside.”

Serra grimaced while reaching for the necklace. “I’m so sorry, Eurich.”

“What’s wrong?” Eurich wanted her to say anything other than what he thought she was going to say.

She raised her index finger, which emitted a strong white glow that was as bright as a car’s high beams.

Eurich sprang up quickly and his body froze. The chill that ran down his spine traveled to his legs, then back in an upward direction. There was nothing he could say.

She touched the stone with her illuminated finger. Immediately the stone resonated and produced a high-pitched screech that lasted for about a second. With no emotion to see on her face, she placed the necklace back on the table.

“You can...have this back...”

“Serra...” Albert rested his hand on her shoulder and nodded. “This will be over soon...”

“What is this?” Eurich managed to ask between gasps. His words came out choppy and he was as stiff as a board. “What did you just do?” He backed away and mustered the will to point at the necklace. Though he had known about something strange going on, he was not prepared for any of it to be true.

She sighed and then wiped the impending tears from her rosy cheeks. “I’m sorry we didn’t tell you sooner, but...you are Oblivion. You are the one who has to control the legacy given you by birth.”

Eurich threw his arms down and paced in front of the table. “No way, this is NOT happening.”

“Eurich, calm down,” Albert hastily got up and reached for him.

“Don’t even!” Eurich raised a fist.

“I need you to sit down!” Albert’s voice boomed and with the flick of the wrist, Eurich sat.

Eurich just looked into Serra’s sad eyes. Emotions were taking over. In that instance he wanted to cry more than anything. Betrayal went through his head. He did not want to fathom that he has been sleeping with strangers all his life.

Albert put his hand down and released his hold on Eurich. “Can we just talk, please?” He grunted, then sat back down.

Eurich relaxed and repositioned himself in the chair. “I guess you aren’t joking...” He had never seen that much regret in their eyes. Their faces showed they were genuinely sorry. He could not help but trust them—they had raised him right for twelve years, after all.

“I wish we weren’t,” Serra smiled, stuttering as she wiped her face again. “That book should’ve told you everything, I’m sure you had plenty of time to read it.”

“So...mana is real?” He sank in the chair a little, hesitating over his words.

“Yeah,” Albert said while nodding his head. “I know you’ve noticed yourself getting stronger.”

“I figured as much,” he smirked, slowly moving backward in the chair. “I thought a miracle was responsible for the arm wrestling match.”

“What I did earlier,” Serra said after she touched Eurich’s thigh, to stop him from moving back further. “When I touched the stone...I completely restored the mana to the stone. You’re going to become something great, so just think of that as a first step.”

Albert stood up and hovered over Serra. “Just one thing. As the stone grows stronger, more of Oblivion will show in you.”

“What does that mean?” Eurich questioned rebelliously.

“Watch your temper,” Serra smiled.

“You’ll be fine. Just like the person that had it before you.” Albert assured.

“Listen!” Eurich exclaimed. “I’m not part of some plot. What about my choice!”

“We’re sorry you were born into this, but...danger is coming fast this way and we don’t have any other choice. If we did I promise you we would take it.”

“So where do we go from here? What do we do now?”

Serra smiled and crossed her legs. “You be the good boy you’ve always been. Albert and I will come clean.”

“Okay...” Eurich crossed his legs as well.

Serra and Albert stood up and walked to the arch over then and turned to Eurich.

“Vizard.”

Their eyes lit up and their bodies twirled as seal barriers blossomed below their feet. A gentle gust arose, scattering papers and slightly moving furniture.

Eurich held his forearm over his face to keep his hair and the minor debris from blinding him. He tried to speak, but he could not breathe. He felt as if he was drowning from the dense atmosphere. Squinting his eyes, he tried to look at them, but the light was too bright. All he could make out were their feet hovering above the ground.

Eurich lowered his arm from his eyes as the blinding light dissipated. “What just happened?”

“You can look,” a softer, gentler voice came from Serra. She walked towards him with her smooth hand out. Albert followed behind her, holding her shoulder.

Eurich was able to see after a brief period of high frequency blindness, but all he could do was gasp in astonishment.

“I...I...” He continued to try to speak, but words escaped him. His eyes closed and with a final breath of shock, he fell back.

The truth was too much for him to handle.

“Eurich!” Serra yelled as he slumped, unconscious to the hard wooden, floor.

“Well, that was expected,” Albert laughed, grabbing the stone from off the table. He walked over to Eurich, then bent over and picked him up, cradling him in his arms. “I’ll just take him to his room.”

“Be careful...”

“I know, I know.”

He walked to Eurich’s room and laid him down on the messy sheets of his bed.

Albert let out a sigh and rubbed his forehead before moving Eurich’s hair out of his face.

“I’m sorry, boy. We never intended this for you. Look at me talking when I know you can’t hear me...” He laughed again. “...But I want you to know that you are doing a fine job, and we could not have asked for a more perfect son.” He placed a light sheet over Eurich, set the stone over him, and went back downstairs to Serra.

“What do we do from here?” Albert walked over to the wall next to the staircase. Before him were old photos from Eurich’s childhood.

“I’m not actually sure,” replied Serra. “But if we change back, we can convince him it was just a dream.”

“You know we can’t do that. This needs to happen,” he said firmly.

“There’s been no change in him yet,” Serra bargained. “Maybe we can prevent this.”

“We can’t. Just have a little more faith in the boy. He’ll do right, even if his destiny is

cursed. He'll live through this and become a stronger man for it.”

“Guess it’s not my choice anymore...” Serra stormed off into the living room to lie on the couch.

Albert sighed and began reading his newspaper again. “These periodicals get more interesting by the decade.”

Eurich tossed and turned in his bed.

“Eurich, embrace your destiny, quick...” a gentle voice floated in his head.

“Syrehnity, is that you?” Eurich plunged deeper into his dream world. He saw her lavender eyes, shrouded in smoke.

“Yes.” She completely masked herself in the smoke around her, still, leaving behind teal sparks. “Your mana is the strongest I’ve come across. Except for the girl, that is.”

“What girl?”

She giggled. “The one with the eyes filled with mana.”

“Syrehnity, come out. We need to talk.” The only thing around him was grey smoke.

The glitter-like specks of lighting rushed towards Eurich, but he quickly fanned them away as they approached his face.

“Behind you.” She tapped on his shoulder.

Eurich turned around, but she was gone. “Why won’t you explain this to me?”

“Hours have gone by.” She appeared briefly in front of him and touched his face, then disappeared again. “We’ll talk when you have free time, I promise.”

“Wait! Wait!” He ran in the direction of her voice and leftover sparks, trying to catch her. He wanted to at least get a good glimpse of her. “I just want to talk...just wait!”

Just seconds afterward, Eurich woke in a sweat. His sheets were rumpled from all the tossing and turning. “This is getting repetitive...” He sighed and looked over to his alarm clock.

“OH MAN! It’s one-fifteen! I’m so late.” He vaulted out of his bed and grabbed his bag, not caring that his clothes were still on. He just hoped to get downstairs and not be scolded by his parents.

He crept out of his room and lightly trod down the stairs. He pulled out his phone and hovered his finger over Jason’s name.

“Aren’t you up late?” Albert asked from the den as Eurich approached the door.

Eurich flinched and turned slightly.

“Another weird dream,” he laughed, trying to throw the focus off him. “You and mom did this thing and got younger-” Eurich halted when he turned the corner. There they were, Serra and Albert in their thirties as if nothing had changed.

“Eurich, son,” Albert said as he watched Eurich robotically walk toward the dining room table. “Your food is getting cold.”

There was orange juice waiting for him at the table, as well as sandwiches, Eurich just sat and ate without saying a word. This would be the only time the he didn’t mind the silence. The experience was just as awkward as Serra had imagined, though she hoped for it one day

“I’ll just take your plate...” Serra noticed Eurich was done. She stood and extended her hand to take the dish from him.

Eurich smacked her hand, threw the dish to the ground, and hastily moved towards the door.

“Intensify!” Serra yelled as she held her palm to the door. A glass-like barrier erected and now stood in Eurich’s way.

Eurich dashed into the living room and immediately stood behind the table next to the

main window.

"I thought we already did this," Albert laughed and began walking into the living room.

"If I'm that important, why am I still alive?" Eurich immediately paused when he saw Serra's translucent imaging fading in from the wall across from him.

"We would love to explain it to you," she said with an aquatic-like voice. Her eyes fiercely emitted orange light, but the rest of her body was clear, fading in and out.

"Not gonna get the chance," Eurich began unlocking the window, ready to escape.

"Albert, if you would," Serra's image was fading.

"Alright," he nodded and agreed. "*Just as stubborn as his father...*"

"Wait, what!" Eurich felt as if something was going to go wrong soon. He knew and felt a strange sensation around him.

"Limit!" Albert shouted, releasing a clear magic that created a bound Eurich.

"Dammit, that hurts!" Eurich fell to the ground and immediately scurried to the wall.

"I'm listening."

Serra's image faded, then she physically walked in from the den. "You have to have faith in us and your developing powers. You know we won't hurt you." Serra wrapped her arms around his neck and hugged him.

"Take off the spell, Albert," she instructed.

"Oh...yeah." He waved his hand and Eurich regained control of his mobility.

Eurich stretched as he got up. He sat down on the long sofa and exhaled.

Serra gave him his space, sitting at least arm's length away from Eurich.

"Were...were my real parents like you, too?" Eurich hastily jumped to the question.

"No," Serra responded. "Not exactly like us. We were born sorcerers and your dad was a dragoon, just like you." Her voice became soft again, and then stern. "Your mother was human, never destined to control mana."

"What happened to them?" He hesitantly asked. Based on the look on Serra's face, nothing good became of them. He patiently awaited the uneasy answer.

Serra sighed and forced out an explanation. "Your mother died shortly after you were born. You had an amazing mass of mana from the time you were in the womb, nothing like a... human like her could handle. Your father wanted nothing more than to be with you...regretfully, he is still in Samsera..."

"Samsera...? So my dream was real!"

"What dream?" Albert questioned sternly. "*Dreams should never include that name... Syrehnity,*" he thought uncertainly to himself.

"About Samsera, even before I started reading the book, Syrehnity was telling me-?"

"Syrehnity?" Serra mumbled.

"You say something, mom?"

"No...nothing."

"Oh," Eurich continued. "The dreams with her seem pretty real."

"I'm not so sure of that," Albert joined in. "Dreams are still fiction, but this is very real."

"I wouldn't distrust anything at this point," Eurich looked at them both with easy eyes, "How old are you really?"

"Far too old," Albert laughed. "Two thousand and twenty three."

"Two...thousand?" Eurich breathed, touching his stone.

"Our age isn't a miracle." Albert continued. "You'll learn how to use mana and you'll be in control of your life."

“Makes sense,” Eurich said amiably. “I read that in the book—so what is Samsera?”

“Samsera is a realm that exists betwixt this one. Kind of like a parallel dimension.”

“If this is my destiny, then I guess I have no choice.” He figured that this was the defining moment of his life, but he still had one more question to ask. “What’s his name? What’s he like?”

“Hmm... Aster Aurion,” Albert replied. “I can’t really say what he’s like because he never spoke about anything other than our goal.”

“So... nothing?” Eurich asked.

“Well, he’s older than we are,” Albert laughed. “We’ll tell you his story, if you’re ready.”

Eurich grabbed his onyx, pulled it off from around his neck, and set it on the living room table. He was hesitant to keep the jewel around his neck, especially not knowing the full story behind it. “Don’t want to take a chance of blowing you guys up with it...”

“I think I’m ready.” Eurich looked him square in the eyes.

“Are you sure?” Serra asked again for confirmation.

“Doesn’t matter, right?”

“Hmm... alright then.” Albert combed his fingers through his short, golden hair and moved next to Serra. He cleared his throat and smiled at Eurich. “I’ll make it as true as possible without revealing too much,” he whispered to Serra.

Serra scowled at Albert, still not agreeing with the way Eurich had to find out. She grabbed Eurich’s hand and halfheartedly smiled. “We’ll try not to bore you too much with the details.”

6. Aster

Albert faced Eurich with his hands clasped together and a smirk on his face. “I’m glad you’re taking this easy.”

“I’ve had practice...” Eurich had confidence in smiling. No one knew completely about his dreams.

“That’s my boy,” Albert laughed softly and untangled his fingers. “I know you don’t know a lot about Samsera, but we’re going to tell you all you need to know.”

“First,” Eurich began, looking at Serra. “What is Samsera—I mean, in the book it says that it’s another world, but what does it have to do with me?”

“That’s really hard to explain,” Serra answered. “I guess I can say that Samsera is another realm that lives right beside this one...” Serra stumbled over her words. She could not believe she had once lived there and lacked the ability to explain what it was.

Albert sat back, watching Serra fail at an explanation. He wanted to help, but he did not think that Serra, of all people, would have any difficulty. He cleared his throat, saving her from seeming ignorant in front Eurich.

“Serra,” Albert said. “We may just have to show him what it was like back then...” That was a last resort, but they wanted nothing more than for Eurich to embrace the past.

“Show me?” Eurich repeated.

“Do you think you can handle it?” Albert asked as Serra got up to sit next to him.

Serra smiled, then quickly answered for him. “Yes...I know he can!”

“Okay then, fine,” Eurich hunched over, brushing his elbows against his knees. “What will I see?”

“Us...” Albert answered lowly. “Your father, Samsera.”

“Why all that?”

“Because ‘all that’ is your legacy,” Serra answered callously. She shut her eyes and when they opened, orange light bled out like she was being possessed.

Eurich jumped back in his seat.

“Eurich!” Albert raised his arm, signaling him to be calm. “Just let this happen.”

Eurich composed himself and sat quietly, still feeling a little uneasy about everything.

“Eurich, we were both seventeen when our lives took a turn—just like you,” Albert was speaking with uncanny nostalgia.

The walls, the couches, the stairs, as well as everything else Eurich could see began to disappear. His eyes widened as he looked around. Grass sprouted where the carpet was and the walls and ceilings became the sky.

Albert said no with his head as Eurich tried to stand. “You must listen and not interrupt.”

Eurich was not sure what was happening, but he knew he could trust his father. He had no choice but to sit back and watch his house transform into their lives—two thousand years ago.

“Eurich,” Albert continued. “I have to chant a spell to show you this...so please just sit there and listen.”

“Okay...” Eurich said after Albert’s eyes started glowing as well.

“Albert!”

Eurich turned sharply, surprised by that voice. It could not have been Serra because she looked barely conscious and it was not Albert. The voice was that of a teenage girl.

“Albert!” The girl yelled again.

Eurich laughed to see that Albert was still getting scolded that way back then. Once he recognized the tone of voice, he knew that she could only be Serra. She looked the same, same length golden hair and small frame.

“She looks almost like Raine...” Eurich whispered to himself. He could not believe what he was seeing. “I didn’t know Serra looked like Raine when she was younger.” Everything was pretty much the same, aside from her emerald green eyes.

“Albert,” Serra yelled again, this time impatiently. “Stop being so lazy and get up! The crusade won’t finish itself.”

“But I’m so tired,” Albert said in his defense.

“Nope, up you go!” She kept poking him until he agreed. “Being stubborn will only get you poked more.”

“You win...” He sat up and sighed, staring into the permanently dusky sky. The sky was a blend of blue and purple and the land around him was fertile and lush. Though they were in the clearing of a forest; that was what they called home.

“We still have a while to go, Serra,” he complained. He stood up and pressed his face against Serra’s, caressing her golden hair and nudging her cheek with his nose. “Aster said we could break...”

“Hmm...still lazy I think.” Serra said, gently pushing him away. It was amazing how much similar she and Raine were.

“We are going to set out when the second moon starts to fall,” a deep voice came from the direction of where they set up camp.

“Aster!” Albert called out happily.

He walked to them, proudly boasting his muscular frame and the onyx stone that hung around his neck.

“Aster!” Albert rushed to him, huffing. “Can you tell Serra that you were gonna let us rest?”

Aster turned his back to him and walked over to Serra. “I did say that, but you both should realize how much training you have left to do.” He watched as their happy faces turned disgruntled in a matter of seconds. “You two are very talented, I’ll admit that, but becoming lazy won’t make you any stronger.”

“But...” Albert faced his head down.

“I know, Albert,” Aster smiled. “You’re a teenager and want to be treated like one.”

“But if you know that, why break us like this?”

“Because...” he began, voice trailing. “It’s unfortunate you live in this time...”

“It’s not our faults!” Albert yelled.

“Albert, calm down...” Serra grabbed his arm and held it to her chest. “You’re getting hot.”

Aster did not want to be that hard on them, but they had a huge task to complete in a small amount of time. He looked at Albert’s unbiased fist, determining it was only a matter of time before Albert tried to strike him. They both were like his own children, but it seemed that no matter what he did, he could never make Albert happy.

“For now,” Aster said coldly. “Take a break now and we’ll still get there in time.”

No one could tell if he was being serious or not. His expression rarely changed.

“Go on,” he reiterated. “But when I return, you’d better be prepared to leave.”

“That’s fine,” Albert did not show any gratitude at all.

“Hmph...” Aster walked away as the wind began to pick up. “I might take you both to

Laguna if you behave well.”

“Laguna!” Serra repeated to Albert.

“I heard,” he wanted to go just as much as Serra, but he did not want to show that Aster had an upper hand on him. “I wanted to take you to Laguna alone, when this is over.”

“How romantic. I’ve never been to a city in the sky...” She shuddered.

“First time for everything, right?” He smiled, then kissed her on the cheek.

They sat down, both looking intently at the six moons that were waning in the sky. The breeze was calm and the trees provided ample shade.

“Looks like one moon is going down...” Albert said regretfully. More moons down meant he would have to do more work. “Only five to go...”

“The six moons fall from darkness, then take their rightful place in the heavens. There is a lesson in humility from this.” Aster gazed into the sky as well, speaking to Albert without looking at him.

“Aster, when did you get here?”

“I never said how long of a break I would give.” Aster looked disappointed again, but then again, it was a natural look for him. “We have to leave. Meet me at the tent.” Without even as much as a wave, he walked away.

Albert stood up and stomped around. “Aster is such a tight-ass! He’s never happy. It’s always train this and destroy that and...don’t die. Would it kill him to say hello to me?”

“Albert...c’mon. He did let us rest a while longer, and didn’t you see him smile earlier? We were not the first choice on his list, but we have to make him proud that he ended up choosing us. Side by side...right?”

“Side by side...no harm comes to us in pairs.” Albert blushed, knowing the origin of the phrase.

“Yep!” she blushed, then pulled him down with her.

“Didn’t you hear Aster? We have to meet him soon.”

“Well,” she said while patting the grass. “Between you and me, I think Aster is grumpy because he has to plan everything out. He needs a break just like us.”

“You don’t think he’ll mind it?”

“Not at all!” Serra assured, fidgeting to lie on his chest. “Plus, this keeps the mana up,” she giggled.

Albert had not noticed how tired she looked. He brushed her hair away from her face, as her low voice became a gentle snore. He smiled and looked into the sky, turning his head before falling asleep, himself.

“Do you think you can win?” Aster’s voice traveled through Albert’s head.

“Win what?” He questioned.

“I am stronger than you. She is stronger than you.” Aster’s eyes were piercing and hurtful.

“Don’t patronize me!” Albert screamed as Aster faded into the smoke of his surroundings.

“Pity...” Aster continued.

“Aster!” Albert’s eyes shot open, waking in a sweat after three hours of painful dreaming. “...Can’t sleep.” He moved Serra’s arm off his chest and buried his face in his hands. Groggy and restless, he could not think straight, because he only had one thing on his mind. He looked up to the sky. “Four moons, looks like I’ve still got some time.”

Serra slept peacefully, still smiling as if she was having a perfect dream. “Don’t...go.”

Her eyes were closed, but her voice carried on between breaths.

He slowly moved over to her and kissed her on the cheek.

“I’ll be back,” he whispered. “I have to try and become stronger, for all of us.”

“*I’m nothing compared to Aster...*” There were no other thoughts in his head as he walked to Aster’s tent. The wind was just right, his strength was restored, the only thing there was left to do was face him before Serra awoke

“Aster!” Albert called, robustly standing in front of the tent with his chest out. “Aster, are you in here? I want to ascend.”

There was no answer.

“I hope you don’t mind if I look around, then.” He looked around, making one final check before he intruded upon Aster’s quarters. “I’ll just find a Lost Arts book and study alone.”

Albert jumped and turned quickly after a subtle breeze blew a paper across his shoulder. His eyes shut quickly, he was afraid Aster had appeared behind him. Lucky for him, no one was there, but along with reaching for the paper, he stumbled across a rare piece, something he’d wanted to look at for months.

“Hmm...Noland’s book.” It was strange because it was just lying on the floor. Normally Aster put it away with a protection spell on it. Of course, Albert took this as a rare and fated opportunity. He opened the book and carefully studied what Aster wanted to keep him from—other dragoons.

“Wow...” Albert really took in every page, but something else beside him caught his attention. It was Oblivion’s stone around a necklace. It was also unprotected. He moved slowly toward the stone, getting closer with feint steps to not trigger the alarm system on the stone that only Aster could hear.

“A dragoon hex...this close to me?” Albert swallowed roughly as he approached the onyx. He was careful not to make any big movements, the radiance that pierced through the loose threads of the tent was already making the amethyst smoke shimmer and interchange inside. He put his interest of the stone aside. There was no use pondering over it since Aster was the only one who knew how to activate its powers. He went back to the book and noticed something else, a piece of loose paper hanging out like a bookmark. He instantly removed the note and began to read:

*A race is only as good as its winner
A chase is only as good as its obstacles
The strongest is kept in balance by the weakest
And... my flame will devour the Sand*

Albert did not know what to make of it. From the text, he figured something was ailing Aster, but he could not figure out why Aster never spoke with them about personal things. He continued to intensely stare at the note, as if it actually made sense to him.

“Curious are we?”

Albert’s breath was taken away by fear. He immediately closed the book and tossed it whence it came, along with the note.

“Your insolence is beginning to bother me!”

Albert turned slowly and instead of his gaze meeting Aster’s, he was greeted by flowing blonde hair and a cheerful smile. “I do a good impression, no?”

“Serra!” Albert exhaled, eyes bold.

“Ha, you thought I was Aster!” she alleged, chuckling under her hand.

“What was that?”

“It’s a spell I’ve been working on. Makes me sound like others...sure fooled you.”

“I guess it could’ve been a lot worse,” he said, walking carelessly to her.

“Yeah, we’d better get washed up. Aster’s gonna come for us soon.”

“Heh...maybe you’re right, the third moon is almost down.” He grabbed Serra’s hand and walked out the tent. They were headed towards the river.

“Ah, Can’t you smell it? The water is so clean.” Serra rejoiced, skipping to the bank.

“Hold on!” Albert halted. “Did you hear that?”

“Hear what? You complaining again?” She laughed.

“That.” He turned sharply to see Oblivion’s container pierce through the roof of the tent. The sound of the stone moving through the air pitched a high frequency that annoyed him slightly. The hex was being drawn towards a high cliff about thirty feet behind them. The overhang eclipsed the sunlight and quickly drew Albert’s attention.

“Who is that? On the cliff.” He held his hand over his eyes to block the light.

“I don’t know,” Serra responded. “I haven’t learned to read mana that well yet.” She squinted at the silhouette. “Th-that’s Aster!”

“Aster? What is he thinking?” Albert gritted his teeth and ran as fast as he could toward the cliff. He could not help feeling responsible for troubling him.

Aster had no shirt on and his auburn hair flawlessly blew in the wind. The look in his eyes, the sheer look of fearlessness showed some kind of poise. He raised his arms over his head and moved closer to the edge of the cliff.

“There’s no water there, he’ll die!” Albert shouted as Aster dove in perfect form.

The onyx pulled itself towards Aster and began producing magnificent amethyst smoke seals around him. Aster reached out to grab the stone as gravity pulled him closer to a hard death. The seals around him widened and became brighter.

Aster roared with his increase in mana. He let his body flow naturally with no strain, almost lying down as the light around him dimmed. He fell at an increased velocity. Oblivion’s armor enveloped his body, starting at his feet, but in seconds, became his entire being. The black dragoon with a hint of purple emerged from the smoke and gracefully spread his wings, catching himself before he crashed to his death.

Albert and Serra both looked in awe. Though they had both seen his transformation before, they had never seen him perform it live. They were speechless. The absolute power of his transformation stunned them. Never in their lives had they seen a more pristine act.

Serra’s eyes were fixated on Aster. She watched as he flew, how his hair blew in the wind, how his eyes squinted as the jet stream irritated them. Nothing escaped her gaze.

“Show me up again, why don’t you...” Albert looked down to the ground. He was absolutely furious that Serra was lost in a person that he could not become.

“Did you say something?” Serra grabbed his arm gently and gave him a smile.

“No...” He barely replied with a nod and focused his attention back to Aster.

Aster remained hundreds of feet above them. Even from such a high altitude, he could see that something was bothering Albert. The utter look of hate in his eyes was a presence that was felt and not seen.

“You need to learn to deal with these things, boy.” Aster flew to a nearby tree and grabbed three fruits, then landed in front of Albert. He extended his hand to offer Albert a yellow apple, but it was smacked from his hand. The only thing Albert had to offer was a piercing glare.

“I’m not hungry,” Albert said coldly.

“You need to eat, to keep your strength up. You are only as good as the nutrition you receive, now eat.”

Albert shrugged, “Don’t think you can buy me off with a forbidden fruit. I wish you would just go away sometimes.”

Aster flinched back, shocked to hear an answer of that caliber from Albert. Instead of an indignant reaction, he smiled. He rejoiced because Albert was finally standing up for himself.

“I won’t force you.” Aster kneeled down and placed the apple at his feet. “It will be here if you decide you want it.”

He offered Serra an apple as well, but her gaze was too preoccupied to accept it. Her stare was lustful and she was giving him compliments without saying a word. Her face told it all.

“What’s the matter Serra? You look like you’ve just seen a live dragoon transformation.” Aster said jokingly as he bit into his apple. “Being the strongest makes me weaker than you... Albert?”

“Yes?” He avoided eye contact.

“You don’t realize how much you have over me. A lovely sorcerer that has not gone erroneous, youth, and morals. I envy you. Your need to prove something will bury you...” Aster took a few steps toward Albert and touched his shoulder. “Don’t die because of this.”

“Die-?”

“Insolent child.” Aster turned around sharply and went inside his tent.

“What the hell was that about?” Albert’s eyebrows narrowed to the middle of his forehead.

“Don’t rock the boat any more than it needs to be.” Serra clutched her arms around his body. “Don’t let it get you down. He respects you.”

“You really call that respect?”

“I do.”

“Well, if you think so...”

“I do,” she said again, then smiled. “Now, we can go wash off. I’m a little sweaty now. I forgot how hot that dragoon’s mana was.” She grabbed Albert’s arm and skipped to the lake, where she had wanted to go in the first place.

The water was perfectly blue, reflecting the harmless nature of the atmosphere. There was a slight breeze that rippled the water and guided fallen leaves. The reflection cast of the moons made the water glow to have an almost white hue to it. Serra’s face lit up when she saw water, it was the perfect spot to relax, considering it gave ample shade from the heat overhead.

“Just gotta give it a touch of clean,” Serra said as she walked aloof to the riverbed.

“A touch of clean? You mean-?”

“Uh huh, I finally learned that antiseptic spell! I’ve been trying really hard so I could show you.”

“Really? Hell, let me see!” He smiled the biggest he had that day. He knew that Serra had been trying to perfect that spell for months. He really wanted to see it in action, even more so because it was such a large body of water to work with.

“Here it goes...” She rubbed her hands together and closed her eyes, exhaling slowly. “Limpia sterileé.” She released her hands and waved them toward the body of water. With the flick of her wrist, the water changed from a crystal blue to a tantalizing, minty green. “Smells like spearmint, yes?”

“Sure does!” Albert had never been more proud of her.

Serra turned away from Albert and began swaying her hips, loosening the threads of clothing around her waist, easily slipping her tattered skirt off.

“Don’t look!” Serra snapped as she took off her blouse and ponytailed her hair. She was down to her bra and panties, which was still naked according to her. The water just looked so inviting that she had no choice but to jump in.

“My eyes are closed.” He laughed, but was still peeking through his fingers. After she was done undressing, he watched her innocently flail around, splashing nature’s blessings onto her face.

“Albert!” Her eyes lit up slightly and her cheeks reddened. “Undeviate!” She chuckled, using her mana to send a wave of water in his direction. “I said no looking!”

“No you didn’t.” Albert took off his soaked shirt. “Implosiate.” The water from his body and drenched clothes lifted and formed into the ball he used to toss back at Serra.

“Now we’re both clean!” She chuckled then turned around to rinse the water through her hair.

“Glad you both are having fun.” A voice came from the trees behind them.

“Aster...” Albert cringed, the expression in his face quickly falling from infatuation to uncertainty within seconds.

“Do you have a second?” Aster’s voice was compelling, almost persuasive.

“I...Do I have a choice?” He tried not to sweat and cave, but Aster’s mana was so heated and dense. He was intimidated, though he tried his hardest to keep a straight face. Every breath Albert took suddenly felt like a fifty-pound burden.

“You have a choice. Now, do you have a second?” Aster walked further into the tress, away from Serra, insinuating that he wanted Albert to follow.

“Sure...” Albert was lost for words. He did not want to look him in the eyes, but for once Albert wanted to prove to Aster that he was no coward.

“Do you know the difference between love and astonishment?” He was tossing his half-eaten apple in his left hand. His stature was calm, without his dragoon armor.

“Love is when she...that person enjoys everything that you do.” Albert’s voice started to rise a little. “Basically praising the ground you...that person walks on. Love is astonishment!”

Aster knocked him on the forehead softly, almost like a tap, kneeling to be at equal.

“Have you learned anything? First of all, I want you to understand that you can talk to me about absolutely anything. I will not bite...much. Don’t let your flawed judgment overcome you.”

“But-”

“Not done yet. Secondly, your brain must not be getting enough blood. Either that or your mana is out of whack. That is not what love is...and I think you already know that.”

Albert sighed, “Love is-”

Aster interrupted again, “Love is you and Serra, do not argue this with me. I have lived a full four lifetimes and I know what love is when I see it. Sure, she may be fascinated with me, but what you two have is rare...and that does not mean that you have to go and try to become like me, because she likes you plenty.” Aster spoke in a calming voice that stood ground as superior, as if he knew everything Albert was going through.

“Aster...I don’t know what to say”

“Well, here is a thought...don’t say anything, just act and react, in a proactive manner, of course. You would be surprised how basic instincts aid you in life.”

Albert’s eyebrow rose at the wisdom he received from his mentor. At the same time, he could not help but feel that he was a burden to him, as if it were a waste of mana even talking to

him. He looked back over to the stream where Serra was washing her face. She tossed the purified water into the air and held it there, making it drop over her like rain. She danced under the threads of liquid, so careless and graceful.

“That’s the look,” Aster commented. “That’s the look that tells you it’s all worthwhile.”

Albert could not take his focus away from Serra. She was the siren that spellbound him, the alluring fixation he could not live without.

“What about you?” Albert asked.

“What about me?”

“Where is your court? I am almost positive you have a woman of your own.”

Aster blushed, but soon cleared his rosy cheeks with the seriousness of his voice. “Yes, you are correct in your assumption. I have a lady whose power still confounds me.”

“Then why isn’t she here helping with the crusade...if you don’t mind me asking.”

“Of course I don’t mind...I promised her, as I looked into her lavender eyes, that I would return to her at home. I did not wish for her to come because she has seen enough death and destruction on her journey to become who she is. She deserves the rest.”

“Well, I would like to meet her one day,” Albert said eagerly. He had satisfaction of knowing the Aster was not the heartless brute that he thought he was.

“You will,” Aster reassured. “Serra has already met her, and to be honest, I don’t think she liked her much.”

Serra stopped dancing in the water, and the droplets she held in the air were overwhelmed by gravity.

“What are you two looking at?” she chuckled before running over to Albert and giving him a hug, not caring that she was still ‘naked.’ “I think we need to get going before another moon sets.”

Aster was happy that she was showing initiative, and Albert meanwhile was hypnotized by Serra’s refreshed image.

“I think you need to put some clothes on first.” Albert tried not to stare at her too closely.

“A gift, for the both of you.” Aster started walking toward the tent. “Follow me.”

Serra grabbed her clothes, covering herself, but not putting them on. “C’mon, Albert.” She pulled him by the hand and followed Aster, barely holding her clothes up with other.

“I’m surprised you didn’t notice these while you were...snooping around, Albert.” He pulled open the drape and walked into the hut.

“How did you-?”

“You’re just too predictable.” Aster reached under the small table, ravaged with scattered papers. He pulled out two boxes, both brown and overrun with dust.

“Well, open them.”

“Ooh, presents!” Serra quickly removed the lid from her box, and out of curiosity opened Albert’s box as well. “New clothes!” She jumped ecstatically and immediately ran outside the tent to try them on.

“Try yours on, my court made them for you. I hope they fit.” Aster picked up Albert’s box and presented it to him.

“You didn’t have to...I was okay with my linens. It’s just a crusade.” Albert held up a pair of tight-fitting brown pants and a blue robe.

“Go join Serra. Put them on and come back inside, I’ll explain.”

“Okay...I’ll be back.” He walked out of the tent, surprised to see that Serra was already fully dressed. She wore a fluffed, slightly armored, corset that was of the same color scheme as

Albert's clothing.

"You're a little late. Hurry and get yours on." Serra pestered, twirling in her new skirt.

"Yeah...about that..." Albert stared blankly at his clothes.

"You need help, don't you?"

"Just a bit, if you don't mind." He laughed a little.

"Well, get over here." She gave him the direction and the help he needed to get his clothes on, and it looked brilliant of top of that. She was happy. Dressing Albert gave her a sense of trust.

"All better. You look exceptional!" Serra fluttered her eyelashes and kissed him on the cheek.

"You two probably feel that..." Aster said, walking out of the tent. "A little more energized?"

"Yes...they feel amazing." Albert clenched his fist tightly. "What is this?"

"Traces of sephrym in the threading. It will boost your magic. You two are strong, but you will need it to bring me...whatever comes our way, down."

"I'm unstoppable now!" Albert rejoiced, jumping carelessly into the air, cracking his fingers and neck. "Not unstoppable." Aster corrected, almost instantly proving him wrong by messing up his hair in a headlock. "See?"

"Not fair." Albert pushed him away and raised his fist.

"Stengrad is out next stop, a community of humans with no ties to mana." Brushing off the push from Albert, he instantly changed the tone of his voice from lightly joking to firm.

"Isn't that town forbidden for people like us?" Serra cringed slightly.

"Yes, but that town is between us and Chaos' fortress. It should not take too long. First we'll pass through the Duragon Forest."

"I hate Duragon," Albert complained. "Why can't you just fly us over? Or teach us a spell that'll teleport us or something?"

"To answer the first question," Aster began. "You're getting heavy and we don't have the time to master such a spell."

"Fine..." Albert followed closely behind Aster, with Serra in hand, all the way to Duragon Forest. They moved swiftly, stumbling over toppled trees and dense grass. The forest held little obstacles for them since all the enchanted creatures were wiped out when the crusade started. The remains of what once lived in the forest existed as remnants of colored mana that occupied the atmosphere. It was a sad sight, especially for Serra. She hated unnecessary death just as much as she hated the crusade.

After just minutes of swift travel through Duragon, Stengrad was in plain sight.

"Well, let's go in!" Albert walked towards the stone archway that would lead him inside.

"Stop!" Aster called out, halting Albert's movement. He grabbed his arm and yanked him to the ground. "Illustrate!" He waved his hand over the gate, showing a clear, free flowing gel. "Albert, no more mistakes like this. Be careful. One step into that gel would alert them that we are here. Avoiding confrontation is ideal."

"Stupid war," Serra was upset at the fact that she would have to sneak into a dangerous situation. "Why can't we all get along?" Pouting and ranting was an escape for her.

"We need to find Chaos," Aster said in a stern voice. "This is important because he has the power to end the war--power that I cannot even begin to fathom. To be honest, I have no idea why humans would wage war on every magical race, it's suicide."

Albert looked to Aster. "Manadrives are kept in human societies. I know they have one."

“Manadrive?” Serra was curious. She had never heard that term before.

“A man made item that steals mana from whatever it hits...a shame they had to invent something like that.”

“Mana is the essence of anything that is living. Taking away one’s mana is taking away one’s life.” Aster explained. “To think...all of this could have been avoided if humans knew how to control their mana.”

“Humans are cruel, this crusade was started because of the jealousy of those damn people...I hate them!” Serra shouted.

“Serra, don’t speak that way!” Albert scolded. “Don’t forget that we are all basically humans, it’s just our mana descendants are not the same. That’s the only thing that makes us different from them.”

“I’m sorry...it’s just that I haven’t heard any good things about humans. Lives are being lost during this war, and it is all because of them.”

Aster looked over to Albert with an ambiguous look on his face, signaling that he needed to tend to Serra. It was good that she was hysterical--it meant Albert was the only one to calm her down.

“Serra, I know this situation upsets you, but please don’t blame them for everything. There are still a few good souls,” Albert empathized, looking her in the eyes and holding her chin up with his finger. “Don’t you remember Alice?”

“Alice...” she breathed, turning away from Albert. “Alice...was different, she wasn’t like the rest of the humans...we were born together. She and I shared the same heart beat.” Serra started to tear up. “My childhood friend...we were inseparable until...”

“Alice was killed by a sorcerer.” Albert finished her sentence.

“I know. I just don’t get it. Who would want to kill her? She was so pure.”

Albert embraced her tightly and wiped the tears from her face. “We are all plenty evil, there are others who shared the same ideals as Alice. There are even humans on our side. You don’t need to blame anyone anymore for what happened to her...now please, cheer up.”

Aster walked over to Albert and touched him on the shoulder. “Job well done,” he whispered. “We go in at night, when the moons are clear.”

“Serra...Keep lookout with Albert, I’ll set up the tent.” He moved a good distance away from them, far from the gate, but close enough to monitor any action.

“Do you think we’re ready?” Albert asked with uncertainty.

“To meet Chaos...I think it’ll be a relief to sleep in for once.” Serra hugged him tighter and smiled. “You’re scared. Your heart is beating really fast.”

“Just anxious...”

“The tent is ready, Serra. If you would, please?” Aster walked behind them.

“Have you learned that spell yet?” Albert questioned.

“We’ll see.” She walked close to the tent and took a deep breath. “Decepto.” Her eyes lit up with intense orange light and slowly shrouded the tent into invisibility.

“Good work, Serra, we’ll hide out inside until nightfall. Make as little noise as possible.” Aster walked tenderly inside the tent, leaving them behind to follow.

“You’re learning spells so fast. I feel a little left behind...” Albert’s eyes wandered the ground.

“Don’t, you can do many things that I can’t. Let’s go inside, we could use the rest until night time.”

“Right.” Albert walked with his hands in his pocket into the tent.

Serra followed behind shortly. Soon after, they all fell asleep under the concealment of her spell.

All of the six moons were down and the sky instantly changed to pitch black. It was quiet, just a few crickets rubbing legs.

“Albert...” She nudged him on his arm. “I can’t sleep...Albert, wake up.”

He was too deeply asleep to hear her call.

She peeked outside of the tent and gazed deeply into the twilight that lit up the night sky. She reached outside her tent and grabbed a stick, etching a heart shaped pattern into the ground.

“Albert and...Serra.” She smiled with her eyes barely open.

“Just a quick inspection, right?” A voice came from down the dusty road.

Serra gasped and instantly flinched back into the tent.

She saw two dragoons, both fully enveloped in dark armor. One was then was tall with a foreboding walk and the other was shorter, toned in stature like the tall one.

“No!” Serra screamed. The dragoons were about to walk straight through the gate.

“What was that?” questioned the tall one, but he saw no one.

“Ignore it.”

The shorter one stepped one foot into the gate.

“Rantyx!” Serra held her palm toward the two warriors and projected them deep into the forest, away from sight and from the impending swarm of humans.

“Dammit...they triggered the alarm.” It was silent, but gave off mana vibrations that Serra saw clear as day.

Within about a minute, a group of six humans inspected the area of the gate.

“Didn’t think I’d have to use this for a while,” said one of them. He held a manadrive, burning to use it.

Serra held her hand over her mouth to keep herself from making a noise. She was frightened and tried her best to contain it.

A loud burst of sound came from the forest. Trees toppled and birds scattered upward in a frightened attempt to escape.

The two dragoons rose from the fallen woods and flew high into the black night, angry that they had been attacked.

Serra did not know what to do. She hesitated, panicking almost. She looked over to Aster and Albert, wondering how they were still sleeping through the noise. Though she had little insight on what to do, the last thing she wanted to do was wake Aster. Things could have become messy. The impending recklessness made her want to close her eyes, but she could not help watching. The dragoons would deal with them swiftly, she thought, confident in their abilities.

“There they are!” What looked like the ringleader gave the instruction to fire at them. They shot arrows, but they were just deflected by the armor.

“Stop!” He retracted the order. “This will end in our subjugation.”

The two strange winged warriors went on the offensive, diving down quickly to strike.

The assailants below them ran as fast as they could to get away, but it wasn’t fast enough. Compared to the speed and velocity of the dragoons, they were easy prey. It seemed like it only took seconds to mercilessly kill the humans with their bare hands.

“I wouldn’t dare waste my mana on these...things.” The tall one stood superior. He turned his back to the gate, surely to boast his victory. “These insects get weaker and weaker by the day, our mana is not meant for them,” he said, while disgustedly looking at the blood that stained his armored gloves.

“You sure do know how to take them out, Riley,” said the shorter dragoon. The armor they both had on was a lustrous pitch-black that cloaked them in the darkness of a night without moons.

“Orders are to patrol the border,” said Riley. “But I say we get rid of the lot of 'em. These... people are worse than any plague I have seen.”

“What do you suppose we do?”

“This is why I do all the thinking, Simura. Our dragoon hexes are without elements, unlike the *five*. We will have to improvise and burn down this village.”

“Riley, I wonder why you haven't become an initial five, you're plenty strong.” He looked over in the direction of the invisible tent that Serra stayed hidden in.

She gasped as he walked in her direction. Serra's heartbeat shot louder than any cannon, the sound of her terrified heart drowning out any sounds in her surroundings. She could not even hear Simura's footsteps as he walked closer to her.

“What the hell are you looking for?” Riley asked impatiently.

“No-nothing, I just thought I saw something.” Simura walked back to join up with his partner.

Serra held her hand over her chest as though it would make the beating of her heart quieter. Letting out a sigh of relief, she went back to peek at the dragoons.

Riley reached for the quiver on his back and Simura reached into a satchel for a container of yellow oil, something for starting flames.

Serra had no idea what they planned to use it for, considering that they had no flint to spark the oil.

Simura rubbed the viscosity in his hands, held them in front of his face, and blew heavily. He spit fire into the air, shaping his hands to contain it. Behind the flame, Riley pulled out a bow and aimed to fire his arrow through the blaze to torch the village.

With the fire contained in the air, Simura walked over to where the manadrive lay beside the blood of the human that carried it. He picked it up, grazing its delicate bronze edges.

“You know,” Simura started to rant. “I will be a hero for burning down this village. Shrinking the pig population is something that should've been done a long time ago.”

“What do you mean? WE will be heroes. We will share the glory, don't worry.”

“I don't think so,” Simura said as he pointed the manadrive at Riley, firing it without warning.

The flash of light blinded him and instantly his armor retracted back into its dragoon article. The mana quickly flowed out of him, rendering his body lifeless. The energy that was left within him dispersed into the air, now a part of the atmosphere.

“Samsera will be proud to have your energy,” Simura's voice was empathetic and a tear began to flow down his hardened face.

“Why would he...?” Serra whispered to herself, still hiding from the horrific scene. She closed her eyes and said a silent prayer for him.

“Is it done?” A human peaked through the gate and walked towards him. “He was too relentless in his actions.”

“Yes...now for my payment!” demanded Simura. His voice was tainted with regret, but was still absolute.

“Sure thing.” He reached into a large satchel on his waist, quickly pulled out another manadrive, and instantly fired it.

With Simura's last fading breath, he said, “I thought...we had a deal.”

“Rule number one,” the human ridiculed. “We do not make deals with *things* like you.”

In seconds, Simura’s body broke down into its mana basics and dispersed among the air. There were no traces of the two. All that remained were their relics, Riley’s tiara and Simura’s opal earrings.

Serra cried, keeping her hand over her mouth to prevent any noise, but there was only so much she could do to hold the gasps. All she could hear was the frantic beating of her heart. Uncontrollable tears blinded her orange eyes, but the memories of what she saw would linger forever. She cried herself to sleep, easily using more mana to produce tears than spells.

The night was black and still. The gentle wind blew through the blades of grass and fireflies attempted to brighten the dark.

“Albert.” Just a couple hours later, Aster tugged him awake. “It’s time, we have to move now. Wake Serra.”

“I will...” Albert groggily answered.

Aster walked outside the invisible cloak and stretched.

Albert reached over to wake her, but he stopped, grazing over her body with his orange gaze.

“Your mana is crazed...” He licked his thumb and wiped the dry tears from her face. Her eyes opened slowly, looking Albert in his bold, orange eyes.

“Are you real?” she asked in a soft voice, almost a whisper.

“Yes,” he grabbed her hand put it over his heart. “I am as real as my heartbeat.”

Serra immediately jumped into his arms and ran her fingers through his hair. “I’m so glad, I saw-”

Albert put his finger over her mouth.

“I know what you saw, and there is no need for you to relive that by telling me.” He said calmly and warmly.

She grabbed Albert’s face and slowly placed her lips upon his and was soon lost into a world of passion. The emotion surging through her was overpowering, speaking with her body language instead of her words. Her hands slid down the threading on Albert’s pants.

He grabbed her hand and put it back to his face.

Serra grimaced a little, forcing her hand back down towards his lower region.

He pushed her away.

“Aster is waiting, Serra.”

“I...want this.”

“Serra, we’re almost done.” He smiled and grabbed her by the hand, leading her out of the tent.

“Galion!” Aster called out with a stern voice and matching face. Dark violet mana wrapped around his hand. The smoky mana molded together, raising a scythe with a large crescent shaped blade.

“Why is it that only dragoons are able to remotely call their weapons from anywhere?” Albert asked rhetorically.

“Get in position,” demanded Aster. He stood in front of the gate, while he directed the two to the opposite ends. “Encantus...now!”

Serra’s eyes lit up. “Encantus...Dix nae derez...”

Albert added to the two-part spell. “Ni dae me...”

They both held their palms to the upmost tip of the gate, producing a dim light at its summit. The incantation went on for about ten seconds. As the final words to the spell were said, enormous seals blossomed on the ground around the gate.

“Thank you.” Aster halfway smiled. “Get back, don’t want you visiting Dis quite yet.”

They backed up a safe distance away from the barrier that was glowing on the floor.

A pair of cadaverous arms ascended from the mana, quickly and quietly dragging the gate into the ground. The ground around the arms turned silver as they vanished, leaving behind the shape of the seal in its wake.

“Stay behind me.” Aster walked in first with his scythe ready by his side. “They are sleeping, no sudden noises.”

They crept through the village cautiously, weaving through the huts, careful not to walk too loudly or too fast.

“Reconnaissance, Serra.” Aster demanded in a whisper. “Your eyes’ ability to see mana will be of better use behind us.”

“Right...” She slowed her pace, looking all around for unusual mana activity.

“Albert, not too fast.” Aster grabbed his arm and pulled him back.

“I know what I’m doing.” Albert shook his arm free and jogged ahead.

“Albert, watch out!” she screamed.

Albert turned around, looking confused.

“What happened to being silent,” he smiled a little. He took a step forward and stepped on a mine that released a blinding light around his body, depriving him of most of his mana.

Throwing caution to the wind, Serra ran over to him, obviously not caring that it was highly possible that she could suffer the same fate.

“Sentify.” She waved her hand, erecting a barrier that would protect them from the impending harm.

“They were waiting.” Aster clenched his scythe tightly as an arrow shot past his face. “Serra...I’ll take care of this...” He turned around and ran toward the attackers, taking the preemptive and killing anyone that dared to approach him. His scythe was stained with the blood of many, but Aster didn’t seem to care. It was like killing was second nature to him.

Serra looked away. Her breaths were cut short and fearful, but she had no more tears left to cry. Shaking arms and a faster heartbeat did not stop her from holding the barrier on them.

“Manadrives out!” A large human yelled. They came out in bunches, each firing at Aster with less than accurate aim.

Aster stood still as the waves of counterfeit magic blew past him, not wanting to move to show their inaccuracies.

“Don’t mock us!” The large human screamed.

“Fine.” Aster allowed. He jumped into the air and activated the onyx stone, transforming into the mighty Dragoon Oblivion.

The blasts from the manadrives fired wildly, trying to mimic all of Aster’s twists and turns. Every shot was missed or evaded. They had no hope of hitting something that moved so majestically fast.

“Focus on the kids.” The leader raised his arm and demanded all the fire be directed at the barrier that sheltered Serra and Albert.

“No...” Aster hesitated on his way down to reach them. “*Her barrier isn’t strong enough to hold against those weapons...shit...*” His eyebrows met in the middle of his forehead and he sped up, trying to get to them before the faux magic did.

Serra sat helplessly next to Albert, watching both Aster rushing down towards her and the magic fast approaching her. She screamed and closed her eyes. A thud was felt pushing against her shield and her heart sped up again. After a few seconds, the pounding stopped. She slowly opened her eyes and looked up to see Aster huddled over her.

Aster's expression was sure, but cold. He knew his power and did not doubt it for a second.

"It's okay Serra." He half-heartedly smiled. "Dragoon wings can deflect this forged magic. You are safe." Aster said to assure her.

"Stop!" The leader raised his hand and gave the command. After a few stray shots, the firing completely halted.

Aster rose and faced the large group of cowardly men, holding his hands behind his back to signal Serra to keep up the barrier and not to move.

They backed away slowly, crunching the dead leaves at their feet. The leader had a remote device held high in his right hand.

"What do you plan to do with that?" Aster said it more like a ridiculing statement.

"I don't have words for you!" The button on the remote was pressed. With no remorse, he gave a large smirk.

Loud footsteps were heard coming from the forest where the two dragoons were killed. Trees toppled and a threatening roar filled the air.

"Looks like your time is up, dragoon." The leader was confident.

Aster took a defensive stance. He knew that what was coming could hit a lot harder than a group of rebellious humans. Getting ready for something big, he arched his eyebrows and tightened his grip on his scythe. His posture was absolute, standing more perfect than heaven's angels.

It made Serra question whether or not he was sent from grace. His demeanor was intimidating, but at the same time, it was safe.

A large celestial being stood there in the distance with a collar around its neck. The bindings pulsed and shocked as the leader held the button.

"Using that device to make that manataur fight for you...that's low," Aster scoffed.

"Shut up! Don't taunt me just because you can control mana. I'll do whatever it takes to prove we are above you."

The fourteen foot tall creature stood with a fearless demeanor. Its skin was crystalline, but flowing, like aura in glass. A tough hide was what it boasted, but the claws were more intimidating. Sadness lingered in its eyes. Even a brutal creature like that deserved a free will.

"Attack!" A secondary button of the remote was pressed. The collar released a large electrical surge throughout the beast. Agitated, it rushed down the narrow pathway to Aster.

Aster folded his wings, hunching down like he was going to take a running start. He dashed, releasing a purple flame from his wings that increased his velocity.

The speed at which they approached each other was massive.

Aster carefully held his scythe in front of him as he raced to the gruesome beast. Pumping mana into his muscles, he slashed down, wounding the crystalline brute, impaling the scythe deep into its thigh.

The creature let out a loud cry and bled multi-colored tears from its eyes and leg. It was significantly damaged, but Aster did not come out completely unscathed either.

The manataur did not cower after the hit. The crystalline beast knocked Aster back with equal force, causing him to uproot the grass to at least slow down.

Aster fell next to Serra's barrier.

"Are you okay?" Serra had one hand over Albert's chest, keeping his breathing in check. Aster did not respond.

He looked at her genuinely, disappointed by the fear he had placed in her eyes. His armor cracked at the core, where his stone was embedded. Coughing up blood and weakened, he was still determined to protect the two he was responsible for.

"Aster...you're bleeding!"

He looked over to her again, and again, he turned his head, saying nothing. He held the crack in his armor and took a second to catch his breath.

"I'm...fine, Serra..." He dug the scythe's rod into the ground, creating a crack that would hold him steady as he tried to get up. Panting heavily, the strength slowly returned to him. He staggered a little as he stood up straight.

A purple glint of light shone in Aster's eyes as he picked up his scythe, ready to continue the fight. He closed his eyes and a smoky, purple aura surrounded him. Power trailed along the blade of his scythe in amorphous tendrils.

He vigorously flapped his wings, taking off to remain stationary in the air. It seemed to be more to his benefit than another reckless charge.

The humans aimed their weapons at Serra's shield. Now that Aster was occupied, it would be easy for them to take a victory.

"Dammit..." Aster scoffed, then touched the tip of his blade. The pulsating mana around his scythe flickered in accordance with his now reptilian eyes.

The impulses sent from the scythe connected to his soul.

Aster tightened his grip and laughed maniacally. "It's over." He screamed.

The group below let down their weapons, looking up at the dark dragon.

The blade of his scythe was completely overcome with amethyst smoke.

"Aster...no..." Serra knew what was coming. She grabbed Albert's arm and put it over her shoulder, carrying him like dead weight. "We have to go honey...wake up." She turned around and looked in the sky, piercing through Aster's armor with her gaze. "*Unruly mana...*"

"Ha!" Aster swung his scythe, releasing the violet energy directly towards the manataur.

"Wake up, please." She set Albert back down, further away from the battlefield, slapping him in the face. The air grew cold and her face became pale as the mighty Galion highlighted the sky.

Chills ran up her spine. She turned around, frightened by the energy that was fired.

"There is no way...Aster did that." She never questioned his power, but what he did was more heartless than anything before. He cared too much for life to just destroy it like that. It was an unusually indifferent act from him.

Looking back to the battlefield, Serra was shocked. She covered her mouth with her hand and quickly turned away. The enormous head of the manataur was on the ground, severed from the rest of its dead body.

A pitiful, empathetic look came to her eyes as she looked back to Aster.

The same crazed expression was still on his face, and he still looked at the beast like he held a grudge. He spit on the ground and threw his scythe into the torso of the creature.

"Galion," Aster called once more. The dark mana once again filled his hand and his scythe appeared to him from out of the body of the manataur. He wiped the blood from his scythe on the crack of his armor. His stone lit up, turning the colorful blood into an alchemic reaction that sealed the crack shut.

The group below was in awe, not daring to attack him.

Aster floated down lightly and began walking towards Serra and Albert, not threatened by the remaining rebels. The crazed look on his face was gone. He knelt down just outside her barrier.

“Serra, are you okay? Looks like they did a number on Albert.” He smiled, then wiped his armored finger on her forehead.

Aster flinched suddenly, eyes wide open as he let out a gasp of pain.

“Aster...no...” She grabbed his face, almost crying. She caught him as his body fell on her. Now, she was taking care of two wounded men within her barrier.

“I’m fine...” His eyes turned reptilian once again, but he was still sane. He flinched again, letting out another gasp of pain.

Serra horrifically staggered with Aster. This time she was more scared, Aster’s blood splashed on her cheek.

“Serra, let me go.” Aster warned. That serious, almost crazed look was back on his face. He reached to his back and pulled out the arrow that he had just been shot with, in a vulnerable spot on his armor, as well as the arrow in his leg and shoulder.

He pushed himself off her, then rose to the air as high as possible and began concentrating a great deal of mana into his stone. A triangle shape was formed by his hands, around the onyx, slowly casting magic into the physical world.

Serra’s heart once again began beating in a loud, irregular rhythm. That look in Aster’s eye was all too common that night.

“Obliviate.” A ball of purple flames appeared before him. Without regard or remorse, he fired it at the group of remaining humans.

Serra put her hands up to the top of her barrier, in an attempt to strengthen it from the orb that was quickly falling. “*C’mon...sephrym, work.*”

The circumference of fire touched down, incinerating the men and setting the rest of the village on fire.

He descended, looking high and mighty, as if he were proud of what he had done. With his scythe behind him, he walked victoriously through the violet blaze towards Serra.

Ash filled the air, blowing in his hair and resting upon Serra’s barrier.

“You must get stronger!” Aster snapped as he deactivated Oblivion.

The intense flames in the background did not bother him. “This should not have happened, killing without cause.” He looked at Albert, unconscious with a gentle face.

“Aster...” Serra called to him as she had her hand still over Albert’s chest. “You used an arcane spell...you could’ve killed us-”

“The sephrym in your clothing made your barrier powerful. I had no doubt that you could resist.”

“You knew this was going to happen?” She moved her hand to his cheek now.

“Not this...what comes next. Serra...did you know that arcane spells cannot be stopped, not even with a power boost...?”

“What are you saying?”

“That you are powerful. Without the sephrym, you could still stand up to my magic.”

“So, why give me the substance?”

“Next, you’ll need to...contain me.”

“Contain?” Serra was curious.

“As in training, silly.” He smiled his halfhearted smile again. “Get some sleep. Albert should be fine upon tomorrow. You’ve done a good job replenishing his mana.”

Without any further words, he laid next to them, sleeping easily.

“Good night, Aster.” She scoffed a little under the protection of the barrier. She moved in closer to lie on Albert’s chest. Unlike Aster, she was not comfortable with sleeping on a battlefield next to incinerated corpses. Aster slept as if it was his own bed, but Serra slept as if she were in a cemetery.

Birds chirped hours later, offering a glorious welcome to the wreckage after the wake of battle. The six eyes of the sky took root once again, complimenting the blue sky and the cool breeze.

Aster woke first, in a cold sweat.

“Albert, are you alright?” He asked, shaking him.

“Just a bit sore, but I’m fine,” replied Albert groggily. His eyes were barely opened, but he could see the destruction around him clear as day. “What happened here?”

“Arcane...” Serra spoke in a soft, almost angry tone.

“Legendary dragoon spells?” Albert grabbed his side and staggered.

“Perhaps, we should rest more...” Aster gave another seemingly empathetic response.

“Are we ready to go?” Serra glared at Aster intently, slightly pissed. She extended her arm, helping Albert to stand.

“It’s settled, we leave now.” Aster breathed easily while leaving the ruin.

After walking for about twenty minutes, Albert grabbed his side, falling to his knees.

“Albert!” Serra instantly picked him back up. “We have to keep moving.”

“The fortress is just ahead of us.” Aster’s face was determined. “Just a bit farther...”

“Aster...can I ask you a question?” Her voice lost its depth, there was no longer any ill will.

“Yes?”

“How exactly will Chaos end the war?”

“I’ve been a dragoon warrior for a long time,” he replied. “But they say that Chaos is a dragoon with infinite control over mana and has enough power to end this war and any war to follow.”

“Then, why doesn’t he end it now?” Albert barked, forgetting his command.

“Chaos is neutral,” Aster replied calmly, not minding Albert’s disposition. “It is important that we go to him first and plead our case so he can help us end this war. It works like this--if the humans get to Chaos, he will fight for them and against us.”

Aster looked up to the sky. “We’re close. Look at the moons going down so soon. It’ll be nightfall in about five minutes.”

“It’s colder now, too.” Serra grabbed her arms in a cross fashion.

“We’ll need as much energy as possible. Albert, please go get some firewood.” Aster’s command was gentle still.

“Fine...” Albert’s eyes lit up and a smoky, orange glow formed an ax in his hands. He walked through the trees nearby, chopping loose branches. Working up a sweat was not on his agenda, but Serra was cold, and nothing else mattered other than warming her up.

“Even arcane spells...” He chopped harder. “So much better than me...making me wear clothes that make me stronger...do you think I’m weak?” He took his anger out on the trees. “My goodness, Albert, get a hold of yourself.”

The ax faded from his grip, the shine in his eyes also diminished. He picked up the wood he chopped and quickly returned to Aster and Serra, laying them down in a circle.

“Great, we have wood, but no fire.” Serra sighed as she cuddled next to Albert for heat.

Aster balled his fist, then released pressure to reveal a small purple flame. Tossing it into the fire, he leaned back, admiring his two subordinates.

“Your...mana changed last night. It was evil...” Serra leaned closer to the fire.

“I apologize youngling, Oblivion’s will is strong,” Aster said in his defense. “That magic took a lot out of me, which is why I needed to make you two stronger. In case I was ever weakened.”

“Don’t be modest.” Albert snickered. “You can perform arcane.”

“Don’t underestimate yourself, boy. I have trained with you for many years now. Do you think you know how to fight against a dragoon?”

“I think so, but why would I have to?”

“You won’t...I just need you to surpass me...just in case.”

Serra looked into Aster. “*Your mana is changing...what are you lying about?*”

“Relax. Tonight, judgment will be dealt...” Aster empathetically looked to Serra, then Albert. “...Make sure you are ready.”

“I can handle it, Aster Aurion. I promise.” Albert said respectfully. “Besides, I’m stronger than a dragoon any day.”

“Ha ha...you underestimate the power of a dragon descendant.”

7. The Warrior Class and the Omni

It was a pitch-black night with no moons in the sky. The stars provided little light from the darkening clouds that threatened to keep them shrouded. With darkness prevailing, the group sat close to each other alongside the fire under the twinkle of the stars that escaped the noir.

“We are really close. Dragons are out.” Aster looked up into the midnight, taking in a full breath of air as he watched the aforementioned creatures chase each other through swirling graphite clouds.

“I didn’t think dragons were real.” Serra was still huddled against Albert. “This is my first time seeing one.”

Aster morosely touched his stone. “Do you know how dragoons came to be?”

Serra looked at Albert and shrugged. Albert looked back at her, an equally blank expression on his face.

“No...”

Aster laughed at the obliviousness of his comrades. He picked up a stragglng branch and tossed it into the fire, though he did not need wood to keep it going.

“Long ago, there were only five dragoons. They had no name, and went only by a title. Three warrior class dragoons: Oblivion, Purity, and Sphinx. These dragoons went through a ritual, a ritual that mended their souls with the mightiest dragons in Samsera.”

“Aren’t you Oblivion?” Serra interrupted

“Correct,” Aster boasted. “I am from the dawn of the dragoons, over two thousand years ago.”

“You only mentioned three. What about the other two?” Albert asked. He sat with his legs crossed and both arms around Serra.

Aster touched his stone again, absently. “The other two are Omni-class Dragoons. Chaos is one of them and the other has been lost, erased from history. People doubt its existence.”

“So, we will just have to make do with one Omni,” Albert joked.

Disregarding the comment, Aster continued.

“Each dragoon has an entity unique to its power, tangible or not. Oblivion has an onyx stone laced with mana essence. Purity is formed through one’s inner fear, not needing any object of transformation. And Sphinx’s dragoon power lies in the eyes, forbidden golden orbs that sink into the eyes, fusing the mana directly with the host’s blood. As much as I hate to say it, I am the weakest of the five...this is only because once my stone breaks, the command over Oblivion will be forever lost...I trust you to keep my secret.”

“Where have the other dragoons come from?” Serra clenched onto Albert tighter. The purple flame was enough to warm her, but she still preferred the natural warmth that came from her lover.

“The other dragoons are not as powerful as the initial five, but we have all performed the same ritual on certain people who display unique power. These people can be of any type... human, druid, sorcerer, even paladin. Dragoons are chosen when they demonstrate a level of control for mana that far exceeds even the strongest of magic users.” He closed his eyes and sighed, as if something was ailing him.

“So...” Albert chimed in. “Could this ritual change me?”

Aster looked to the ground, falling silent as he prepared to answer the question. “Not everyone can survive the ritual, many die when the dragon bonding takes place.”

“I guess that means you were strong enough to take it.” Albert pushed in another comment.

“We initial five are the strongest because we have made these pacts with the forbidden dragons in Samsera...dragons that were peaceful in nature, unusually strong, and beautiful.” He spoke with a keen sense of sadness. “...We should have just left them in peace,” he whispered to himself, letting out a sigh. He held back some tears, but the wetness of his eyes was lit up by the purple flames.

“Aster...is something wrong?” Serra stared him down, not because she wanted to look at him, but because she was interested in looking at his mana.

“Every dragon that you see...will eventually die, it saddens me.” He spoke with a melancholy voice that was quickly losing emotion.

“Why would the dragons die?”

“Becoming a dragoon isn’t as simple as bonding a soul. It’s my fault for saying that most people will die because they can’t handle it.”

“What do you mean?” Serra was just a bit confused.

“A small percentage of people die as an unwanted result, but...” His voice began to trail. “All dragons that are forcefully put up for bonding die. The life drains from them instantly without leaving behind a body to bury.” The sternness in his voice made it hard to tell that he was being empathetic.

“So, that means...” Serra questioned.

“Dragoons will continue to come, and dragons will slowly be pushed to extinction.”

“Aster...?” Albert decided he would speak up. “If you are the one of the legendary ones, why would they make more...if, certain people had to be worthy, why not stop at the initial five?”

“Because...” He tossed another piece of wood into the fire. “The five are an addition to maintain order. The three: Purity, Sphinx, and myself, were the only ones who protected this world. The Omni’s are the gods, neutral of course...given the responsibility to keep order, while we fight as their underlings. Eventually, we had to protect too much of the world...and we could not do it all by ourselves. So, other dragoons had to be melded, to lighten our load.”

“Lighten your load...” Serra raised her voice a little, posing it as more of a question.

“Selfish, I know. I was young when I approved of more dragoons.” Aster placed emphasis in ‘I’, taking full responsibility for the lack of dragons.

“And...Chaos let you approve that?”

“Chaos...wasn’t there...”

“Aster...!” She was peeking into his mana, and had been through almost the entire conversation. She had no reason to look into it, but she was curious as to why his voice was so emotionless when it should have been sad.

“Yes?” Aster asked calmly, disregarding the hesitancy in Serra’s voice.

“Nothing...” She turned away, then turned back to him, ready to explain why she called his name. “Mana reading...it can tell when someone lies, right?”

“For advanced eyes, yes.” He knew where she was getting at, but kept his cool.

“I just...wanted to know.” She wanted to call him out, but then thought that there would be a good reason for Aster to keep certain secrets.

There was a brief pause. The fire crackled and the crickets became louder.

“Rest.” Aster got up and stretched for a second before returning to his position. “The sudden disappearance of the moons will affect your magic negatively.”

“Aster...!” Serra declared again, almost a whisper that time.

“We have something important to do later...” Aster turned over and rested on the plush grass.

“Geez, without a tent this time?” Albert complained.

“C’mon.” Serra pushed him down, on his back, forcing him to lie down. She cuddled up further against him and put her head on his chest. “Good night--or, good falling-of-the-moons.” She laughed lightly as she drifted into slumber. Albert was soon to follow.

They slept comfortably: the fires flickering next to them, keeping them warm through the still night and the nocturnal creatures singing, almost intentionally, through their dreams.

A couple of hours later, Albert woke in a sweat, touching his face and chest hesitantly, and unable to go back to sleep.

“Just a nightmare...”

He reached over, smoothed his finger across Serra’s delicate, sleeping face, and made sure Aster was still sleeping as well.

“I’ll be back,” he whispered. “I need to get some water.”

Albert moved his hand through his hair and walked to the nearby stream, which was set in between a bed of large pine trees.

“C’mon...” He closed his eyes, focusing mana into them. Concentrating hard, he picked up a small stone and skipped it across the crystal clear water.

“Now...” He opened his eyes and examined the ripples the stone had made. There was nothing unusual about how the water waved, just testing his concentration. “Dammit!” He shouted loudly, voice echoing among the leaves. “Why can’t I see mana?” He kicked the dirt at his feet and balled his fists.

The subtle wind dragged an acorn to his feet, drawing the attention of a gnawing squirrel whose eyes were remarkably big and brown, and a perfect match to the frizzed almond fur over its skin.

“I’ve been nothing but useless this entire crusade,” he said to the squirrel, who had no interest. “I mean, my girlfriend’s eyes are stronger than mine...and I’m not physically appealing like Aster. I don’t know what to do.”

The animal stood up to look at him obliviously, seeming as if it would speak to give him an answer...and then went back to gnawing on the nut.

“I wish you could understand me, maybe I could help you with your problems as well.”

A leaf crunched in the distance, causing the squirrel to scatter. The step that crushed the leaf was gentle, like it was intended to be a surprise.

Albert sighed, and then smiled, getting ready for an imminent talk with the only person he felt comfortable around.

“Albert,” Serra called. “What’s wrong?” She carefully moved around the trees, approaching the stream.

“Nothing, I just needed fresh water. It’s hard to sleep next to someone that big is all. Aster makes things hot...” Yet, another halfhearted smile.

“You’re lying,” scolded Serra. “Your mana becomes unbalanced when you lie. Now, what’s bothering you?”

The light from the sea of stars reflected handsomely off the water. The darkness of the sky masked the coming of a flock of blackbirds, but their voices were noticeable above the babble of the stream. Their beautiful, synchronized melody reigned over the treetops.

Serra walked over to Albert and touched his face gently, locking her gaze with his.

“What’s wrong...antymetas are out. These birds only flock around worry. Tell me, please.”

“It’s Chaos...” Albert sounded frightened. “I just have a bad feeling about meeting him... I mean, if he’s really that much stronger than Aster-”

“Shh, don’t be afraid,” she interrupted, closing his lips with a touch of her gentle finger. “I’ll be by your side always. If there is anything for you to place your trust in, it’s Aster. And you know what else? You don’t give yourself enough credit. You’re plenty strong. I have never met anyone like you. I’d gladly use my mana in exchange for life, just to be with you longer.”

Albert grimaced and then looked back to Serra.

She was still smiling, carefree, even though she was hurting a bit on the inside. “Don’t worry about tomorrow and the next day too much, ok?”

Albert smiled as well and held Serra tightly in his arms.

“But, why do you think he gave us more power...if he simply wanted to talk with Chaos...I mean, what if-”

“Stop it, Albert. We’ll take it a day at a time. I’d say we have about another two hours before the moons come up again.”

“Night and day, then day and night? Time around the fortress is really out of whack, huh?”

“Sure is!” She smiled. “Means Aster will let us sleep for two more hours.”

Underneath the twilit serenade, they rested, but it seemed like no time at all before their dreaming was interrupted.

Water came rushing down on Albert and Serra’s face.

“Wake up, you two. Peace will not bring itself.” Aster stood over them, looking off into the distance.

“Wha-what?” Albert looked into the sky. “I just closed my eyes...we have two hours left.”

“Your timing is off. We have two minutes before the moons rise once more. We have to make it before the breaking of the next dawn. I told you time is off around the fortress.”

“What about food?” Serra whined. “Feels like I haven’t eaten since I left home.”

“Food?” He smirked. “Mana is nutrition. Now we should be able to make it to the fortress by the fourth moon.”

He was just as serious as usual, determined to reach the dark citadel.

“...Then, I will feed you.”

“All six are up now, and sooner than two minutes.” Albert smart-assed.

“Never too tired for antics, I see.” Aster sighed, trying to ignore him.

“I call it how I see it.” He and Aster were now on a different level of understanding. His jokes were taken more lightly. His newfound confidence actually appealed to Aster.

Aster looked forward, to the east through another forest, ignoring him without a response that time. It was time to move.

The sky was bright and six gleaming orbs gave them passage through the empty forest as they approached the fortress. It was in clear sight, enormous and sinister.

“This is it. Chaos is inside,” said Albert nervously. “Look for an entry point.”

Serra went around the side, concentrating on anything that gave off unusual energy.

“Mana waves...the same as Aster’s...” She looked at a slot, noticing it was the same shape as Aster’s onyx stone, along with a depression that was the shape of a gourd and another with grey soil in it.

“Aster!” Serra yelled. “Over here, I think I found something.”

“On my way.” Aster jogged over to analyze the depression. He pulled off his stone and sighed. “I guess I have no choice.”

The stone fit perfectly into the hole, forming a smoky, purple seal around the gate as it opened.

“Door’s open,” Albert said, backing away.

Aster walked through the gate hesitantly, the first sign of fear he’d ever shown.

“Hold on!” Albert reached out for Aster, but was blocked by an invisible barrier just before he could reach him.

“Only dragoons can enter...I appreciate you two accompanying me here.” Aster said, voice echoing with a faint longing. He turned away suddenly, as if he were already regretting something, as if he did not wish to continue alone.

“But...your stone is still...”

“I guess Oblivion can’t help me here,” he turned back to them and smiled. “I’ll meet you on the other side.” He grimaced for a quick second, like he was unsure of his decision.

“Aster, we were supposed to help!” Albert’s voice rose.

“Just...take care of him. When that time comes...” He turned his back and walked further into the fortress. The gate immediately closed behind him.

The stone fell to the ground, losing its luster.

“What do you think that means?” Albert questioned.

“I don’t know.” Serra picked it up. “He’ll be back. I’ll bet he’d want to have it again.”

Two moons descended as Aster entered the fortress, just as he had predicted.

“What do you think Chaos is like?” Serra asked.

“I can’t really say. I would think that the name Chaos means something, but then again our Oblivion is as gentle as a butterfly,” he said in an almost sarcastic tone. “I wonder what he’s doing. Serra, do you see anything?”

She focused her gaze on the fortress, straining her eyes a bit.

“Nothing...do you feel that?” She stood with her arms out, trying to keep balance as the ground shook.

“Yeah, what is that? An earthquake?” He was trying his hardest to stay up as well.

“The fortress!” Serra completely lost balance.

“Whoa!” Albert fell over, but quickly got up to catch Serra before she fell, too.

The fortress was crumbling, causing mass tremors around it. Towers fell from the summit and into the river. The once proudly standing fortress was falling into ruin.

“Sentry!” Serra grabbed Albert and pulled him into her barrier.

The falling debris pounded away at her shield, almost shattering it completely.

“What the hell was that?” Albert looked to the damaged fortress. “Is he fighting someone?”

The dragons still soaring in the sky roared with a violent outcry. Clouds pulled closely together, darkening as though a storm were brewing.

A loud cry came from inside. Instantly, Serra knew whom it came from. It sounded like he was in great pain.

“Aster!” Serra leaped forward, before Albert stopped her.

“He can hold his own, it must be a trial,” he reassured. “He is suffering to bring about our peace. I commend him.”

“Well...” Serra calmed, reassured by Albert’s words. “He needs to hurry back.” She said impatiently after a brief pause.

An explosion came from within the fortress, causing mass damage to the rods on the towers. Rain began to pour down heavily, in addition to the sudden fall of the two final moons, which made the night darker than usual.

“That wasn’t Aster’s mana...” Serra pulled the stone out of her pocket.

“What do you mean?”

“It’s not his!” Her voice dropped to an almost fearful tone. Flinching at the next peal of thunder, she ran over to Albert and looked up to the top of the fortress.

There, stood a large dragoon with red and black armor and a helm that covered the top part of his face. The structure crumbled beneath him, forcing him to hover.

“Aster...no.” She covered her mouth with her hand and slowly backed into Albert.

“A new transformation?” Albert wondered aloud. “Serra, what’s wrong?”

“Look, at what he is holding...try to focus your eyes.”

He squinted his eyes and looked past the fierce lightning, drowning out the clashing thunder.

“How...” Albert grabbed her hand and he backed up slowly as well. “That’s...Chaos...with-”

“He defeated Aster...shit!” She turned and buried her face in his chest.

Chaos stood magnificently above them, clutching a limply splayed Aster like a ragdoll.

“ASTER!” Serra screamed, voice barely audible above the cacophony of sound.

Thunder crashed once more and clouds all swirled around the towers of the fortress.

Chaos’ hand rose to the sky, draining the silver light from the stars and harnessing it as his own.

“Legendary...celestial mana.” Serra breathed, too stunned to move out of Albert’s grasp.

Chaos threw the energy into the air, creating a rift and throwing Aster in.

“Why the hell didn’t I stop him? I knew this would happen.” Albert shook Serra to get her to move. “Serra, we have to go.” He grabbed her hand and ran in the opposite direction of the Omni.

Chaos flapped his mighty metallic wings, flying high into the air. He raised one hand, turning the swirling grey clouds to a fiery red fog.

Fierce movement came from behind Albert and Serra, like a stampeding herd.

“What’s going on?” Serra turned around only to have hundreds of warriors blow past her.

“What have you done?” a dragoon barked as she was passing by. She flew with a violent force towards Chaos.

Sorcerers on the battlefield tried to take a preemptive, performing higher-level spells than both Serra and Albert, trying to bring down the Omni before it was too late.

Chaos deflected all of the magic like it was paper being thrown at him: lighting streams, aqua spells, even druids chanting to strengthen the magic further failed. The dragoons were the last resort.

Chaos raised his hand, like a man to a dog, and smacked back every single dragoon with an airstream. His natural fighting instinct was as involuntary as breathing.

“Nova.” Chaos uttered. He gathered the celestial mana in his hand once more and fired it at the casters trying to harm him from the ground.

Serra and Albert ran as fast as they could to escape the falling ball of celestial energy that appeared as large as either of the moons that were normally present. It seemed unfathomable to

outrun it, but it was all they could do. The intense heat dehydrated them and limited their capabilities, but at least they were out of range.

It quickly crashed down, setting the field on fire and ripping down trees. Warriors were tossed about in a grisly, dead pile as though by the winds of a hurricane. Those unfortunate enough to be at the epicenter were disintegrated in the blast.

Chaos supremely hovered, unthreatened, knowing he had no equal.

More dragoons flew in, each calling out for their weapons and casting magic that was remarkably weaker than Aster's.

They came and fought valiantly, but soon fell without any real effort from the Omni.

"Aura." A large sword with a jewel-encrusted hilt appeared before Chaos. The black and red destructor raced through the skies, slashing down everyone in his path.

"Moving faster than sound..." Serra tried to trace him, but he was nothing more than a blur. "*He is... God.*" She gripped Albert's hand almost desperately.

Dragoons continued flocking to the field, soon numbering in the thousands. The fight was starting to look balanced, but they were dying off faster as Chaos utilized more of his abilities.

Albert noticed that waves of magic came into the battle that did not resemble the warriors or Chaos. He followed the faux waves over to a hill off to the side of the fortress.

"Manadrives...no!" Serra had no idea when humans introduced themselves to the battle, but the glow of their weaponry was unmistakable. She looked over to the humans in fear, who were using the confusion of battle to kill without consequence.

"NO!" Chaos boomed. He held his palms to the sky, making the stars glow brighter.

"No way!" Serra gasped. "He can control the stars themselves...not just their mana." Serra was in a trance, hypnotized by his power. Frozen in place, her legs trembled and she fell to the ground in awe.

"NOVA!" Chaos used all the energy he had gathered from the stars and fired it at the humans, completely decimating them and the surrounding land.

"Serra, we have to help them! We cannot just let them die because of our mistake," Albert barked. "Where the hell are the Seraphim?"

Serra remained in her trance, blinded by the rage and blood pouring down from the sky.

"SERRA! Snap out of it."

"What can we do?" Serra exclaimed. "Oblivion was born with Chaos, why didn't he know this?" She stood up with resolve. Her eyes began to glow bright and her hair blew in the still air. The floral-patterned seal barrier once again appeared beneath her feet as her radiant, silver mana encompassed her body.

"Albert," Serra called to him in a low, echoing voice. "Restrain Chaos."

"Serra...I can't"

"Restrain...him." She coldly spoke again.

"Sure thing..."

There were no more words from him. He just gave her a nod and followed her command.

Albert's eyes brightened, holding out his hand as his coagulated mana began to take form. His natural blue mana burned around his body, being amplified by the sephrym in his clothing.

"Here goes nothing." He tightened his grip around the chain that appeared in his hand.

He twirled it at maximum speed. Without much thought, he tossed it into the air, wrapping it around Chaos' torso.

Chaos roared, angry because he could not rid himself of the mana-binding chain. He flew around, dragging Albert off the ground through the reddened sky.

Albert's grip was fading, but he was determined not let to go. He climbed the transparent chain, drawing closer to the Omni.

"Serra! Anytime you're ready!"

Serra remained emotionless and still, glowing as she hovered with blossoming seals at her feet. She focused her palms on Chaos, seeping out mana little by little. Her vibrant, silver mana ignited around her body, cutting through the immediate darkness.

"No Serra, not that spell! You don't know what it will do to you," Albert commanded, but his voice was too far away for her to hear. "SERRA...STOP!"

"Ascendiate!" She screamed. Her life force leaked through her eyes and mouth. The seals below her disappeared and the soul that bound her to humanity escaped into the air.

She was now an apparition, a figure more made of plasma and energy.

"Can't...be scared now." She sullenly looked at her body lying, cadaverously, on the ground. The air around her broke, glasslike, as she soared to Chaos. "I'm coming, Albert!"

Chaos casted destructive magic, all aimed towards Serra.

"You're in my way!" Chaos shouted indignantly with a deep, dark voice. He fired and fired, but Serra moved too fast, even for his eyes to catch. "NO!" As a last defense, he folded his large wings around his body.

"Serra...no..." Albert was forced to watch from underneath. He closed his eyes and turned his head when he realized Serra placed her soul in Chaos' body.

Chaos' arms dropped, he was calmed.

The sorcerers stopped casting and everyone else halted their fire as the possessed Omni floated down.

She guided Chaos gently to the ground.

"Albert..." The voice was both from her and Chaos.

"Yes?" Albert was just returning to his feet.

"Put a binding seal on me...make sure it's tight. I can only sever his mana for so long..."

"Ok." Albert put both of his hands on Chaos, forming a rope around him. "Limit...There, Serra. Now please go back to your body before you're gone forever..."

"Leaving now..." Her soul leaked out of Chaos and flowed back into her body.

"Serra!" He heard her cough in the distance and ran over to her. "Are you okay?"

"Yeah...just fine. We were strong for Aster."

"You, kid!" A bulky and aged sorcerer spoke to Serra. "You weakened Chaos. Help us bind him once more."

"No, can't you see how weak she is?" Albert roared.

"We need to utilize the remains of her power. Once Chaos comes to, we'll all die."

"No-"

"Albert, it's fine. I can do this."

"We thank you." The elite sorcerer held out his arm and helped her up.

"I don't know the chants..." Serra panted.

"Just focus your mana. We'll handle the rest." He and the other spell casters gathered in a circle around the exhausted Omni.

"I'm...sorry," Serra whispered as she held her palms in the air, powering the seal that would force Chaos back in the fortress. The circular pattern around his body lifted him and slowly moved him into the gate.

Chaos was in solitude once more, but the chanting continued, as if they were not satisfied with overcoming an Omni.

Serra had no idea what they were going to do, but her arms were still in the air, frozen in place.

“I can’t move...” She tried to put her arms down, but there was a force keeping them up and active.

“What are you doing?” Serra tried to pull herself away from the circle. Instantly, it clicked. Serra saw a glimpse into the future. The enormous amount of energy around her pushed her limits, granting her sight into what would become of Samsera, as well as the humans. “Stop this! They can make amends. Don’t punish them all for what a few have done...Chaos has done enough.”

Albert ran up to her, trying to pull her away, but she would not budge.

“Let her go!” Albert tried yanking her back with all his strength, but she was as still as a wall. Unable to pull anymore, he dropped to her feet, mourning as if she were already dead. “You’re draining her! STOP!”

“Humans cannot live with us, that much has been proven,” a druid, about two bodies down from Serra said. “We are going to create a juxtaposed dimension in which they can live in their own insanity.”

“Please stop this...” Serra’s eyes were going black. Somewhat of a cosmic shift appeared in the torn sky above them, threatening to pull everyone in.

“Here is where they will live,” the druid continued.

Serra’s mana was completely wiped, but the seal was complete. She fell to the ground, barely breathing with eyes blacker than the void that was just created.

Albert scurried to her almost lifeless body. “Serra, wake up!” He began crying horrendously. “Serra, return to me!”

“Serra!”

8. The Great Divide

Eurich was finally able to look at himself after Serra's eyes returned to normal. Even after seeing the extraordinary detailed story, he still had questions.

"So what happened afterwards?"

"I was partially responsible for making the seal for the human realm, Earth." Serra breathed in deeply before continuing. "Earth and Samsera exist side by side, but unable to see each other. They are one and the same, essentially, two sides to the same coin."

"What happened to my dad, and how was I born?" Eurich questioned frantically. His thoughts were jumbled, all over the place and perfectly normal at the same time.

"Your father is still in the fissure that Chaos placed him in. And eighteen years ago, your mother found a way into Samsera...a human. She found the fissure." Though Serra seemed extremely regretful about how the present was created, there was hesitation in her undertones. "Aster's powers are strong, strong enough to impregnate with just mana alone. When we found her, we could tell the baby was important because you have the exact same mana as your father."

"And...my mom?" He hesitantly asked, expecting an unpleasant answer because he had never seen her it was hard to remain optimistic, so he was ready to assume the worst.

"She died as you were being born," Albert cut in. The conversation was bothering Serra and he knew she really had no interest to bring up the terrible downfall of Eurich's parents. "We sent you to other families to see how well they would raise you...let's just say New York isn't your setting. You have to understand that we didn't want this life for you, but no one was fit to raise such a magical child, so we took our chances and raised you ourselves."

"You make it sound like a burden."

"We weren't ready to be parents. Two thousand years of life hadn't prepared us for this, at least we thought," Albert responded, smiling. There was genuine sincerity on his face and in his eyes.

"It's more of a blessing than you know," Serra joined. "Teaching you right from wrong was the greatest lesson we gave you, consider this another one."

"I think...I need a nap." Eurich's confusion from it all left him a little tired. He walked into his room, hoping to let sleep solve some of his problems.

"You can ask us anything," Albert said loudly.

The sun set on the small neighborhood. The clouds were dark and the half-moon was right around the corner. Eurich sat on his bed, touching his stone as if it was some strange object he had never seen. He reached into his pocket and pulled out his cell phone. The first thing he wanted to do was tell Jason. As he scrolled down his list of contacts, Serra called for him from downstairs.

"Eurich, come down here. It's time to eat."

Eurich immediately put the phone back into his pocket and glided downstairs to the table. Even in the midst of his confusion, he knew mealtime better than anything.

"How was your nap?" Albert had a genuine concern for him.

"Exhausting," Eurich laughed, then dug into his plate. It was one of his favorites, roast with vegetables.

“Breathe, son.” Serra laughed as well, then passed him a napkin. “Your destiny doesn’t involve choking.”

“How did you guys get here...I mean, if the worlds were cut off,” Eurich asked as he was chewing, the question could not wait.

“After you swallow,” Serra insisted. “You may not be a normal human, but you are not a savage.” Her voice was sharp like a knife.

He gulped and swallowed his food instantly.

Albert put down his fork. “We still saw the good in humans, we...opted to live amongst them and see how they will grow, and also to see how they fall...” His voice trailed into uncertainty just as before.

Eurich nodded and finished his meal. “Then...I have another question, it’s kinda off topic.”

“Shoot!” Albert was more than ready to answer.

“I saw plants, trees and flowers in Samsera.” Eurich began. “You know, when mom did that spell.”

“Yes?”

“While the moons are in the sky, it’s daytime right? And, when it’s night, the moons are gone?”

“That’s correct.” Albert didn’t see where he was going with the conversation.

“If moons are out during the daytime, how is the sky lit up, and how do the plants grow with no sunlight?”

Albert laughed. “Samsera doesn’t share your solar system. The moons are augmented with life-supporting mana. The moons provide their own heat, nutrients, and light.”

“Two sides of the same coin, what gives? If we are truly juxtaposed, something here has to be equal to that.” Eurich never sounded so excited to talk about Samsera. Serra and Albert were happy that he was finally accepting who he is.

“Too smart of a kid, this boy is.” Serra smiled.

“All six of the moons combined would have the same potency as the sun here. Each moon down fades slowly into darkness, until there are no more,” Albert answered.

“And the flocking of the birds at...night, I guess?” Eurich continued.

“It’s better to not know everything about that world. You’ll go blind with madness.” Albert joked.

“Hmm...okay.” Eurich was fine with what he knew and accepted that he would have to find the rest of the answers on his own. “I’ll be upstairs. I’m a little tired.” Eurich started to get up, but paused when he heard what sounded like mumbling from Serra. “What was that, mom?”

“You just woke up, why are you going back to sleep?”

“Didn’t sleep very well. What happened earlier was kinda hard to take in.” He pushed his chair back and rested his fork on the plate.

“Just leave it in the sink. I’ll get to it later.” Serra put a napkin on her plate.

Eurich walked into the kitchen, put his plate in the sink, and walked back to the table, as if presenting himself in front of his parents.

“Well, goodnight. Thanks for dinner, mom.”

“Go get some rest. Complimenting my cooking? You must be tired.” She smiled, looking distinctively at Eurich’s face. “Your father would be proud of how you’ve grown.”

Eurich smiled to Serra, then started toward the staircase. His mind was jumbled with roaming thoughts. Samsera and his father were his main concern. First, it started as a simple

dream hinting that he would be destined for something, but his parents confirming it made chills run down his spine. He reached his room, twiddling the stone around his necklace with his fingers.

“Oblivion, huh?” He plopped on his bed, laying, holding the stone over his face. “How the hell do I activate this thing?” He banged on it, tapped it against his wall, and laid it on his windowsill to see if it would have the same reaction as the bangle.

“Oh well...it’ll happen sooner or later.” He tossed the onyx into the same drawer as the bangle. Almost fed up, he stared at the ceiling, recalling the events thus far. “Why me?” He suddenly sounded like he was speaking with someone. “This is too much...first, Jason, then this...I wouldn’t be surprised if my parents are the heartless bloodsuckers that Raine semi-hates so much.”

He let out a frustrated sigh. He did not know whether to be happy or not. His life was beginning to take a new turn, one that he did not exactly agree with yet.

“Wait a second!” He turned on his side and looked at his dresser. In one swift movement, he reached back into his drawer and grabbed the onyx. His frustration was evident, but holding back a smile proved harder than he thought. The thoughts racing through his head gave him an unusual energy, as if simply accepted it was all he had to do. He immediately sprang off the bed and rushed downstairs. The doorbell rang on his way down and he was surprised to see that his parents took their elderly forms again.

“It’s Raine and Jason,” Serra was confident in her guess.

“How do you know?” Eurich was almost at the front door.

“Mana,” Serra said comically.

“Cheater,” Eurich chuckled. *“I can get used to this.”*

He answered the door to Raine’s cheery face and Jason’s smart remarks. Though it had been weeks, Eurich could tell that Jason resented his newfound strength.

“You weren’t in school today. You had me worried,” said Raine, not chuckling as she normally did.

“Maybe she really missed me?” Eurich thought to himself. He blushed slightly but was brought back to reality when he saw the impatient look on Jason’s face.

“What was that?” Raine asked.

“What was what?” Eurich countered.

“Hmm...nothing, I thought you said something. It must be my imagination...but I thought you said you missed me.” She somewhat giggled.

Eurich flinched back, *“Damn...I know I didn’t say that out loud.”*

“Tell your friends to come in,” said Albert while rocking in his chair. It seemed like he was perfectly timed, to break the unwanted tension.

“That’s bad hostmanship.” Jason laughed and walked in, while Raine skipped over the threshold.

“We’re going to be cleaning down here, mind taking them to your room?” Albert asked, gathering the plates on the table.

“Sure thing.” He walked them into his room and leaned over the windowsill, while Raine plopped on his bed and Jason took the computer chair. “Why are you guys stopping by so late?”

It was difficult to tell whether Raine was impressed or scared by what she saw in Eurich’s room. Her face lit up as if she was fascinated, but she poked Eurich’s clothes on the floor with her foot as if they were bugs.

“Man, when was the last time you cleaned?” Jason laughed after he lifted a pair of white and blue striped boxers.

“Give me those!” Eurich reached, jerking it out of Jason’s hand.

Raine shrugged, laughing at Eurich’s embarrassment. She really didn’t care about how messy the room was, her excitement came from not being there in so long.

“Your room hasn’t changed a bit.”

“I thought I changed it a little...I’ve got a better TV now,” he declared.

“In the same spot,” she laughed.

“Well...none of you answered my question.” Eurich pushed the origin of the conversation. “Why so late?”

“You missed a really exciting lecture today,” Jason said sarcastically. “Lucky.”

“That’s why you came over?”

“Maybe...” Raine’s eyes innocent fluttered.

“Well, if you’re not going to tell me, I’ve got something to show you.” Eurich changed the subject and took the necklace off, showing them the stone. “Just look at it really hard.”

A few seconds passed with nothing happening, just silence.

“Okay...” Jason was unimpressed. “What exactly are we looking for? It’s the same dusty old stone that you seem to keep in this family. What is it, like a thousand years old?”

“What’s wrong, Eurich?” asked Raine, ignoring Jason’s comment. She felt that his constant complaining no longer needed to be dignified with responses.

“Nothing...I guess I thought there was something up with this thing,” Eurich replied, disappointed that nothing happened.

“You’re lying,” Raine scolded. “Your aura changes when you lie.”

“You use that excuse for everything, Raine.” Eurich laughed. “You’re not a vampire and don’t say you weren’t thinking you are. I saw the notes spill from your textbook.”

“Regardless, stop lying.”

“Looks like you’re busted. She saw your aura, ooh.” Jason laughed, trying to mimic what he thought a ghost sounded like.

“Shut up, you two. Don’t question my ways,” Raine said, knowing they were just joking.

“Fine.” Jason agreed. “Your aura’s already been exposed.” He threw it in there one more time. Raine reciprocated by picking up Eurich’s pillow and throwing at Jason.

Eurich ignored the background activity, clenching his stone nervously. “This is supposed to transform me into a powerful creature.”

Jason looked at Eurich in a funny, almost pitiful way. “Eurich, I’ve heard some crazy stuff out of you, but this tops it. You have crossed a new level of weirdness, or is it just your desperation in fables?”

“Well, there’s no surprise that you don’t understand.” Eurich’s voice was serious and his eyes wandered the floor, sulking because he knew it was the truth. “*You’ve never had anything like this happen to you...*”

“What if...he is serious?” Raine posed to Jason.

“He’s not. He probably had a long day and isn’t thinking straight. Right, Eurich?”

“Maybe.” He absentmindedly answered.

“Hmm...” Raine stared at Eurich, sympathizing. She did not want to believe that Jason was right, that Eurich may have fallen off the deep end.

“*What is she looking at?*” Time seemed to stand still for Eurich. Not often did he have the chance to gaze into Raine’s forest green eyes.

"I...lo-, " Eurich was safe inside his head, but still cut him off.

"He...loves...me?" She was sure his lips did not move, but knew she heard his voice.

"...Am I reading his thoughts? No...that's silly, it must've been the test today. I hate AP physics."

"Ahem..." Jason cleared his throat, breaking the moment Eurich was having. "We just came here to tell you that the science teachers are hosting a field trip tomorrow, going to the Appalachian Trail for some reason." He reached into his bag and handed Eurich a permission slip.

"Getting out of the building for once. I'll get it signed." He tossed the slip into the same drawer where he placed the bangle, forgetting to close it.

"Can you see that?" Raine asked them both.

"See what?" they responded in unison.

"I don't know...all the pretty colors."

"I think you're out of it," Jason suggested. "That physics test was a bitch."

Raine's eyes flickered orange, back to green, and then back to orange. She stared longingly at the bangle in the drawer, keeping her expression outwardly impassive.

"My head hurts..." she closed her eyes, holding her forehead as if she was suffering from a migraine.

"You'll be fine. I have some aspirin in the car," Jason assured.

"No..." A high-pitched noise buzzed in her head, and it only got louder. "It's...not...a-." Her eyes rolled to the back of her head and she passed out.

"Raine!" Eurich called out. He rushed over to the bed and lifted up her head, then turned to Jason. "Go downstairs and get some cold water and a cloth."

"What the hell?" Jason panicked.

"I don't know, just go get the water!" Eurich had a good sense of responsibility in his voice.

"Ok, I'll be back."

"And...watch out for my parents."

"Got it." He rushed downstairs.

"C'mon Raine, two guys and a passed out girl...not a good look." He ran his fingers over her neck.

"Dammit, no pulse..." He then brushed her hair out of her face and peeled back her eyelids, opening her eyes as wide as he could. Her eyes were dilated, still flickering between green and orange.

Eurich flinched back when he saw them, crashing into his dresser, and closing the open drawer.

Raine exhaled loudly, coughing.

Eurich stood his ground once again and moved over to her.

"Are you okay?" Eurich asked, holding her face close to his.

She said nothing. Raine took breath after breath, but kept her eyes on Eurich.

"Raine...what happened?" The worry in his voice was drowned out as he looked into her eyes.

"Your eyes are...really blue." Raine breathed, touching his face.

"I guess they are..." Eurich leaned in closer to her face, chuckling, not realizing he was in kissing distance.

“I got the water,” Jason said as he made his way into the room with a bowl of water and a cloth.

Raine and Eurich jerked away from each other, both blushing.

After pausing to gather himself, Jason walked over to Raine and dampened the cloth he brought with him. He grimaced a little, but put it over her forehead.

“Eurich, do something productive,” Jason was more demanding than usual.

“Like what?”

“I don’t know, hold her hand or something.”

Eurich clenched her hand tightly.

Raine’s face was pale and tired, but she still smiled. A gentle tear ran down her face before she closed her eyes and drifted into a light sleep.

Almost two hours passed and Jason knew it was time to go. The image of Eurich and Raine that close to each other tore at him.

“It’s pitch black outside, we should get going.” Jason nudged her awake. “How are you feeling?”

“My head hurts a little, but I’m fine,” she weakly replied.

“Easy now...” Jason helped her up and headed to his car.

“Don’t forget to get that slip signed,” Jason reminded as he gently lifted Raine into the back seat.

“Got it right here.” Eurich lifted his arm with the paper in hand.

Jason helped Raine inside and started up the engine, driving off into the darkness of the narrow road.

Eurich walked back in the house to find that his parents were now downstairs. “What are you two doing up?”

“You made quite a bit of noise up there earlier.” Serra allowed.

“Yeah...sorry about that. Raine got this headache, so she and Jason stayed a while.”

“It’s fine...what’s that in your hand?” Albert asked.

“Oh...yeah, you think that I can go to the Appalachian Trail with the rest of the seniors? It’s...actually tomorrow.”

“Sure you can, just be safe,” Serra replied.

“Really? I can go?” He was surprised that it was that easy.

“I just said yes,” she smiled. The least she could do was grant him the opportunity to unwind.

“Thanks!” Eurich was not as happy as that response should have made him. Something was in the back of his mind.

“Now, what do you really want to ask me?” Serra instantly pointed out that he was preoccupied with other matters.

“Mom, what’s with this mana reading thing? Can you read minds or something?” Eurich sighed.

“I can’t read minds, but I can read mana. Yours is anxious. Now tell me.”

“In my dream...a voice told me eyes filled with mana will lead me to Samsera,” Eurich said lowly. “Aren’t your eyes filled with mana? Aren’t you the only one who can see it?”

“Sure, I can see mana, and so can many others. But my sight isn’t powerful enough to reveal Samsera...I’m sorry.”

“But the advice I can give you is to not rush destiny.” Albert held her shoulder and welcomed Eurich back into the house. “Just wait for things to happen and they will, I promise.”

9. Acceptance

The way Eurich woke up was quite unusual from how it normally happened. Instead of the ringing of an alarm, he woke up to a strange rattling ping not unlike hail hitting glass.

“What now?” He wanted that sound to be his alarm clock, simply because it was easier to turn off, a quick knock to the ground. Barely getting up, he looked over to his window and saw small stones ricocheting off it from the outside, but decided not to pay it any mind. Sleep was much more important to him.

“Hey, wake up!” He heard Jason yelling from outside, voice barely heard audible because of the thickness of the windows.

Eurich’s eyes finally darted open. Everything was still a little blurry from the late night. He walked over and lifted his window, which he barely had the strength to do.

“Do you know how early it is?”

The fog outside was heavy and the air moist.

“Of course I know how early it is. Now hurry up, I’ll be in my car.”

There was no time to adequately shower or eat for that matter. He ran in and out of the bathroom, taking care of as much as possible before running downstairs to meet Jason.

“Took you long enough.” Jason’s hand was on the key, ready to turn it. The door was already open for Eurich.

“Well, I went as fast as I could. I didn’t know you planned on stopping by this early. It’s like five in the morning.”

“Hey, hey. No excuses.” He paused. “We’ll pick up Raine first.”

The car purred when Jason turned the key. His fog lights cut through the dense mist like butter and his wipers buffed the windshield as the droplets accumulated.

Jason raced down the forest-accompanied road, rolling the windows down to let the air blow in. Aside from the morning dew, the air was nice and brisk, typical September weather.

“What happened to Raine last night?” Jason asked, still keeping his eyes on the road “I saw that you and her almost kissed.”

“It wasn’t like that, I was just checking for a pulse on her neck... besides you hang around her a lot more than I do. I’m sure that she’d be into a guy like you, not me.”

A sheepish grin appeared on Jason’s face, as if it was exactly what he wanted to hear.

“Are you sure?” Jason asked. “Because I was thinking of asking her to the ball.”

“Oh... well go ahead, I’m sure that she’d like to go with you,” Eurich looked out the window and sighed lightly. “When do you plan on asking her?”

“I was thinking about asking her when we arrive at the mountain. That’s romantic enough isn’t it?”

“Maybe not romantic, but it definitely sounds like Jason.”

They pulled up to Raine’s house--a Victorian style, two-story home on the outskirts of town, perfectly aligned with a reservoir. It looked like something out of a home décor magazine. There was a walkway, both sides of which was lined by small flowerbeds containing gardenias and yellow rose bushes. It was an absolute match with the panels embedded in the marble stones of the walkway.

“Looks like Aurora is waiting for us.” Jason liked speaking on a first name basis, and had no problem addressing Raine’s mother that way.

Despite the morning shower, Aurora stood in front of the driveway, as if she was expecting them. She still looked like she was in her early twenties, and dressed like it too. The vampire thing seemed more believable each day. She too had golden hair, a light orange shade to her eyes, and remarkably porcelain skin. She looked very much like Raine.

“Hello Aurora.” Jason stretched, getting out of the car.

“Ms. Knight.” She corrected while laughing. “Come on in, Raine will be down in a minute.” She turned to walk inside, then back to them. “Eurich, Jason. You look like you’re starving. You’re welcome to whatever we have here.”

“Good enough offer for me.” Jason walked in and straight to the kitchen. Of course, Eurich was hungry too. He opened the fridge, trying to find something that he could make quickly.

“There are muffins in the cake dish and eggs and bacon that Raine didn’t finish,” Aurora yelled from in the living room.

Raine’s home was like theirs, at least in the ‘what’s yours is mine’ kind of way.

Jason grabbed two plates from the cabinet and prepared what was offered to them for him and Eurich.

They finished their meals in what seemed like no time at all, and placed their dishes in the sink. Soon after, it was time to head for the couch in the living room and wait for Raine to come back down. It was not very contemporary. There was a fairly new television, but the rest of the living was traditional. Photos and knick-knacks overran the walls, and the furniture looked like something from the renaissance. They sat in silence for a bit, until Jason broke it.

“What would be a good flower to give Raine if I was asking her to the ball?” Jason asked Raine’s mother.

“Orchids,” Eurich chimed in. “She likes orchids.” He trailed off, trying his best to seem indifferent.

Raine’s mother looked at Eurich, impassively smiling.

To Eurich, the clock’s ticking off to the side of the living room became excessively loud. He did not mind it too much, but he found it strange that the noise began to dissipate. The ticking was not the only thing to slow down—time also seemed like it was standing still. The light that made up the continuum was visible. Eurich knew there was a problem. *“Is this a spell? From who?”*

Eurich stood up and moved around the room with no consequence, Jason was stuck and so was Aurora. “What the hell now?” He waved his hand in front of Jason’s face, but he did not even blink. Eurich was afraid. He had no way of knowing what was happening. Chaos was the only one he knew of that had the power to do that, so of course, he was ready to pass judgment. He stretched and then walked to Aurora to administer the same test. After Eurich saw her lip twitch, he was sure of who cast the spell.

Aurora quickly sprung forward and grabbed Eurich’s hand. “I guess it is true.”

Eurich jerked back, falling on the couch behind him.

“Dragoon, huh? I’ve never been able to get this spell to work on them. You would think I would have noticed a lot sooner...your mana did not start to spike until about last month.”

“So you’re a sorcerer too...or...are vampires real?” asked Eurich, standing on guard and covering his neck.

“The first one,” she laughed. “Vampires are just ridiculous. An adaptation of a hideous tale about estranged sorcerers. I try explaining that to Raine often.”

“You must have sided with the humans before the dimensional split.”

“That’s right,” Aurora said cheerfully. “There is a little bad in all of us, I don’t put anyone at fault.”

“Umm...is Raine...one of you-I mean a sorcerer?” Eurich hesitated to ask, Raine was that last person he wanted with power. He just liked plain, normal Raine.

“Well, she has my blood in her veins if that is what you are asking. I don’t see any signs of it, maybe because her father was human...who knows, if she’s lucky, it might skip a generation.”

He was relieved, but quickly changed the subject. “I have a question.”

“Ask away!”

“Umm...I guess I am supposed to have my dad’s legacy, this great power. How come I haven’t seen it yet?” He was hoping for a positive answer, but somewhere deep down, he knew he would not get one.

“Dragoon mana is tricky. Some are born with mastery, and some just need a push,” Aurora said with reassurance. “It’s rare to see a dragoon considering what happened to them, I’m pretty sure that Serra and Albert told you.”

“Yeah...” Eurich said with disappointment in his voice, almost sad.

“Don’t worry, I don’t doubt your ability to maintain the mana balance. After all, you take after Aster.”

“You know my father?” Eurich said with a puzzled look on his face, contemplating whether he should ask more questions, or whether he was better off ignorant.

Aurora smiled at Eurich and nodded. “Please sit as you were before the spell.”

“Ok...” Eurich adjusted himself.

“Dementium.” She waved her hand and time slowly started to pick up.

“Orchids, aren’t those death flowers?” Jason asked, not seeming to notice anything strange. It was like nothing happened.

“Yes they are. They’re so beautiful, but resemble withering, just like a vampire,” said Raine as she was walked down the stairwell.

Jason and Eurich both did nothing but stare as she came down.

“All ready!” She had on hiking boots with safari pants. Her ponytail was braided with a few strands hanging loose as bangs, rather like an intrepid explorer.

She plopped down next to Eurich and boldly stared directly at his face, eyes pacing back and forth.

“Why are you looking at me like that?” asked Eurich.

“I just want to see something,” she replied, leaning in more towards his face. “Stop fidgeting!”

“*I can’t believe it, is Raine trying to kiss me?*” He moved back, keeping her at distance. In the next second, he relaxed himself and accepted that Raine was making a move on him.

Raine pushed away. “Uh huh...okay.” She then turned to Jason and stared at him for a few seconds.

“*Dammit, I knew they liked each other,*” Jason thought to himself, but otherwise remained indifferent, trying to play it cool.

“I thought so,” Raine said aloud.

“Thought what?” Eurich and Jason said in unison.

“Nothing,” she said as she smiled gracefully. She got up and started to head to the front door. “C’mon, don’t we want good seats?”

Aurora smiled to Eurich on the way out. “Have fun on the field trip, you guys.”

“Alright, Eurich in the front.” Jason unlocked all the doors with his remote key.

“Why can’t I be in the front?” Raine pouted.

“If you want the front, have at it.” Jason got in the car.

“Well, I don’t want the front.” She giggled then hopped in the back, crossing her legs because the seats were cold from the rain. “Kinda sucks, my fiancé isn’t here.”

“Patricia?” Eurich was just putting on his seatbelt. He did not want to risk himself with Jason’s driving, especially on wet roads.

“Who else?” She giggled and placed hers on as well. Trust only went so far when it came to Jason’s driving, and wrecking was considered a deal breaker. “I just hope she comes back soon...”

Jason maxed out his speed gauge, going down the one-way road from her house to the school. No other cars were on the road. Nothing but clean, raw environment--just how he liked it.

The weather turned from light morning dew into a raging tempest in a matter of minutes. There was no wind, lightning, or thunder, just a heavy downpour that cascaded over the entirety of Roanoke.

They arrived at the school grounds and hastily boarded the bus, holding their bags over their head to avoid getting soaked too bad. The engines to the buses were already started, so the trio arrived with very little time to spare.

The bus was rather large and could fit three people per seat. Towards the back of the bus Raine sat in the middle, Eurich got the window seat and Jason sat closer to the aisle.

Halfway into the trip Eurich fell asleep with his hand close to Raine’s lap. She, on the other hand, was wide-awake, watching as Eurich slept and noticing Jason watching her.

“Are you okay after last night?” Jason whispered to her.

“Yeah, I’m fine. I just got a really bad headache out of nowhere, but I’m fine now. So don’t worry.” Raine replied as she smiled at Jason. She quickly turned back to Eurich’s soft sleeping face.

”I guess it didn’t skip a generation...” Raine said softly.

“Did you say something?” Jason just wanted attention from her.

“No, nothing.”

“*I can’t believe it...*” She was excited, but thought it’d be best to talk in her head. She looked out the window, glancing at the trees and streams that she passed by. “*Mana of water, trees, people...I can see it all...*” She smiled big and looked back to Eurich.

“Raine, can I-” Jason wanted to ask her right there and then.

“Hold on, I want to see something.” She immediately closed her eyes and rested her head on Eurich’s shoulder, which aggravated and confused Jason.

He knew she was not asleep, but when he went to tap her, she didn’t move. She twitched as though she was having a bad dream. At that point, he knew that she just randomly fell asleep. He set aside his frustration because that was not exactly the first time she randomly fell asleep.

“Let’s see now.” Raine was sure she was dreaming. She suddenly opened her eyes and appeared in a dark void, nothingness all around her. “I can read minds...and, I can see mana.”

“How long have you had this ability?” A voice asked her from the blackness of the void.

“Months...seems like years though,” she replied.

“You awakened faster than the dragoon, impressive.”

“Who are you?” She looked around, but the darkness completely blinded her.

“It’s ‘your’ subconscious...” Out of the swirling void, red sparks began to rush towards her, the same sparks that Syrehnity produced as she moved. “You tell me.”

The specks stopped in front of her face.

“Meaning?” Raine questioned.

The glittering red lighting began to take human form, but it was smoky, like the substance inside Eurich’s stone. Everything about the silhouette was blurred out except her eyes.

“You’re...” Raine was beginning to deduce.

“Yes, I am you.”

“Then-then why do you look different?”

She opened her lavender eyes and touched Raine’s face with her insubstantial hand. “I am...you,” she said cryptically, then faded away.

As she disappeared, the blackness of the void became vivid color, an instant change in scenery. She was now in a forest where the trees were made of crystal. Snow fell in layers from the sky, but was strangely without temperature.

“Where am I?” Raine looked to the sky, searching for the other her. “Wait a minute...” She got a feeling of disturbance, so closed her eyes, taking in the mana around her.

“This isn’t my subconscious anymore...it’s...Eurich’s dream.”

She walked through the crystalline trees with one goal in mind—find Eurich and leave. The snow melted as it touched her skin, and the sun instantly dried the water that fell off her face. The rivers flowed as diamonds, blue topaz, and sapphire in the gemstone forest.

“This is beautiful...Eurich.”

She walked up the largest tree she could find and looked at herself with the cast reflection.

Raine stood there perfectly still and alone, but the reflection showed Eurich holding her. He stood behind her with his arm wrapped around her neck. She closed her eyes and then opened them to look back at the reflection. There, it showed that she had majestically purple eyes with flowing brunette hair.

She did not stagger. She accepted the dream and merely placed her hand where his would have been. It was perfect to her. She wore an elegant Victorian dress and Eurich had on a suit. It had an old-style value to it that Raine liked.

“Eurich...say something to me...anything.” She closed her eyes once more and embraced his invisible touch.

“I have to stop.” She pushed away, a blush clear on her face. The image in the tree faded away, but the snow grew lighter and Raine found it easier to walk. Treading through the melting snow, she noticed that there was a spot where the sunlight reached outside of the gemstone forest.

There was a brush of lusciously green grass in the dead center of the crystalline wood that surrounded it. A stream of sunlight beamed directly on the small patch. This was the only spot that had any type of color, beside the cascading jewel streams. Wildflowers sprang from the ground from every origin. They were colorful and delicate, but firm enough to withstand crushing. It would have been the perfect spot for a picnic if it were a real place.

A cracking sound came from the other side from of the meadow. It sounded like someone stepped on and broke a piece of glass.

It was Eurich.

Raine backed up as she saw Eurich approaching from the other side of the crystalline forest. Not sure on how she would impact the dream, she hid behind a tree, which was jagged enough to distort her image.

“Who is that?” Raine squinted her eyes, looking closer to see whom Eurich was with.

It was...her.

Raine stood there, peeking from the corner of the tree.

Eurich grabbed the dream influenced Raine in a romantic way, combing through her brunette hair with his fingers. He laid her down in the meadow and kissed her, looking deeply into her lavender eyes.

“Raine,” Eurich said with a profound softness to his voice. “I may not be able to compete with Jason, but-,” he paused, hearing a rustle come from the woods. Not thinking too much of it, he focused his attention back to Raine.

“...I love you.”

“I didn’t think...” Raine held on tightly to the largest branch of the tree. She wanted so badly to run out there and hug him.

“We have reached the destination,” a voice suddenly intruded upon his dream. The trees began to break apart and shatter as the flowers in the warm part of his forest began to wither. His dream was being ripped asunder.

Raine, unsure of how she entered his dream in the first place, started to panic and move frantically, searching for a way out. The pieces of the trees that fell gathered around her, and suddenly she was alone with her multiple reflections that cast from the ground. Eurich had already woken up from the sound of the bus driver announcing they arrived over the intercom, but Raine was still left in his dream, trapped.

“Raine must be sleeping hard,” said Eurich. “I need some fresh air. Wake her up, Jay.” Eurich climbed over them and exited the bus.

“Raine, time to get up,” said Jason, looking lustfully at her sleeping face. Staring at her, he forgot the objective Eurich left him with.

He saw her palm open and went to grab her hand.

Still in the dream world, she felt someone that was not Eurich trying to tug her. What she felt had no physical presence. It kept trying to pull her in and Raine was trying to resist.

“NO!” Raine screamed as she was waking up.

Jason quickly let go of her hand when the others students on the bus looked at him like he did something wrong. “Everything’s fine,” he said quickly. “She just had a nightmare.”

10. Two's Company

With everyone off the buses, the science teachers gathered the students in a circle to announce that they would be not only be hiking up the mountain trail, but they would be looking for things that appeared as 'strange material.'

"Sorry if this is short notice to some of you." Mrs. Singleton, their designated teacher, began to speak. "Not sure if most of you heard, but there have been reports of unearthly substances on this trail."

"Unearthly substances?" Eurich questioned.

"Objects with chemical a makeup not found on this planet. About a few weeks ago, it was announced. According to the chemists that were already out here, the material is not harmful to us. So, if you find anything, be sure to collect it."

"A whole day off for this? I'm not complaining." Jason smirked, turning to Eurich.

"Ok now," Mrs. Singleton continued. "Two teachers to every six students. No time to waste. Science does not pause. Raine, Eurich, Jason, whenever you're ready."

"Hey wait! Don't leave yet!" There was one last person on one of the buses that straggled behind. He looked groggy as he ran his fastest to catch up to Eurich. His shirt was messy and it looked as if he just woke up and made no attempt to fix his hair.

It was Mr. Andrews.

"What are you doing here? You're not a science teacher." Eurich stopped, almost demanding that Raine and Jason halt as well.

"I know I'm not, but I just love the mountain air," he said while trying to catch his breath. "Well, what are we waiting for? Let's go!"

"We break up into equal sides of the trail," Mrs. Singleton instructed. "My group will take the trail to the east. Mr. Black will take the mountain...and so on until we equal out."

"I'd like to take just Raine and Eurich. If you don't mind, of course." Mr. Andrews requested.

"This is for science, right?" she hissed.

"More than you know."

"Then...sure, just meet back up at the end of the expedition."

"What about me?" Jason did not want to be left alone. He hated feeling like the outcast.

"Your time will come," Mr. Andrews reassured.

"Well, Jason. Ready?" Mrs. Single dragged him away, ignoring the frown on his face.

"We've got to get going." Mr. Andrews led them to a narrow path with two boulders standing firm like a gate.

"Why can't Jason come?" asked Eurich.

"He isn't special like you," Mr. Andrews then turned to Raine. "Or you."

Eurich looked at Raine, then back to Mr. Andrews.

"You mean, like our grades?" Eurich asked. "He's in the top as well."

"No." Mr. Andrews' eyes shifted from a calm brown to a fiery crimson and a barrier appeared to protect the path from anyone who might have inadvertently entered.

Eurich dropped his bag with his mouth wide open.

"It seems Serra restored mana to your stone. It's up to you to activate the rest now," Mr. Andrews' voice was casual, not even acknowledging Eurich's surprise. "I can't tell you how, but...just know you have to do it."

“That’s great!” Eurich said sarcastically. “I supposedly have all this power and I can’t even use it.”

“Don’t worry, I think you can do it,” Raine said to reassure him.

“Raine, you knew?” Eurich was finding it a little hard to believe that magic had been around him the whole time and no one bothered to tell him until a few weeks ago.

“Um...I guess I’m a sorcerer, like your mother and mine,” she timidly replied. “I can see mana too...I can also use mana to form words and thoughts.”

“What does that mean?” asked Eurich.

“I can read minds,” Raine said lowly while twiddling her fingers.

“What?” Eurich asked surprisingly. “What do you mean you can read minds--does that mean?”

“Nope,” Raine interrupted, giggling. “You’re as blank as an empty page.”

Eurich looked to Mr. Andrews. “Does this mean you have a true form too?”

“I am what you see. I never liked the idea of mana cloaks.”

The walk up the mountain was weird to say the least. Eurich didn’t quite feel comfortable that everything seemed to happen so suddenly.

“So, how old are you?” Eurich asked.

“Not too old...that’s all,” he said coldly.

“Where are we going anyway?”

“Look ahead.” Mr. Andrews pointed to a highly elevated cliff.

“When did that get there? There aren’t mountains like that here.”

“In this path...it’s here. Only users of mana can see it and our activity up here. It’s the only part of Samsera that still remains.” They reached the cliff and he paused, causing Eurich and Raine to stop as well. “Keep going, to the edge. I’ll be right behind you.” He held his chin in a thinking posture and watched them leave him behind. “*I know Raine is powerful...but Eurich is questionable. His abilities haven’t awakened yet...*” he broke out of his thoughts. “Raine!” He shouted from across the way. “What types of mana can you see?”

“I can see sound vibrations, thought patterns...the barrier you just placed, and genetics.”

“*She is already more advanced than I thought,*” Mr. Andrews thought to himself. “Look at me.”

“Um...looking.” She laughed a little.

“My internal mana. What can you tell me about it?”

She concentrated hard on him. “It’s...yellow and swirls to the left.”

“*Impressive...and without the orange eyes.*”

“What about you, Eurich, how far have you gotten?” The rugged teacher focused his attention on him.

“I’ve gotten stronger a bit, but I don’t see this destiny of mine happening.”

Mr. Andrews walked over to Eurich with a threatening speed. “Then you are obviously not the one I want. Surely you are a mistake.”

“What do you mean? I have the stone.”

“Winds can kill, Mr. Aurion.” His eyes became more hostile, and he placed his hands behind his back. A robust wind blew his hair, spiraling around to form a ball in his hand.

“What are you doing?” Eurich backed up, but ran out of space when he reached the edge of the cliff.

“Aerostigma!” He released the wind from his hand in Eurich’s direction. The wind not only hurtled him from the mountain, it also slashed his cheek deeply.

“Eurich!” Raine screamed as gravity claimed his body. The band that held the braid in her ponytail popped. She turned towards the teacher with a semi-hateful, crazed look. “What did you do?”

An orange glow came from her eyes. The shift was finally happening.

“Finally awake.” Mr. Andrews was proud, but concerned for his safety at the same time. He feared what she was capable of.

“What the hell have you done?” Her voice became more intense. She held up her hand, lifting the teacher off the ground, choking him with her vibrant red mana that appeared vigorously around his neck.

“Raine...stop, I can't...breathe,” Mr. Andrews pleaded.

She did not listen, the grip around the teacher's neck only tightened. With the hand she had free, coagulated red mana began to leak out of Mr. Andrews and go into Raine. His life force was draining slowly.

“That's...a valkyrie's move...Raine...stop.” His voice began to fade out into unconsciousness.

A strong purple glow emanated behind Raine that lit up the sky. It was warm and familiar to her. Her green eyes took command once again and her grip on the teacher faded.

She ran over to the cliff and looked down. Eurich was still falling, but a glow was coming from his stone. Circular barriers with strange writing blossomed around him and armor quickly immersed his body. His metallic wings spread, flapping, and stopped him from falling any further.

Eurich pushed his way back up the mountain, flying with ferocious velocity. He rushed past Raine's face, hovering in the air above her, looking down.

Mr. Andrews took the chance while Raine was preoccupied to catch his breath.

Eurich descended and landed next to Raine. She quickly ran to him and buried herself in his arms.

“Everything's fine,” Eurich said in cold voice. He'd never been close to her that way and didn't know how to react. The fact that he was protecting Raine was enough.

“I...I almost killed him,” Raine had uncertain fear in her voice. “I couldn't control myself...I thought you were going to die.”

Eurich folded his wings and began walking over to Mr. Andrews.

“Not active for two minutes and you fly like a natural...” The teacher was coughing uncontrollably.

“Eurich...don't hurt him!” Raine ran to the teacher with his life force still in her hand. After she reached him, she kneeled down and touched his chest. “I'm sorry for that.”

The energy returned to him, though he still looked exhausted. He was stable and that's what was important.

“No, I'm sorry,” he said, still coughing profusely. “That was the only way I could think of. I was counting on the adrenaline to trigger the stone.”

“Thank you,” Eurich said sincerely. “I guess all I really did need was a push,” he laughed, thinking of Aurora. “I could've died, though.”

“Death isn't in your destiny. You have a prophecy to fulfill,” Mr. Andrews said, pulling himself up.

Eurich felt the power surging through his body, but slowly became weary. Even though he was happy to finally be wearing the same legendary armor as his father, all he wanted to do at the moment was take it off. He began pulling at the armor, gloves first.

“That armor is a part of your nerves. It is part of you, not something that you can just pull off,” said Mr. Andrews.

“Wait, I can’t take this off?”

“Calm down, boy. Of course you can. Try focusing mana back into that stone of yours.”

Eurich closed his eyes and placed his hand over the onyx. “Like this?” The stone dimly shined.

“Just like that, you’ve got it.” The teacher smiled, proud.

“Here goes…” Eurich exhaled, opening his eyes. Instead of armor retraction, there was a ball of flames contained in his hand.

“Eurich… WAIT!” Gala scurried back, surprised Eurich could muster something like that so fast.

The sphere of amethyst flames did not wait, it had a target and propelled instantly at the teacher.

“*Obliviate…an arcane?*” The teacher had no time for reaction, let alone thought.

“Eurich, stop!” Raine held out her hand and stopped the fire in its tracks. Time only stood still for the ball of flames, giving the teacher a chance to move away before time resumed.

“How did I…?” She looked at her hands, trying to figure out what the hell she just did.

“Raine?” Eurich looked over to her. “What was that?”

“I don’t know…it just happened…” She shook her hands and ran over to Eurich. “I’m sorry.”

“You saved his life. Don’t be.” He smiled at her.

“Magnificent,” the teacher clasped his hands together. “You two are starting out faster than I’d hoped.”

“Really? And sorry about trying to fry you…” Eurich rubbed the back of his head.

“It’s fine, but instead of trying to kill me this time, let’s get that armor off.” He inhaled deeply, taking in the brisk air. “Let’s give it another go.”

“Ok…” Eurich breathed in and Raine backed up a little. The stone let out a heavy glow and a purple aura around him began to peel away his armor.

“Good job,” the teacher congratulated. “A dragoon never looked better.”

Eurich’s glow dissipated and he was now in the clothes he put on. “That feels a lot better!”

Without waiting for Eurich to catch his breath, Raine tackled him to the ground.

“That was amazing!” Lying down, she played with his auburn hair and poked at his cheek. “Mr. Aurion the Dragoon, how does it feel?”

“It feels good,” Eurich replied. “Actually, I can’t even explain it--it feels…right.”

“*I think he is ready. Now we just need to find Samsara and restore the mana balance,*” Mr. Andrews thought to himself. “*He even prepared an arcane…his legacy is true.*”

“Alright guys, let’s meet up with the rest of the students. Our reason for being here is done.” Mr. Andrews said as he walked down the hidden path.

“Umm…you think I can try this dragoon thing again?” Eurich asked timidly.

“If you can handle it,” the teacher replied.

Eurich grabbed Raine and triggered his transformation, standing on the edge of the cliff with his black armor, eclipsing the newly risen sun.

“See you on the way down,” Eurich said as he flew down the cliff, holding Raine tightly.

Mr. Andrews sighed and smiled.

“Kids.”

11. Explanation, Please?

The ride home was a little more bearable. It was around seven o'clock and Jason, Raine, and Eurich fell asleep. For the first time in high school history, no one on the bus was talking. It was completely silent. After leaving the trail, everyone stopped for lunch, following another expedition before dinner. It was an all-day thing.

"We are now at the school, please exit in an orderly fashion," the driver announced, abruptly waking everyone.

"No school tomorrow!" Jason got off the bus and stretched, yawning. He jogged over to his car and opened all the locks with his remote key. "Well, you coming?" He looked at Eurich and Raine before getting in the driver's seat.

"We're coming," Eurich said. "I didn't think we'd be out all day." He walked slowly to the car, holding Raine. She was barely awake. The ride to Eurich's house was fast. He'd stopped by Raine's house first to drop her off. She was already half-asleep walking in, too tired to even look back at anyone to say goodbye.

"Freedom!" Jason opened the door to Eurich's house and the first thing he did was run up the stairs to Eurich's room. "You mind if I crash here? I swear I'd fall asleep on the way home."

"Don't worry about it. You know you're welcome here anytime," Eurich replied, laying down sheets and pillows on the floor.

"What's that for?" asked Jason. "I'm getting the bed."

Jason and Eurich both laughed, but it was short lived. Jason scowled, grimacing, not hiding the fact that something was bothering him.

"What's wrong?" asked Eurich.

"Why did Mr. Andrews take only you and Raine, what happened up there?" Jason rarely took a depreciate tone.

"It was nothing much. He just wanted to talk to us about grades and stuff," Eurich stuttered a little.

"I saw...that *thing* you turned into." Jason did not waste any time.

"Wait...what?"

"You had wings, and you fell, and you didn't die. It was...you were black and purple... and-and, the sky turned purple...why didn't anyone else see it?"

"Jason, it's okay, just calm down," Eurich said, sitting down at his computer desk. "*He said no one could see us...*" He slid to his drawer, quickly opening it to grab the book. There was a moment of pause before he tossed it on the bed "It turns out everything in this book is real," he said while flipping the pages. "Mr. Andrews knew, my parents knew, and even Raine's mother knew." He then flipped the page to Oblivion. "This...is my father, and I guess this is me now."

"Eurich, you can't expect me to believe that you were right this whole time."

"Jason, you said you saw it with your own eyes...I'm a dragoon." Eurich sighed. "Just... don't tell anyone." As a last resort, since Jason had a hard time believing him, he stood up focused his mana in the stone and transformed.

The purple aura that was let out around his body had an intense temperature, a heat that made Jason back up. Within a few seconds, the armor became part of him.

Jason moved further back, stunned by the dark warrior that now stood before him.

"See?" Eurich said to verify his story. He retracted the armor and sat down at his computer desk. "I won't bite, I'm still goofy Eurich."

“Are Raine and Mr. Andrews dragoons too? Is that why only you three went up that path?” Jason was still a little shook.

“No, I think I’m the only one. Raine is a sorcerer and I don’t know what Mr. Andrews is, but judging on how his eyes turned red and what this book says, I’d say that he’s a druid.”

“I want to become one, how do I become one?” Jason wanted to smirk, but his face was a little serious.

“What, a druid?” asked Eurich.

“No, a dragoon...that was really cool.”

“I don’t think that you have dragoon blood in your veins,” he explained. “Otherwise, I think Mr. Andrews would have asked you to come with us.”

“I just can’t believe that Raine has powers too...why couldn’t it be me? Am I not good enough?” Jason was starting to judge himself harshly.

“Jason,” Eurich called to calm him down. “Seriously? You’re a ladies’ man and you’re still the strongest person I know.”

“I guess you’re right, but I can’t even beat you in an arm wrestling match anymore.”

“Huh?” Eurich shrugged, after realizing what Jason said.

“I cheated...I couldn’t pin you down, I didn’t want to be embarrassed. I moved the table to catch you off guard...you’re stronger.”

“Jason...” Sympathy consumed his voice. “I-I didn’t know, I thought you were letting me win.”

“I don’t need your pity,” Jason was becoming exasperated. “...But I guess I do have a question. Why now? What are you and Raine supposed to accomplish?”

“I’m not sure about Raine, but I’m supposed to restore a mana balance and get to a place called Samsera. But I can’t make it to Samsera unless I find eyes that can see it...I guess,” Eurich replied.

“Lemme see that book for a second.” Jason reached over for it and looked over its pages. “Samsera, huh?” He nodded, as if he understood it all. “To think that someone like you could be the chosen one?”

“Chosen one does have a ring to it, but this all happened by chance,” said Eurich, disregarding Jason’s biased comment.

“It would be cool to have a super powered girlfriend.” A smug look attached itself to Jason’s face. “I guess I’ll just have to ask Raine another time.”

Eurich was no longer in the best mood after that statement. He thought that explaining that they both were above him would make him back off a little.

“I’m kind of tired.” Eurich said impassively, taking the floor without any debate. He closed his eyes and put his arms behind his head, resting without giving Jason the room to say anything else. He dreamt a familiar dream: a neighborhood in ruin, and also the first place he met Syrehnity. The setting was calmer this time, there were no fires blazing, but the debris and swirling ash remained. He walked carefully to the gazebo in the midst of all the wreckage and saw Syrehnity just sitting there, as if she was expecting him. Her body was still as transparent as Eurich remember, but she looked older now, at least in her early thirties.

“Eurich, what’s wrong?” asked Syrehnity as Eurich approached her.

“Nothing...”

“I wouldn’t appear to you if everything were alright.”

Eurich sighed and stopped in front of her. “Why is it so hard to let Jason have Raine? I’ll just feel awkward if he ends up dating her.”

Syrehnity swiftly faded through Eurich's body and removed his necklace. "Raine will make a favorable decision, but you and she are destined for great things." She held it up to the grey sky and turned around to face him. "Samsera is one step closer for you, but sadly the force that will lead you to Samsera will be the force that attempts to take your life."

"What does that mean?" asked Eurich.

"The eyes filled with mana will reveal Samsera to you. You possess the eyes now...only certain events in a prophecy can be avoided or changed. It is not completely up to you."

"Whose eyes will lead me there, my mother's, Raine's mother?"

"No," Syrehnity firmly said. "They are not strong enough."

"Have you seen what they can do? I think they are strong enough," Eurich opinionated.

"I think you know the truth, just think about it and accept it. You know, your eyes are pretty strong too, don't be surprised," Syrehnity said as she faded away.

"Wait!" Eurich said before she completely disappeared. "What about that bangle, it can't just be a piece of jewelry."

"It's sephrym, when worn it amplifies your power, but it brings out inner darkness, just like Oblivion's stone."

Syrehnity threw Eurich's stone to the ground. "Aster lost to Oblivion's will, he became...different. Don't let Oblivion change you."

"You know my dad?"

Syrehnity glided over to and touched Eurich's face gently, smiled, and started to float away. "We will meet again...true love prevails, don't worry."

She disappeared and a paper was left behind in her wake.

Eurich went over to pick it up. Wiping the ash from the paper, he read it:

Galion is no longer in Aster's control, but it is not for you to use. Celest is what you can borrow in the meantime.

"What does this mean?" He asked.

There was no answer. She was not kidding about trying to leave.

"Heh...at least she's pretty."

12. Training Day

The doorbell rang, waking Eurich and Jason.

“Damn...” Jason put his arm over his face. “Who opened the blinds?”

“Hehe...the almighty sun defeats Jason,” Eurich chuckled.

“And the pillow defeats Eurich.” He immediately tossed his pillow at him before lying back down.

“I’ve got it!” Albert yelled from downstairs. He looked through the peephole and gritted his teeth. “*What does he want?*” He thought to himself. “*Hasn’t he caused enough damage...?*” He did not know what to expect as a repercussion to opening the door, but since he somewhat needed him, he really did not have much of a choice.

“Come in,” said Albert, slightly hesitant.

“Where is Eurich?” asked Gala, coming in without any permission.

“He’s-”

“Upstairs with Jason, why?” Serra completed, glaring intensely at the teacher wither her cold orange eyes, intimidating and hateful.

“He activated Oblivion yesterday, we need to train him for the event he does meet Chaos sooner than expected,” Gala said with no hesitation.

“He WHAT!?” Serra tried not to yell too loudly.

“Serra...please.” Albert put his hand on her shoulder.

“Okay...okay,” Serra said forlornly. “We’ll find a spot in the forest...we’ll teach him how to beat an Omni,” she became sarcastic. “Oh, and while we’re at it, we can teach him how to take down a druid...you know, in the event he fights someone like *you*.” The sarcasm in her voice was drowned out from her increasing anger.

“Serra,” Albert hugged her. “Eurich will be fine, he’ll have us, and we’ll fight beside him. Let’s try to be nice to the teacher, okay?”

Serra broke out of his hug and walked away without a word. Whether she was torn with spite or agony, no one would know. It was hard to tell. She was hard to understand sometimes and she liked it that way.

Eurich and Jason came downstairs, less than eager to start the new day.

Serra saw the boys coming down and tried to fix her attitude, but her face was beet red, not from blush, but her anger would not settle down. Amongst all the people who added to the scenery, Jason still seemed out of place.

“Look who’s here...” Jason said to Eurich, looking at the teacher.

“I wonder what he wants.” Eurich was a little shocked to see him as well.

“I’ll go find out.” Jason rushed over to the teacher like a fan wanting an autograph. “Why am I not *special*? Turn me into whatever the hell Eurich is.” Jason’s words were rushed and irritated. The good mood he woke up in went away quickly. “Please, I need this.”

“I assume Eurich told you everything...you weren’t born with his and Raine’s capabilities, to put it simply.” Mr. Andrews’ face was indifferent while talking to Jason and his cold voice pierced Jason’s heart like an icicle.

Jason started to walk out the door, torn and diminished.

“Stay,” said Mr. Andrews. “We are about to begin his training.”

“Training?” asked Eurich. “What training?” He looked at Albert.

“There’s a decent forest behind the house...a good spot.” Albert opened the back door, letting the breeze and the sunlight invade.

“What about Raine, is she going to train with us?” Eurich asked.

“No, I’m sure that she will be training with her mother.” Albert proceeded out the back door. Shortly afterward, everyone else followed.

A secluded part in the woods, surround by tall trees was the destination. The grass was short and the flowers grew wild. Some of the trees were toppled over and Cedar Waxwings rested on the branches far above the ground.

“This spot is perfect,” said Mr. Andrews. “I’ll begin now.” His eyes quickly shifted to red “Decepto.” He touched the ground with both hands, raising a barrier around the large, open wood.

“Eurich, this barrier stops anyone from seeing what we are doing,” Serra explained. She stepped back next to Albert. “Vizard.” She and Albert both floated above the ground, glowing, creating a robust wind that forced the birds to scatter.

“Whoa!” Jason jumped back, but could do nothing but stare. Never had he’d imagined that something like that could happen.

“I know,” Eurich reprised. “I’m still not used to it.”

Jason smirked a little. “They look like BFF’s.”

“Hush up. We are still your elders,” Serra scolded.

Jason found a good spot on the grass to sit on, leaving Eurich standing with everyone else.

“Today, we’ll show you how to use your weapon,” said Albert. “Call for Galion, and... don’t transform today.”

“Hold on, give me a chance to-”

“Ready or not!” Albert put his hands together, fashioning a sword out of the mana that lit up his fingers. “No mercy, if you happen to die, then your journey is already over.” He spoke casually, then, almost in the same instant, he rushed at Eurich with a sword that was sharper than the thinnest jet stream. He had no remorse for swinging at his son. It was shoot to kill, or in his case, slice and dice.

Albert’s agility was unprecedented. It was a miracle that Eurich was able to dodge at all.

“Galion...” Eurich called, hoping to receive the weapon that would make it easier for him to fight. He wanted to feel more connected to his birth father by wielding it.

“...Galion!”

“Galion,” he kept calling for the scythe, but it would not appear.

Eurich dodged rather well, though he was exhausted. Sweat ran down his face and his usual peachy tone was starting to diminish. Even so, Albert did not let up. He continued swinging, not like a person who just started sword fighting. He fought with a distinctive style, like a master.

“You’re getting slow!” Albert raised his sword and slashed down firmly, cutting Eurich in the face before throwing him down to the ground.

The stone quickly reacted and healed the wound.

Eurich quickly rose to his feet and pushed Albert with both of his palms open, easily sending him flying about ten feet. Eurich roared. The pupils in his eyes narrowed, looking more reptilian. His face became filled with rage and hate. Not the hate that he would give a family member, but the hate he would have given a stranger. The purple mana slowly poured over his

body, masking him like a cloak. Eurich clenched his fists and accepted the magical transformation. He roared as he ran towards Albert with his wings fully spread out.

With a single cut, his humanity was gone...just like that.

Eurich gritted his teeth and placed his hands around the stone, producing a ball of fire.

“Rantyx!” Serra yelled, projecting Eurich further into the woods. She sullenly looked down, knowing the origin of when she had to use that spell in the past. “Albert...Restrain him please.”

“Damn...what a hit.” Albert got up, trying to catch his breath. He placed a binding seal on Eurich, for his and everyone else’s safety.

Jason got up and tried to run to Eurich, but Serra’s sharp voice halted him.

“Stay down!” Serra yelled. “This is out of your league.”

“I remember when I was the strong one, this is madness.” Jason scoffed as he went back to sit down.

Serra walked over to Eurich, where he was struggling to break free of the binding, growling, and snarling.

“Down boy.” Her index finger shone as she touched his stone.

Eurich stopped in his restless movement and the armor retracted back into the onyx.

“That’s right, Eurich. Calm down.” She gently graced over his face

His eyes were droopy and tired, but at least he was calm. It wasn’t long until he fell asleep.

“I’ll grab him,” Albert jogged over and grabbed him, moving him from the unorganized woods, into the open. “We definitely dodged a bullet there.”

“We’ll continue when he wakes up,” said Serra firmly. “Just because he passed out does not mean he is off the hook.” She looked over to Jason. “You are free to go. It may be a while before he wakes up.”

“I’ll stay...” Jason looked a little calmer.

“Fine, this shouldn’t take too much longer.”

An hour passed and Eurich started to open his eyes. Jason was closer to the teacher, talking. Serra was standing next to a tree, and Albert was sitting next to him.

“Ready to continue?” Albert stood up and took a few steps back from him.

Eurich had not become fully oriented but he stood up as if he was ready to take on the world.

“Yeah, come at me again,” Eurich replied. His voice was calm and his face was no longer flushed.

“Heh...” Albert allowed. “Not like you have much choice. He formed his sword again and charged at Eurich. The sunlight bled through his clear weapon as he slashed down. Albert was serious and Eurich was finally starting to understand that.

“This is a bit...easier,” Eurich said in between huffs. Dodging seemed like child’s play since he fainted.

“Hmm.” Albert raised his eyebrow, swinging faster.

“Galion!” Eurich called out again, but still nothing. “Dammit.” He was fully prepared to clash his weapon with Albert’s. Twigs and leaves snapped as Eurich trapped himself into a corner. His back was to a large tree. Luckily, Albert was about two feet away.

“I really thought it would end better than this,” Albert said as he repeatedly tossed and caught his sword.

Serra and Jason looked away.

“Serra was right...you are hard-headed.” A gentle voice rose in Eurich’s head as he panicked.

“Syrehnity?” Eurich whispered to himself.

“I gave you a hint,” she replied. *“I won’t tell you anymore.”*

Eurich closed his eyes, not caring that his father was drawing in closer to him.

“Sorry about this.” Albert picked up speed and was ready to slash down.

“Celest...” Eurich said calmly. Bright teal twinkles of mana began to form around his hand. The mana solidified in his tight grip, gifting him a sword from Syrehnity. With no questions asked, he accepted it.

“The hell?” Albert tried to pause, but he was already swinging.

Sparks flew off their blades as they collided. The resulting shock of the impact broke Albert’s sword and sent him flying back at least ten feet.

Eurich smiled a little, looking at his newly acquired weapon.

The blade was glistening like diamond and the hilt was metallic teal, covered in bright semi-precious gems. Ostentatious maybe, but it was a weapon nonetheless, a blade of at least forty inches.

“Celest...?” Serra said quietly to herself. *“Eurich has more capability than I thought, but when did she-?”* She cut herself off in mid thought and rushed next to her husband.

Albert lay on the ground, smiling, trying to catch his breath at the same time. He was beaten, but he was proud. “Better than I thought.”

“This is enough for today,” yelled Serra.

“Thank you...” Eurich let out a big sigh and slumped to the ground. He loosened his grip and the sword dissipated to wherever it came from.

“Good session...better than expected.” Mr. Andrews let down the barrier and they all walked back to the house, everyone, except for Jason. He continued to sit, lost in thought. The way he looked down was sad, like no one in the world cared for him. That was not the case. He knew that he would always have someone to have his back. The problem was him having Eurich’s back.

Albert stopped and turned, looking at Jason. He started to walk towards him, but paused when he realized why Jason was upset. Not saying anything or making any gesture, he let Jason sit there, wallowing in his own envy. Albert understood it a little, considering it was what he often felt towards Aster.

“Albert, come on, it’s getting a little windy.” Serra moved over to him, grabbed him by the arm, and pulled him home, leaving Jason by himself.

They came in through the glass plated double back doors, where it had an archway consisting of two doves and vintage, ivory pillars.

“I meant to tell you that you have a wonderful home.” Gala stated. “Almost a million dollars I’d say, but I will not guess the price.”

“Thanks...” Serra replied while opening her cabinet to get some glasses. “I know you three must be exhausted, maintaining a barrier that size.” She walked over to the table where they were sitting. “First day of training, and losing to your son.” She laughed, before walking back into the kitchen to get a pitcher and pour ice tea.

They all drank in eerie silence because someone was missing. Distraught and unappreciated, Jason walked through the back door. Something was unpleasant about him, from the way he hunched his shoulders down to the arch in his eyebrows. He spoke not a word to

anyone. Sure, there was a reason for the envy, but there was no reason for him to feel he did not have a friend in the world.

Eurich turned to Jason, finding it hard to fight back tears of sympathy. Helplessly, he watched Jason walk into the kitchen. Eurich did not do anything wrong, but he felt worthless as he watched Jason sulk. It was like him betraying his best friend for power, and it ate him alive. The thought of knowing, for a second, that he was causing Jason's anguish troubled him.

"Jason," Albert called out. "Drink some tea with us." The only person who could understand him at that point was a person who went through it.

Jason grunted, like he did not need permission. He was already headed towards the cabinet to grab a glass. Still looking distraught, he leaned into the refrigerator and grabbed the pitcher and helped himself. Slumping just a little, he sat at the table with the others.

"I can't believe how helpless I was..." Jason grimaced. "How did I go from being the strongest one in the group to the weakest one in the pack?" His questions had a rhetorical tone, but Jason wanted them answered.

"You're not weak," Eurich reassured. "You can do lots of things that I can't."

"Like what!" Jason yelled. "I'm good for watching! Does that FREAKING sound strong to you?" His anger rose quickly. Just a few seconds before, he seemed okay. "I don't need your ridicule and I don't need your sympathy. You just...got lucky." He broke his glass on the ground and hastily bolted out the front door, slamming it behind him.

Not only was the front door chipped a little, but it also sounded like he slammed the door to his car the same way before letting the engine drown out his unresolved feelings.

Jealousy was tearing Jason apart and Eurich knew there was absolutely nothing he could do to amend it, except for one thing. Eurich sighed at the thought of it, but there was no other choice.

"Give him time," said Albert, knowing Eurich was plotting something. "He'll get over it. I can understand where his envy is coming from. I felt the same thing with your father."

"Really?" asked Eurich.

"Yes, he was always showing off in front of Serra, and I wasn't that strong," Albert explained. "The same thing is happening with you and Raine, I can tell he likes her too...just give him time."

"Fine..." Eurich walked into the living room to look out the window and saw Jason speed down the road with fury. Albert followed behind shortly.

"What am I supposed to be doing with this power? Surely it wasn't given to me just for training...what am I training for? Besides restoring some mana balance...I don't know."

"Do you remember when we showed you how Serra helped to seal away Chaos?" asked Albert.

"Yes," Eurich replied.

"Well, the seal placed on him is weakening, and soon, he'll be free..."

"Be free?" Eurich questioned.

"That's a bad thing, Eurich. He needs to be stopped so another uprising doesn't happen again. The last thing we need is someone competing for his power. We would try more seals, but we need to end this for good. Another dragoon has to be the one to do it."

Serra turned away.

"You mean...you want me to defeat the guy who defeated my father? I don't think that I can do that," said Eurich. "I've only been a dragoon for a day--"

Serra interrupted, "No, you've been a dragoon since you were born."

“I-I can’t lose my friend over this. I have to go.” It was all becoming too much for Eurich to comprehend. He grabbed the stone around his neck, like it was its fault, before running out the front door.

“Eurich stop!” His mother called after him.

Eurich stopped, holding his stone, purple aura almost completely covering his body.

“Yes?” He turned around, giving her a side profile.

“Be careful,” she warned.

“I will.” He transformed, and then flew high in the sky. Determination was what he had. He absolutely refused to lose a friend over something so stupid. Throughout the years, they had their fair share of idiotic fights, but that was something different. Envy was being bred into hatred, and that is what Eurich feared.

Gentle winds blew calmly as he flew west. The sound of Jason’s car still echoed through the trees, though his car had already stopped. About two miles out, Jason was parked next to a lake surrounded by trees that all were over twenty feet.

“Found you...” Flying down, Eurich wanted to be silent, not wanting to alert Jason he was there quite yet.

“Dammit!” Jason said, tossing stones into the water. He tossed them like he hated the water they skipped on. The ripples in the water were wide. The lake would have been, otherwise, calming scenery, but feelings of resentment easily turned it into grounds of turmoil.

“What do you want?” said Jason, seeing the purple glow from the retraction of Eurich’s armor. “I have nothing more to say to you, nor will I apologize, if that’s what you are looking for.”

“I’m not asking for an apology,” Eurich was stern in his voice. “I just want to understand, talk to me.”

“Nothing left to talk about...” He finally turned around to acknowledge him.

“Jason, please-”

“Eurich, no! You’re getting used to this sympathy crap. You are not better than me.”

“Seriously, Jay? You think I’m better than you?” Eurich slowly approached him.

“Don’t turn this around. Since you got stronger, it’s been all about you, don’t act like you didn’t know...”

“I didn’t choose this,” replied Eurich. “I didn’t even want this. Do you think that I want to fight a battle that should’ve ended thousands of years ago?” He backed up a little, standing his ground.

A frustrated look came across Jason’s face, like he was not ready for Eurich to question him. Jason looked down from Eurich’s face, slowly, down to the stone that lie around his neck.

“If you want it, then take it...I don’t want to be the strong one, that’s your job.” He attempted a smile, but the vigor was not there

“Don’t mess with me,” Jason added.

Eurich’s smile faded into grimace. “Not messing...” He ripped the stone off his neck and threw it at Jason’s feet.

Jason blankly stared at it. The wind stopped blowing and the two stood a standstill. It took him a second to realize what was going on. In a way, he could read what Eurich’s body language was asking. Not fully realizing, Jason stood still.

“What the hell are you waiting for, take it!” Eurich screamed. “If me being stronger than you is putting a bind on our friendship, then I’ll give up that power.” He balled his fists tight,

trying to stop himself from shaking, from both anger and fear. It was a rush, yelling at him felt gratifying because he had never done it before.

Jason wanted to pick up the stone at that point, but didn't want to seem weak and needy.

"I don't need you to give me anything...Eurich, don't you get it? You think your power is from that stone? It's you! You got everything, I was supposed to be destined for great things, but everything has only worked out for you."

"Why are you jealous? I didn't ask for this...take it." He pointed to the stone, not really wanting to let it go. A decision had to be made. Give it up or lose Jason, possibly forever.

"I don't have time for this." He kicked dirt over the stone at his feet.

"Listen." Eurich had to think carefully about what he had to say. "I guess you're right...I can't give you my mana, but the stone will make you transform, I'm sure. Take it..."

Jason bent over slowly, almost smiling at the fact that he had won. Wiping the dirt off the stone, he picked it up.

Eurich frowned as Jason examined the stone. He could not believe that he just lost his transformation. Who would stop Chaos? All he could hope for was that Jason picked up the power as fast as he did.

"Looks better on you..." Eurich turned around, willing to walk miles to his house.

"What's this?" The stone began to shine around Jason's neck.

"*Already transforming?*" Eurich frowned a bit more. "Looks like you're the chosen one..."

Jason grabbed the stone, the increasing heat emitting from it was uncomfortable. The necklace faded into a silver light, disappearing into thin air.

"*Don't be reckless, the stone is yours.*" Syrehnity spoke to Eurich before the stone appeared around his neck once more.

"YOU'RE NOT BETTER THAN ME!" Jason screamed. "I thought you were above this." Though Eurich was stronger, he still flinched at his indignant voice.

"Jason...I'm sorry...I didn't know"

"See, this is *your* destiny," Jason said in an 'I told you so' manner. "Go home."

"I'm sorry, Jason." He apologized again. "This wasn't my choice."

"The power, and Raine...you think you can have everything," Jason said under his breath between his gritting teeth.

From a fair distance away, Eurich heard what he said, but chose not to say anything. Jason was destroying himself and Eurich couldn't stand to watch.

"I won't do this with you." Eurich activated his stone and hovered slightly above him. He knew transforming in front of Jason would anger him, but he didn't care.

"We are all friends no matter what. I'll wait for you to see that." Eurich spoke with confidence and superiority.

"What do you know?" Jason said, still quite upset.

No response was needed. Eurich turned south, taking off and heading home. He left with regrets, but was proud of standing up for himself. Leaving Jason behind at that moment was the best thing he could do for their friendship.

13. Concern

The days at school went by slowly. Jason did not talk to anyone and had not shown up to school for weeks. Eurich and Raine spent more time together, but the trio was not complete, not for a while. Patricia was still out as well. Nothing seemed right anymore.

The bell rang to let the students out of third period. The allotted seven minutes in between classes gave students the chance to catch up, stop at a vending machine and, occasionally, help the nerd that was pushed down by some bully.

Not three feet out of his classroom, Eurich saw Raine waiting for him at his locker.

“Hey,” Raine pushed herself off the locker and skipped toward him. “Today...marks three weeks that I haven’t seen Jason, no texts or anything. What’s up with him?”

“I think he’s feeling a little left out,” he replied, putting his back against the locker. “Maybe I shouldn’t have told him about any of this.”

“You did the right thing, Eurich. He’ll come around. Graduation for us is in a month after all.” Raine said, trying to smile. It seemed that in the weeks since she last saw Jason, smiling was no longer her forte. “How is your training going?” She sharply changed the subject. Jason would have put them both in a less than charming mood.

“Nothing but getting swords and bolts thrown at me for the last three weeks. I’m surprised I’m not dead yet,” Eurich huffed, like he was still defending himself. “What about your training?”

The number of students began to die down. Most of them were in their classes, but there were still a few stragglers: the ones who would rather take a write up instead of being in class.

“I guess mine is easier because I don’t do anything physical, but I’m getting pretty strong. Soon enough I’ll be able to stop my aging,” Raine eagerly responded. “I’ll be seventeen forever ha ha ha...”

“Wow, you’re moving fast, at the rate I’m going I’ll grow old and die in no time-”

“So,” Raine cut him off. Slightly different things were on her mind. “Tickets to the ball are on sale. Who are you going-” She paused, letting the bell finish ringing before she continued the rest of her sentence.

She waited patiently for the bell to subside, but Eurich preempted.

“We’ll talk at lunch, ok?” Eurich touched her on the shoulder and glided to his next period class.

“C’mon, Raine,” she said to herself as she crossed her arms and watched him walk away. “You’re better than this.” Brushing the hair out of her face, she walked to her class as well.

“Almost late again,” A fellow classmate welcomed as Eurich came in the door. She was ready, pencil out and everything.

“But I wasn’t.” Eurich avoided eye contact with her and went straight to his desk in the middle of the classroom. He never really cared too much for her anyway, she was a know-it-all.

He looked up to see that the whiteboard was clean. It was a little strange. Normally at the beginning of each class, it was filled with quotes and riddles as a warm up.

The final bell rung, and about a minute later, the teacher walked in.

“We seriously need a teacher tardy system,” said another classmate as Mr. Black placed his papers on the desk.

“Very funny, Paul,” Mr. Black said sarcastically as he began his lesson for the day. “First of all I would like to thank all of you for making my class so fun, and to celebrate your early

graduation, I've decided to do something a little differently today." He picked up a marker and turned around, writing something on the board.

"What is it?" The girl who mentioned Eurich's 'tardy' said. She had already pressed her pencil to the paper, ready for anything the teacher was ready to dish out.

"A riddle, Samantha," Mr. Black replied, his back to the board now. "The first person to figure it out will be exempt from the mid-term." He cleared his throat. "Final...considering you are all graduating early."

Chatter overtook the classroom. They were all excited about possibly not doing more work. Pencils out, they anxiously waited for the teacher to move out the way.

"Piece of cake." Samantha pushed up her thin-framed glasses and moved her face closer to the paper.

"Ready--solve!" Mr. Black moved out the way and let the riddle be known to everyone:

This child has no age and no mother, but will be continually reborn when the storm clouds gather.

Samantha began writing away, thinking too hard on an obvious answer.

"Looks a little familiar..." Eurich whispered to himself. It was something he had seen before, but never gave much thought. "Just like the message from the bangle..."

Everyone in the classroom tried hard to figure it out, but Samantha was especially perplexed.

"It has something to do with an Indian tribe, doesn't it?" Samantha was getting a bit frustrated.

"Good try." Mr. Black said instead of giving her a no.

"It's rain," Eurich said after not giving it much thought.

"Rain?" asked Mr. Black. "How do you figure that?"

"Storm clouds appear grey because of the building of condensation. Rain pours from light to moderate, then to heavy. As far as children with no mother, clouds have no gender, but still consider rain as their children who are born multiple times with each new storm."

"Correct!" said Mr. Black, surprised that it was so easy for him. "I thought that it would've taken longer to crack this one. Don't worry class, there will be other opportunities."

"That should've been mine." Samantha complained to Mr. Black.

Eurich tuned out both his teacher and his peer. He was lost in thought, trying to tie the riddle from the board to the message in the bangle.

"Was the message telling me that the rain will harm me? Maybe Oblivion is weak against water...he is fire-based after all."

"Weak against water?" Syrehnity's gentle voice arose from the depths of his mind. *"Pokémon hasn't influenced you in years."*

"There's nothing else I can think of, the riddle and now this. No coincidence."

"What riddle?" Syrehnity laughed a little.

"The one in the bangle, the one you gave me," he countered.

"You think too much."

The bell rang to let everyone out for lunch.

"Remember class," Mr. Black caught everyone on the way out. "You guys are the future."

"Were you paid to say that?" Paul snickered as he went out the door.

“Not any more than the usual salary,” Mr. Black countered. “Oh, Eurich.” He stopped him and firmly shook his hand.

“Yes?” Eurich tried to mimic the teacher’s grip.

“Excellent work on solving! It took me quite a while to think of that one.”

“Well, let’s just say I had some practice.”

“Well, have a good lunch.” The teacher released him.

“I’ll try.” Eurich walked out into the hallway filled with decorations for the winter ball. There were cut out snowflakes and glittered snowmen all over the walls. He went straight for the cafeteria because it was too cold to eat out in the courtyard.

“C’mon.” Eurich tried his best to maneuver around the students who were just standing there. It was even more difficult to get around the corners, but he trudged on until he reached his destination.

The stage in the cafeteria was usually used for short announcements and presentations, but its use that day was slightly different. There was a long line of eager students waiting to get tickets to the winter ball, as if they would rather skip on the school’s lunch just to wait in line, and no one could blame them.

Eurich saw Raine across the cafeteria sitting and laughing with a group of friends. He cut through the line and made his way over to her.

“I didn’t realize we had that many early graduates,” Eurich said to her as he looked at the long line.

“I just can’t believe the school is really letting us go early,” said Patricia cheerfully, but slightly low-keyed. She blended well in with everyone at the table. She smiled under her mitten-covered and coughed lightly, pausing as soon as everyone had noticed she was there. “I’m back...”

“Wow!” Eurich rejoiced. “You’re actually here today? That’s great!” He got up from his seat and hugged her tightly, before sitting back down.

“Yeah...I didn’t expect to be sick that long, but I’m here now!” Her voice was still a little muffled, she was getting better, but she still had a little recovering to do. “I’m just glad I was able to do all my work from home. Anyway, we were all going to the movies this weekend, did you want to come?”

Before he could give an answer, he was distracted by the thunderous sound of the rain hitting the concrete in the courtyard. It was loud and treacherous, heavy rain followed by a robust wind. The windy rain pulled the bark off the trees and nearly cracked the glass. It would have been insane for him to go out there. It would have been insane for anyone to be out there at all. The piercing sound of the monsoon hitting the glass and concrete got his attention initially, but that is not what kept it.

“*Is that?*” Eurich squinted, trying to focus on the drenched silhouette.

“Eurich, are you listening?” Patricia snared, cutting him off in mid thought. “Hello? I guess I’m talking to a wall.”

“*What is he looking at?*” Raine followed his gaze, but could not see past the dew that stained the windows. The figure waved in and out in accordance to the way the rain splashed on the glass. “*If I can’t see you...*” She closed her emerald eyes and then opened them to reveal her orange gems. “*The hell?*” She was shocked at what the mana told her. Moving her tray aside with uneaten food, she moved next to Eurich.

“His mana changes constantly,” She grabbed Eurich’s hand. “It doesn’t flow naturally anymore. It’s all black and it swirls differently.”

“At least he’s alive.” He let go of Raine’s hand. “Should we go?”

“I think so.”

They both got up and headed towards the doors that would let them out into the courtyard. The rain subsided a little, but not so much that it was noticeable.

“Here goes nothing.” Eurich nodded to her and opened the door. They both were soaked almost immediately after stepping under the tress.

“I like the new haircut,” Raine said to break the ice, trying her hardest not to shiver. Jason’s hair was relatively short, but not so short that it was military. “Looks good on you.”

Jason ignored the comments, getting up to walk back inside. He didn’t give as much as a scoff or frown.

“Hold up,” Eurich demanded. “I don’t know what’s going on with you, but whatever it is, it’s stupid.”

Jason stopped and turned.

“How does it feel, Eurich?” Jason asked with the same incriminating indignation.

“How does what feel?” He questioned back.

“How does it feel to be the one in control?” Jason continued. “Now you know what it’s like to be the one on top. You’ve got the power and even the girl.”

Eurich just stood back, not wanting to confront him.

Jason effortlessly moved over to Raine. “I may not be a dragoon, but I can give you a lot more,” he said while gently brushing her face.

Raine moved farther back with a scared look on her face. It wasn’t fear for herself, but fear for what she could do to Jason.

“Jason, stop,” she backed herself into a corner and couldn’t move anymore.

The rain died down a little more, it was more like a gentle shower.

Jason wiped the water out of his face and continued with more advances. “You don’t understand, Raine. Don’t just choose because it seems right.” He tried kissing her on the neck.

“Enough Jason!” Eurich dashed over to him, grabbing Jason’s arm to try to detain him. “You’re so much better than this.”

“Like you would know.” He yanked his arm back, but Eurich grabbed it again.

“Jason, I said enough!” Eurich boomed, pulling Jason away with one hand. It was clear who was stronger.

“Back off.” Jason swung his warm back, hitting Eurich in the face and busting his lip.

Eurich staggered back, but soon caught his balance as the stone glowed to heal his wound. He did not quite know what to make of being hit, so he stood there trying to come up with a reason as to how it came to that.

With Eurich preoccupied with thought, Jason continued with his advance towards Raine.

“Jason, don’t you see what you are doing?” Raine placed her hands on his stomach as an attempt to hold him back, but it was not very fruitful.

“He’ll be fine. What about us?”

“I said stop!” Her eyes glowed orange and she released a loud force from her hands that pushed Jason into a bush. She gasped and fell to her knees immediately afterwards.

Eurich ran over to Raine.

“Are you okay?” he wiped her face off.

She turned to the cafeteria, where the students’ faces were pasted to the glass, staring at them. They really did not see what happened, they were just curious about what made that shrill noise.

“Raine?” Eurich questioned again.

She looked at him with her sad, jade eyes and took off into the building.

Eurich just stood there, watching as some of the students came outside to help Jason out of the bushes.

“Get off of me!” Jason pushed off the people who were trying to help him up and walked into the building.

The clouds in the sky began to break apart, letting the sunlight shine through. Patricia came out, hopping over puddles until she reached Eurich. Jumping one final time, she grabbed hold of his arm, trying to balance herself so she would not get her shoes dirty.

“Hey...” Eurich barely acknowledged her.

“What happened?” Patricia asked, grabbing his face so he could look her in her bottomless hazel eyes.

“I...don’t know.” Still, he did not acknowledge her.

“Eurich!” She grabbed his arm tighter. “I won’t let go.”

“Jason just flew off the handle, nothing too serious.” He did not want to reply, but he did not want her pestering him. “Can you please check on Raine?”

“Yeah...don’t do anything rash, ok?”

“Of course.”

Patricia began to move away from him, not really wanting to leave him alone. Though she was worried for Eurich, Raine was her primary concern. She knew exactly where to go, the same place Raine always went when she was upset.

“The bathroom again, huh? Too predictable Raine.” She went in to open the door and then halted in her movement. The bathroom was public, but she still felt that it was best to knock.

“Raine?” She repeatedly knocked on the door. “Raine, are you in there?”

There was no answer, so she lightly pushed the door open.

“Raine, you in here?” There, she saw Raine sitting on the floor with her back against the wall.

“The great goldilocks not smiling?” Patricia teased.

Raine put her head up and wiped the tears from her face, but did not say anything.

“Are you alright?” Patricia sat down next to her.

Raine wiped her face again. “I’m fine. I just don’t know how to handle this.” She spoke more clearly and her eyes were now orange. “I could have seriously hurt him, but I didn’t know what else to do.”

“Handle what? Jason, or your coming in to mana?” Patricia asked as she moved Raine’s hair behind her ear.

“Jason...he’s becoming so different and not to mention he’s grown distant,” Raine sniffed. “It’s been nothing but conflict, ever since he found out Eurich was a dragoon.”

“I still wanna see that in person, sounds kind of cool.” She laughed.

“It is cool.” Raine sounded happier, but sniffed again.

“There we go.” Patricia was succeeding in her goal. Changing the subject was the only way she knew Raine would let it go. “Picture messages don’t capture the light on his armor that well.”

“Well, it’s pretty stunning in person.” She smiled, eyes back to green now.

“How about this?” She grabbed a paper towel, wetting it to wipe away the dry tears from Raine’s cheeks. “We’ll invite Jason to the movies this weekend.”

“But-” Raine did not quite agree.

“Let me finish.” Patricia began wiping just a bit harder. “I want to get closer to him, just give me a chance to fix him. Maybe he needs a girl.”

“You think that’ll work?” She closed her eyes as Patricia wiped further up.

“I hope so. Your eyelashes are getting really long, you know that?” She got up and offered Raine a hand.

“You think so? Is that bad?” Raine accepted the offered hand and rose to her feet.

“No, not at all. Your freckles are cute too!”

“I don’t have freckles.” She paced over to the mirror, wiping her hands on her face and stretching her skin.

“Gotcha.” Patricia laughed.

“Not funny!”

“Well, you can kinda see them, but they aren’t too bad. They blend in well.” Patricia leaned against the edge of the sink.

“So, movie?” Raine wanted the details and the subject changed.

“Zombie flick! Jason hates those. I think it’ll be funny watching him get all squeamish.”

“That would be pretty funny to see...” her voice was still unsure.

“Raine, Raine.” She put both of her hands on Raine’s shoulders. “You are technically my fiancé. That means I will not let anything happen to you. Now come on.”

Raine grabbed her hand and accompanied her down the hallway.

“I’m thirsty.” Raine stopped at a vending machine. “You can go sit back down. I’ll be there in a minute.”

“You sure?” Patricia let go of her hand.

“Yeah, I’ll just be a sec.”

“Okay. I see Eurich sitting down. I’ll tell him you’re alright.” She walked away, moving swiftly to the table.

Raine cringed a little as she felt a familiar mana approaching her.

“Yes, Jason?” She didn’t even need to turn around.

“Sorry for earlier...and I guess the last few weeks.” He was calm and he seemed more collected.

“Quick change of heart?” Raine’s voice was sharp, but she still paid him no mind. She stuck her money in the machine and her drink came rushing down. “Sorry if I hurt you.”

“Water under the bridge.” He reached into his pocket. “Raine?”

“I have to get back to the table.” She bent over and grabbed her drink out of the machine.

“Look.” Jason presented two tickets to the ball.

She acknowledged the tickets, but decided to walk away without saying anything.

“For us,” Jason continued. “Go to the ball with me.”

Raine gave him a menacing look, a soul-piercing glare. Not even returning a response, she began walking towards the table where Eurich and Patricia sat.

“Dammit!” He knew that after a look like that, there was no need to wait for an answer from her. He sighed and leaned against the wall, covering his face with both of his hands.

“C’mon Jason...” he pushed himself off the wall, watching Raine walk away.

“I really am sorry.”

14. Preparation

School let out for the day and it was once again time for everyone to go home. The buses were lined up outside by the dozen. Eurich's, however, was not there yet. He waited anxiously, eager to go home. He saw his bus pull around the corner, but at the same time, he saw Raine with Jason.

"Again?" Eurich thought. "*Better leave it alone...*"

Jason approached Eurich, "I'm sorry, it's just—"

Eurich interrupted. "No need to apologize. There are some things that you did that crossed the line...but I guess I can understand how frustrating everything must be."

"Apologizing isn't really my thing...I'm trying to say-crap. I'll just get to the point."

Eurich huffed, preparing for a drawn out excuse from him.

"I want to take you and Raine somewhere," Jason said, voice intense.

It wasn't exactly what he expected Jason to say.

Eurich stopped, having been about to board his bus, and turned to Jason curiously. In response, Jason just nodded his head in the direction of his parked car.

"It's ok." Raine led the way to Jason's car and Eurich followed.

"Where are we going?" he asked. "I really need to go home and continue my training."

Jason smiled and fanned his car keys in front of his face. "You and Raine can both miss it for a day. It won't kill you. Let's go, there's something you gotta see."

"Do I have a choice?" Eurich put his hand on the handle.

"No." Jason unlocked all the doors and got in.

Without any further questioning, the others got into Jason's car. He pulled out of the school grounds and left in a direction that neither Eurich nor Raine had been before.

"I've never been this way before," said Eurich, noticing the strange scenery of the road Jason decided to choose.

"Just chill, I'm sure you'd like this place," replied Jason. He was unusually patient with Eurich. "It's about a twenty minute drive, so just sit back and relax." He continued down the road with no regard for the speed limit, as usual. The forest passed by in a blur.

"How you got your license, I'll never know," Eurich quipped.

"*How you became a dragoon...I'll never know.*" Jason still tried to fight back some animosity.

"Can you go any faster?" Raine asked sarcastically. She cringed at his thought, but said nothing. All that mattered is that Jason was willing to behave.

Jason smirked at Raine and pressed the gas harder.

From the backseat, Eurich took out his cell phone and began typing a message. A few seconds later Raine's vibration went off.

Raine opened her phone to view the message:

Just read his thoughts

Raine turned a little, since she was in the passenger seat and did not want Jason to see the message. With her phone almost out of his sight, she replied.

Eurich knew she would instantly reply, so he placed his phone on silent, not wanting to alert Jason that they were talking about him.

When Eurich received the next message, he frowned a little:

No mind reading today, just trust in him

Raine turned to look back at Eurich and gave him a smile for reassurance.

“We’re almost there,” said Jason. He knew it was almost impossible for Eurich to sit still, so he decided it would be best to tell him that it would not be that much longer. No one knew where he was going, but at least he seemed excited about their destination.

“Does this place have food?” Raine asked. “I’m getting really hungry.”

Jason smiled. “Yeah, they have food there.”

“*Always with food.*” Eurich laughed to himself.

Raine turned around again.

“Hey! I’ll be a fatty when I want to be,” Raine said out loud, seemingly random. Eurich took out his cell phone and started to type another message. A few seconds later Raine’s ringtone filled the car once again.

She opened her phone to another message from Eurich:

Thought you said no mind reading today

“Oops, sorry.” She turned to look at him, speaking with her face more than her mouth.

“We’re here,” Jason sounded relieved, whipping his car one final time before he stopped.

Raine jumped out of the car first, stretching her legs and arms.

“What are you two staring at?” She hopped around, taking in the fresh air.

“Heh, don’t get big-headed.” Jason laughed, going in to grab Eurich on the shoulder.

“Where exactly is ‘here’?” asked Eurich, slightly brushing Jason off him. He walked around to examine his surroundings. There was a lone shed in the middle of what seemed to be nowhere. Other cars were parked outside, but there was no visible activity.

“Just follow me,” Jason finally said after he saw some frustration in Eurich’s face. He led Raine and Eurich into the shed.

“Why don’t you leave your book bag in the car?” Eurich said. Since he and Raine took them off, he figured that Jason just forgot.

“Nah, I need a little resistance.” Jason flexed and proceeded to lead them into the shed.

“This it?” Eurich was a little disappointed walking in, more so than when he found out the he beat Jason fairly in their semi-annual arm wrestling match.

“Seriously, Jason?” Raine added, she sounded less than impressed as well. “We missed training for this?” It was not very often that her voice rose, even a little.

There was no one in there, just tools and a random door in the middle that did not seem to lead anywhere.

“Damn, calm down.” His voice was still unusually calm for his recent behavior. “Like children, I swear.”

“What’s supposed to be here?” Raine asked.

“I’m surprised at you. I thought that you would be able to see it at least.”

“Well, I don’t...don’t tease.”

“Fine.” Jason could not help but laugh while he went in closer to the door. “Did any of you think to turn it? I would’ve given you the key.” He reached into his pocket and pulled out a

key that looked like a blade, similar to the one that their school mascot sported. Unlocking the door, he turned the knob. "After you."

Eurich walked in first, grabbing Raine's hand by instinct as he walked down the dusty, spiraling staircase.

Hanging light bulbs flickered in and out like a hostel. The lights were dim and some hung so low that they had to move some out of the way to continue walking down comfortably.

"I'm not even gonna ask you how you got electricity in this place." Eurich brushed some cobwebs out of his face.

"It was a bitch...I can tell you that much." Jason held on tightly to the stone panel to keep balance. "I meant to get the lights raised a little, now that you can fly, maybe you could help me out with that." He smirked.

"We'll see." Eurich gave a promising tone.

"Well, I want to make the entrance more like a rave, instead of a dungeon, ya know?" Jason noticed that Raine was not saying anything at all. Her hand still clung to Eurich's, as if she were holding on because she was frightened.

"Raine, you alright?" There was little room for Jason to move past Eurich, but he managed to squeeze by.

She quickly let go of Eurich's hand to punch Jason in the arm. "Why didn't you say anything about this before?" She actually sounded pissed. "You know I love places!"

Jason winced. "What? This old place? It's not really anything. I wanted it done before I brought you here. Now...I figure it's a good place to bring you to make amends."

"Jason, I told you I understand. No need to apologize." Eurich stopped, almost down the stairs, and turned toward him.

"I didn't say I was apologizing, just making amends."

"And that's good enough for me!" Raine grabbed Eurich's hand again and continued down the stairs until they reached a narrow corridor with a door at the end of it.

"I originally built this as a playground, a place to go away to..."

"Why would you need to get away?" Raine's voice was compassionate.

"My mother died early...so my dad made any excuse to be at work and not around me. I was frustrated and realized today that the two of you are all I really have. I don't wanna come close to losing you guys again."

Eurich and Raine were surprised, that definitely was not an answer they expected to hear from him.

"I know what you mean..." Raine let go of Eurich's hand and went over to hug Jason. Her grip was tight, as if she directly felt his pain. "I lost my dad when I was young, you'll get through it...we'll get through it."

There was a moment of silence. Words went unsaid, but at the same time, Raine and Eurich felt that Jason told them everything--an unspoken reason that normally Raine could only understand.

"Now if we're done being morbid...I'm still hungry." She skipped over to Eurich.

"Aww." Eurich said teasingly to Jason. "I knew you were all fluffy on the inside."

Jason dashed, reaching over to Eurich and snagging him in a headlock. "Hey, watch it, dragon. I can still kick your ass."

Raine just looked at them obliviously, not understanding why boys acted like boys. She left them behind to play and opened the door. Soon after, she spotted an empty round table that she was determined to sit at.

“Hey, guys quit fooling around and sit down.” She peeked her head back around the doorway. She stomped over to Eurich, getting him out of Jason’s grasp and pulling him over to the table.

“Saved.” Jason followed.

“This is really cool Jay,” Eurich admitted.

“Me and a bunch of people have been renovating the underground to this place for years now, call it my secret hideout.” Jason sounded the proudest he’d ever been.

Two flights of steps underneath the shed, it was just as Jason said, a playground: for teens. Other than the dreary light on the way down, there was no flickering of the lighting in the vicinity, though rope lights were messily draped over the foundation of the ceiling. Out of the ambient lights that lit up the large room, there was one, a black light, which shone on a stage. Occupying it was a dark haired girl, sitting on a stool with a microphone resting at her chin, reading off gothic poetry. The girl wasn’t the main focus, though she was profound and had a strong voice. Most of the attention was at the pool table, where it seemed many students were betting on their lives.

“Even looking at it, I can hardly believe it...other than the fact that I’m talking, I’d say I’m speechless.” Eurich looked around, as if he were lost in the fiction section at a bookstore.

“I told you already, you guys inspired me.” Jason replied. “Couldn’t have done it without ya.”

Eurich nudged Jason in the arm. “Glad to have you back.”

“I won’t finish that line.”

“You said there would be food!” Raine snapped, still keeping an upbeat tone.

“Calm down.” Jason walked across the room and opened a black refrigerator. He grabbed a few sodas and basic food-chips, hamburgers, and gelatin, for Raine. Since the burgers were cold, he took a minute to microwave them before putting them on a bun and returning to his friends.

Ding!

The microwave went off and Jason pulled the handle.

“Damn thing.” The door was stuck and it was frustrating him a little.

“Trick handle, you have to sweet-spot it.” A student beside behind him said, then opened it.

“Thanks,” he said, pulling out three plastic plates from the cabinet above the microwave. “Chris, wanna help me out?” Jason set the plates down with the food on them and walked a little past the center stage.

“Sure.” Chris set down a PlayStation controller and turned to Jason. “Man, team death match just isn’t what it used to be.” He sounded slightly pissed off, then again, when Jason looked at the score, he knew why.

“Use better kill streaks. It’ll stop you from going four and twenty-three, trust me.” Jason tapped him on the shoulder, giving him condolences. “But...you still need to be able to aim to get those kills to get those kill streaks.”

“I’ll...keep that in mind.” Chris went to pick up the controller.

“Hold on.” Jason stopped him in mid-action. “Help me take these plates over to the table.”

“I’ve got time until the next match, sure.” He followed Jason to the counter, picking up the food and setting it down before Eurich and Raine.

“Appreciate it.” Jason smiled at him. “Try and win the next match.”

“Yeah, and I got some sodas for ya.” He reached into his pocket and pulled out three beverages. Noticing that Jason did not pick them up, he took the initiative. “Maybe I’ll just go camp in the next match.”

“Whatever helps you win,” Jason laughed.

There was a gleam in Raine’s eye as she watched the food hit the table, and she grabbed for it like she had never eaten in her life.

“I’ve wanted to talk to you guys about this thing, but I had to be perfectly sure before I said anything to you.” Jason spoke seriously, though the sight of Raine stuffing her face threatened to interrupt him.

“Sure of what?” asked Eurich.

Jason took the backpack off his shoulders and laid it on the table. Reaching into it, he pulled out an item that was very familiar to Eurich.

It was The Book of Noland.

“How...when did you get that!?” Eurich asked, startled. “I’ve been looking for that book for weeks!”

“That night I spent the night over your house, I found something rather interesting about your book. So I jacked it.” Jason tried to make light of the situation by seemingly throwing in a joke.

“Funny.” Eurich did not find it as humorous as Jason did.

“Just trying to get a better understanding of what’s happening.” Jason flipped through the pages quickly, as if he wanted to show them something specific.

“Something up?” Raine was interested, but not interested enough to stop chewing.

“Didn’t you say that there were only five dragoons at the dawn of time?” Jason took a drink of his soda and a bite out of his burger.

“Yeah,” Eurich replied. “Why?”

“I’ve been wondering why only you, I mean Oblivion, is the only one in this book. Even if the other Omni was lost like you said, there should at least be four dragoons in this book,” Jason pointed out.

“He’s right,” Raine added. She took a closer look at the book. “You can even see tear marks where the pages were supposed to be. I wonder who removed them.”

“Actually, there is one more page that is removed towards the back of the book,” Jason continued. “I asked Mr. Andrews about it today, and all he told me was that it was none of my business. I think he’s trying to hide a very important detail from you.”

“Ever since he shoved you off that mountain I’ve had a bad feeling about him. Even your dad thinks that he has something to do with the seal on Chaos weakening,” Raine said with a somewhat serious look on her face.

“My dad suspects my teacher?”

“Oh, sorry, it’s really hard not to read someone’s mind. Some peoples’ thoughts are just loud, and your dad’s one of them.”

“Not just your dad...Mr. Andrews rubs me the wrong way, too. To think, I could’ve been at home watching a movie...you sure do know how to stir up trouble.” Jason snickered.

Eurich grabbed the onyx around his neck and sighed. “It wasn’t supposed to get this far. Now you and Raine are in this when you shouldn’t be.”

“Nonsense,” said Jason. “This was happening way before you. I don’t have any power, but I think you’ll need me somewhere along the line. I seriously think this is worth checking out.”

“Even if it is, it doesn’t seem like Mr. Andrews wants to give up any information...but I guess I would want to know if there are other dragoons,” Eurich compromised.

“We need a plan.” Jason finished off his soda. “Raine?”

“Busy.” She was still stuffing her face. It seemed like she was willing to replace chewing with breathing.

“We can hold him for ransom!” Eurich did not think too much on what he wanted to say, so he just said the first thing that came to mind.

“We’re trying to get information, not money.” Jason corrected.

“We go to his house...and just steal the pages.” Raine suggested, wiping the crumbs from her mouth.

“Where does Mr. Andrews live?” asked Eurich.

“I don’t know, maybe I can tail him home when he leaves school,” Jason offered. “Either that or have Eurich confront him directly. He’ll more than likely spill everything to him.”

“That’s too risky, and I doubt he’s willing to give up that information, not even to Eurich. Otherwise I think the pages would still be in the book,” Raine commented. “At the end of the week, there’s a teacher meeting after school that is supposed to last about three hours. We can use that time to get into his house and do some snooping.”

“That’s a great idea and all, but we still don’t know where he lives,” said Eurich again, a little more impatient this time.

“Everyone has a distinctive mana trail, and his sticks out like a sore thumb,” Raine said to Eurich.

“I suppose, but I can’t see it,” Eurich said unconfidently.

Raine closed her green eyes for a second and when she opened them again, they were a mana-viewing orange. She grinned.

“Leave that to me.”

15. Suspicion

Graduation was one day closer and winter ball was soon to follow. Training went by swiftly for Raine and Eurich, their power growing stronger by the day. Impending graduation was exciting, but the Eurich had slightly different things to prepare for.

“We all ready?” Jason stood in front of the flagpole at the end of the school day, sluggishly leaning on the concrete slab surrounding it, waiting for Eurich to move away from the hoard of students that were exiting with him.

“Yes! Friday finally.” Eurich exhaled.

“Now or never, right?” Raine stretched her hands over her head, waiting alongside Jason. “Burglary today, movie tomorrow. This is an exciting way to start the weekend!”

“We aren’t stealing anything.” Jason felt like he was talking to a child. “Just snooping.”

Raine reciprocated with sticking her tongue out at him.

“I guess this is it,” Eurich said. “We’ve got about three hours to get in and get out.”

“Raine, are you ready?” Jason wanted to be sure she was up for it.

She nodded, closing her emerald eyes and pausing for a second. After taking in a deep breath, she opened her orange eyes wide and proud, ready for their mischievous escapade.

“Uh huh.” It was her way of saying yes.

Jason took his keys out of his pocket and began walking towards his lustrous, black coupe. “Ok. Raine will sit in the front-”

“Um...” She interrupted. “It’s gonna be hard to follow his mana trail and give you directions at the same time. It could change sharply and we might crash.” She placed her hand on her hip.

“Then, make sure you concentrate extra hard.” He knew where she was getting at, but chose to ignore.

“Or,” Raine continued. “You might need to take a drink and lose control of the wheel, resulting in yet another crash.”

“We’ll be fine.”

“I’m afraid I’m going in to need your keys,” her voice was heavy with authoritative persuasion.

“What? No way!” Jason exclaimed. “You don’t even have your license yet and insurance is high as hell.”

“Waiting.” Raine stood her with her hand out.

“Not driving my car.” He said in a more serious tone.

“We’re wasting time just standing here,” Raine did not care whether he was serious or not. She impatiently moved her fingers back and forth, rushing him.

Eurich stood there, laughing. “Jason, I’d listen to her. I don’t think this is a battle you’ll win.”

“Those keys!” Her orange eyes pierced through him, she was serious.

“Give it up Raine. There’s no way I am letting you drive my car.”

After arguing over a moot subject they finally pulled out of the school grounds and were well on their way to follow the trail down every road it pointed them in.

“I can’t believe you let her drive your car,” Eurich laughed hysterically from the passenger seat.

“Whatever, this better be worth it.” The irritation in Jason’s voice arose again, not only because Raine was driving but also because she made him sit in back. It was nothing more than friends getting on each other’s nerves.

“His mana is yellow,” Raine turned back to look at Jason.

“Eyes on the road!” He snapped. “His mana could change sharply,” he repeated sarcastically.

“It’s fine, there are no cars on this road—and no sharp turns that I can see.” She pressed the gas harder and sat back further in the seat. She continued down the empty path, trying her best to focus on the mana trail.

“Raine, you’re swaying a little too much to the right.” Jason grabbed the back of her seat.

“This is where the trail is taking me.” She turned onto a hidden path leading into the woods. Determined to reach their destination, she continued, not caring that the stray branches were pulverizing the car.

“Raine! Watch out for those braches. I can’t afford for this car to get messed up,” Jason complained.

“Raine, slow down a bit.” Eurich grabbed her shoulder.

“I can’t!” She was running over logs, banging against the barks of trees, and almost hitting birds as they tried to fly away. “Seatbelts!” She did not look back. Her eyes were still on the trail only visible to her.

”Raine.” Jason sighed. “You better hope that magic...or mana, whatever it is, can fix this.”

“I’m almost there.” Raine started to slow the car down a little.

“Never again.” Jason ran his fingers through his short hair and sat back, letting out a sigh of relief.

“This is definitely the place.” Raine stopped and parked next to some trees. “It’s all covered in teacher mana.”

“You sure this is it?” Jason got out, looking at an eerie three-story mansion. “A place this big in the middle of the woods? I feel dumb for missing it.”

“Don’t you live this way? We could have saved a lot of damage to this car if you would have seen this.” Eurich was touching the scratches and dents on the car, primarily on the right side.

“He must’ve been hiding it?” Raine said, touching what seemed to be the air.

“Anyway, we’ve got about two and half hours to look around before he comes home,” Jason jogged up to the door.

“What exactly are we looking for?” Eurich walked up to stand beside him.

“Anything suspicious, maybe things you’ve seen in the book or old relics. Be creative.” Jason looked to the door. It was rather odd, cast in bronze with a strange looking symbol on it. It was an angel with two snakes wrapped around its neck, one purple and the other red. Other than the gloom created by the shadow from the trees, the house was extravagant. The windows were plated with gold accents, the pillars were of Victorian style, and the balconies were something from out of a romance novel.

“So, how are we getting in?” asked Eurich.

“Just like this.” Jason hopped back and took a running start, sprinting towards the door and kicking it open. “Open.”

“Wow,” Raine voiced in the most sarcastic tone possible. “Is there any way you can make a break in more obvious...maybe you can break some vases.”

“The door is open, okay,” Jason murmured. “Now we need to hurry, this place gives me the creeps.”

The inside of the house was just as organized as the outside, Greek style panels and Victorian chandeliers.

“Somebody lives nice.” Jason speculated. “It should be easy finding anything out of place in here.”

“Where to start?” Raine asked.

“I’ll take the first floor,” Jason allowed. “Eurich, you take the third floor and Raine, well, you know.”

“Agreed.” Eurich began walking to the third floor, where it was the coldest and the darkest. He wandered around for a little, wondering where to start. There were bedrooms and a separate dining area. “Can’t see a thing.” He pressed his back against the wall and stumbled upon a light switch. “My lucky day.”

The switch clicked, but did not turn on the lights.

“Lucky...” Jason said mockingly.

“You should really use your head a bit more.” Syrehnity teased.

“I can’t see a thing,” he responded.

“No excuse to stumble in darkness.”

“Nothing I can do.”

“Luestrous.”

“Luestrous?” He questioned back.

“Brighten the darkness.”

“Luestrous.” He held the stone tightly with his eyes closed. The light seeped through his fingers with a burning sensation. He quickly jerked his hand away to reveal a purple light that lit up most of the room. With his newly acquired spell, he was able to search the room without the hindrance of darkness.

“Thanks.” The stone grew cold around his neck.

“Now that you’ve accepted this spell, it will no longer burn you.” Her voice faded out.

“I can’t find anything.” Eurich sighed, maneuvering around a large table that could easily seat about twelve. The color scheme was mundane, bronze over ivory.

“Better go help Raine out.” He did not see any point to being on the top floor if he couldn’t find anything. He walked toward the stairwell, ready to head down, but something on a table next to him caught his attention. It was a painting Aster standing over Serra and Albert.

He looked deeply into the picture. He knew it was his father, both because he held Oblivion’s stone and that he matched the image Serra had produced when Albert was telling the story.

“Raine, Jason!” Eurich called out, reaching over to pick up the framed picture. “I think I found something.”

His hand was shocked by something invisible—there must have been a protective barrier around it. He jerked back and stuck his finger in his mouth to cool it down.

Raine and Jason ran up to the third floor of the sinister mansion.

“What happened?” Jason asked. “Did you find anything?”

“Yeah, this painting,” he shined his light on it. “Why does he have a picture of my parents?”

Jason reached over to pick it up. “Hmm...well let me have a look-”

“Don’t touch it!” Rained yelled out. “There is some kind of barrier around it.”

“Druids specialize in offensive and protective barriers,” said Jason. “I should’ve known. But why would he place a barrier around a picture of Eurich’s parents?”

Raine focused on the picture for a moment, but sighed and gave up, changing her eyes back to her natural green.

“There’s nothing I can do. Only druids have the capability to manipulate barriers. I’m sorry, all I can do is put them up.”

“Well, I guess we can search another floor. It’s no big deal.” Eurich shook his singed finger and walked closer to the stairwell.

“Wait!” Her voice halted Eurich. She opened her eyes and they were orange once again. “I accidentally used this on Mr. Andrews before, and my mom was teaching me about it.” Her eyes glowed and hair blew in the still air. Red mana poured from her left hand that attached translucent strings to the photo. Slowly, it transferred the mana from the barrier to Raine.

“Wow, Raine...what was that?” asked Eurich, slightly proud.

“My mom told me that this is an ability unique to me. I can suck the mana out of anything that uses it,” Raine continued. “So, I guess this makes me like a mana vampire,” she giggled frivolously.

“Does that mean that you can take mana from humans?” Jason asked, astounded by her ability. He suddenly realized he might not want to get on her bad side.

“Only in defense,” answered Raine. “But I’m not into killing people or even things. I don’t like this power much, but at least it gets down barriers.”

The protective spell was down and Eurich went in to grab the picture.

“Aww Eurich, you have the same blue eyes as the big guy in the picture,” Raine said in an embarrassing manner. “Is he related to you?”

“That’s Aster, my real father.” He said, voice full of melancholy. “He is apparently stuck in Samsera, so I want to find him eventually.”

“If he is stuck there, then why are you here?” asked Jason.

“Serra told me that my mother found a way into Samsera eighteen years ago and then found a way back out. I’m afraid I don’t know more about the story,” replied Eurich.

The stone’s light started to dim, so Eurich and the others moved to the second floor, where the lights switch worked.

They all sat at a table, looking at the picture and wondering why their teacher would have it.

“To believe that a painting of this quality was drawn *that* many years ago,” Eurich pointed out. “Puts new aged artists to shame.”

Raine took the drawing from Eurich’s hands to examine it, but did not find anything unusual about the mana covering it. She then passed the picture to Jason, hoping that he would find something that she and Eurich had missed.

“How about getting it out of this frame first?” Jason took the picture out and a note fell from behind it. He swiftly picked it up and read it aloud. “Oblivion is new life born into a world ruled by Chaos.”

“Well, what does that mean?” asked Eurich, tired of riddles at that point.

“I think it’s referring to anarchy in Samsera during the war,” suggested Raine.

“Or maybe it’s saying how Chaos defeated my father,” Eurich’s voice became unconfident again.

“Well, whatever it is, we’ll be likely to get some answers later,” said Jason. He put the picture with the note back in the frame and walked upstairs to put it back in its place.

“We have about an hour left and we still haven’t found anything else interesting,” Eurich said when Jason returned, voice irritated and eyes squinting as he tried to hold back anger. He did not want to be there and the expression on his face made it apparent. Seeing his father triggered something in him. Suddenly Eurich felt as if it was his fault.

“He’s right, maybe we should leave early,” Jason agreed, but only because he knew Eurich was getting angry. “I’m feeling a bit light-headed. This place is too high off the ground.”

The group walked down the flight of stairs, still bobbing their heads in many directions, hoping to find something on the way down.

“You know,” Raine sparked. The silence on the way down was uncanny. “I think that if we--ouch!”

She fell forward, tripping over a baseboard that sprung up from the floor. She sprawled next to the staircase on the first floor, holding her reddened knee.

Eurich rushed over and kneeled down beside her. He pulled her head close to his chest, still angled in a way that he could still reach her leg.

“My hero...” she whispered in a voice so low, even amplified hearing would be useless. She closed her eyes, trying not to tear up because of the sting.

“Did you say something?” Eurich brushed the hair from her eyes. “*I can’t believe I’m this close...I hope Jason isn’t feeling anything...*” He thought to himself. His face was right next to hers, dangerously close. Overcome with a blush, he quickly took his eyes off Raine and looked to Jason.

Jason was standing against the wall, attention occupied by the rather large television in the living room. He heard and noticed that Raine had fallen, but he let Eurich go to her aid instead of him. He’d figured that Eurich would be better suited for the task.

Raine opened her eyes to see Eurich looking down at her. “Jason is fine...your thoughts are too loud.”

“I forgot that my thoughts aren’t safe around you,” he laughed softly. “You hit your knee pretty hard.”

He removed his necklace and placed it over her knee.

“It’s warm,” she said, still watching Eurich. His face was serious, something Raine had grown to like. “That’s interesting.”

“What is it?” He was baffled by her comment. “Oh, you mean the stone thing. I just figured if I can heal myself, I could use it to heal you.” He pulled down the hem of her skirt, so Raine wouldn’t feel as exposed while he healed her.

“Yeah...that’s what I meant...” she was slightly upset by his obliviousness, but was able to get past it because she was so fascinated by his demeanor. “*But that is not what I find interesting,*” she thought.

“Looks like you tripping wasn’t all bad?” Jason said, intruding in what could have been a private conversation.

“Not all bad?” Eurich questioned, agitated.

“I heard a switch...check under Raine’s dress.” He calmly stated.

Sighing, Jason pushed off the wall with his right leg and began making his way over to Eurich, who was helping Raine to her feet.

“I didn’t want to be right. A switch...” Jason smirked. “To that bookcase over there... wow,” he was expecting a bigger finale. “Seriously?”

“It’s amazing...how we overlook the tiniest details.” Raine was dusting off her skirt, pulling her shirt down.

Jason smiled gregariously and led the way to the bookcase that was slowly opening horizontally. Seconds later, it revealed a short passageway that led to a room which looked to be preserved only for science experiments. There were test tubes filled with chemicals of every color and miscellaneous equations written down on scattered papers to match them in quantity.

They looked around with expressions of both awe and fear. It was a rather disgusting sight: fangs in a tube that looked like it was from something...human as well as other bite sized body parts.

“I thought Mr. Andrews was an English teacher...” Raine said in a low voice, looking around. “I’ll keep a look out for anything strange.” She was bound to find something, not too many things escaped her eyes.

“Hey, look, Eurich,” Jason said, jerking his head to the right. “It’s another painting of your dad.”

“Really?” Eurich walked over to him. “Let me see.”

It was Aster in normal clothing, or, at least normal back then. He was by himself, on what looked like a mountain surrounded with jagged rocks.

“What is with this guy’s fascination with my dad?” Eurich went to set down the painting, but he saw something etched on the back:

The old prophecy has been fulfilled. The fire diminished the sand to maintain balance. A new prophecy is among us, one where the flame must be extinguished by the minerals to create a stronger force.

“Umm...Jason, can you make sense of this for me?” Eurich scratched his head.

“Y’know, you’re supposed to be the smart one, but let me see.” He looked at the message inscribed on the back and returned the same puzzled look. “I thought prophecies were written on scrolls. I guess you take what you can get.”

“No good if I don’t know what they mean.”

“Why do you think he didn’t place any barriers in this room?” asked Raine, afraid to touch anything that looked foreign to her. “I mean, it doesn’t make sense of him to place a barrier around a small painting and not around this big room.”

“Maybe you drained mana from anything that took the same barrier?” Eurich did not understand the power Raine had, but still took a guess.

“I doubt it. I would’ve felt if it had come from more than one object.”

“I don’t know, but maybe he wanted us...or someone to find this place.” Eurich took another look at the painting of his father.

“That’s...not exactly what I wanted, but I can’t be mad that you are here,” said Mr. Andrews, in the doorway of his study.

They turned around quickly, shocked and wide-eyed. Raine moved closer to Eurich and Jason backed up a little. The teacher just stood there, not moving an inch to breathe.

Mr. Andrews looked about the study, making sure everything was intact. He primarily focused his attention to the painting that was behind Eurich. Though he knew Eurich would not make sense of it, he was still worried that Eurich may have figured out something he was not supposed to.

Raine held her palm towards the teacher as he moved slowly towards them with a cold, lifeless look in his face.

“Not again with the hostilities, child.” That time, the teacher was not afraid of what might happen.

“Rantyx.” Raine’s fingers began to produce an air-like glow, ready to send the teacher back out of the room. Her vision fixated on his image. She forced the air out of her hand and tried to send it to the teacher, but it quickly dissipated within seconds of leaving her fingertips.

“Raine, what happened?” Eurich asked, defensive-like.

“I don’t know...it’s not working!”

“Dammit.” It was up to Eurich to defend them at that point, he could not rely on Raine that time. He grabbed his stone and began focusing mana into it. Eurich was getting stronger, but not so much that he could rely on physical combat. The stone lit up at the core, light bleeding through his fingers. A large glow overcame Eurich, but when it dissipated, he stood there, unchanged.

“The hell?” Eurich looked around his body and then looked at Jason.

“Eurich!” Jason pressured. “Now is not the time.”

“I can’t change...”

Nothing worked, but at least Raine’s piercing, orange eyes were still out. The teacher moved casually across the tables towards them, but still was a little intimidated because Raine was still able to see with those eyes.

“This is a specialized room where mana doesn’t work to use magic...too keep my experiments from losing control.” Mr. Andrews stopped and leaned on a table. “But Raine...your eyes are special. The strongest I’ve seen so far, there should be no way they still work in here.” He held a creepy fascination.

“Celest!” Teal mana sparkled around Eurich’s hand. Feeling desperate, that was the last thing he could do. The glow began to form the sword, but, it too, was useless. He gritted his teeth, the first time he felt helpless in a while.

“Useless.” The teacher stated.

“How did you know we were in here?” asked Eurich, trying to calm himself down through pointless questioning.

“Clues...that you carelessly left behind: branches torn asunder from my trail, misplaced objects, as well as my door, torn from the hinges.” His sarcasm was offset by the seriousness of his face.

Eurich looked to Jason, dumbfounded at the fact that he did not bother to close the door. “Seriously?”

Jason shrugged. “I was in the moment.”

“But, I must say that I am impressed that you found my study.” The teacher awkwardly congratulated.

“Wasn’t exactly...original.” Jason stated, not caring about his disposition.

“What do you mean? I thought of this design.”

“Not really. A switch with a bookcase leading to a room is cliché.”

“Cliché? I see somehow...my ideas were leaked.”

“Jason, might want to calm it down a bit,” Eurich whispered to him, nudging his shoulder.

“I got this,” he whispered back.

“Well,” Jason continued. “Looks like we’d better get out of here-”

“I’m not here to hurt anyone.” Mr. Andrews assured them. “But it’s impolite to snoop around.”

“There’s...just something we need to know-” Eurich began walking up to him, before Raine stopped him.

“I figured. Follow me.” The teacher turned his back and began walking out of his study.

Raine gave them both a nod, insinuating that they should follow the teacher. “His intentions...aren’t bad.” Most of the hostility lifted off her shoulders. Her eyes shifted back to green and she began leading them out.

Though Raine was able to see through him, she still thought it was wise to be cautious while following the teacher out. Jason and Eurich sat down on a couch across from where the teacher decided to sit, a suede loveseat with a black cloth draped over it. Raine picked a nice chair next to the teacher, beautifully crafted in ivory satin, since there were no other chairs across the table where Eurich and Jason sat.

“Mr. Andrews-” Jason started to speak.

“Please, call me Gala,” The teacher interrupted.

Jason paused for a moment. “Gala...why are there pages missing from this book?”

“I guess it is your business now.” He halfheartedly smiled.

“It was my business before!” Jason would have gotten out of his seat if Eurich had not been holding him down.

“Just try to stay calm.” Eurich reached into his bag and handed the book to Jason.

“Sorry.” Jason said to the teacher and then threw the book on the table that divided them.

The teacher just sat there, disappointed that he would now have to answer to Jason. “Go ahead. Show me what you’re looking for.”

Jason scoffed, not needing any permission. He turned the page straight past Oblivion, pointing to the torn edges of where the pages used to be.

“Why were they torn out?” Jason then turned to the back of the book. “As well as this page.” He did not waste any time, and that type of pressure bothered Gala.

“Hmm...” Gala looked at each of their expressions and without saying another word, he got up and headed toward his study.

“See Jason, you pressure people too much.” Eurich commented.

“Operation failed?” Raine looked a little lonely sitting there by herself.

“Not failed, let’s just wait and see what happens.” Jason kept his eye on the teacher until he disappeared into his study.

“You pissed him off.” Raine snapped at Jason.

“Whose side are you on?” Jason countered.

Seconds later, the teacher came out of the room with loose pages in his hand. Mimicking Jason, he tossed three pages on the table, which were all torn and suffered minor loss of legibility. Three were on the table, another was in his hand.

“Is that it? Just gonna give them to us now?” Jason asked.

“I have nothing more to hide. I no longer have any objections in *you* viewing these pages...along with your friends.”

“What are they?” The pages were turned over on the table, so Eurich did not know what they were.

“Take a gander for yourselves...” Gala sat back in his loveseat and waved his hand, allowing them to take the pages.

Raine, Eurich, and Jason reached in simultaneously to grab one and then went back to sitting in their respective seats.

“Look...” Eurich wanted to show Jason the page, but he was busy looking into the page he had. *“Another dragoon-I knew it.”*

Eurich continued to look at the page, somewhat excited that there was someone else like him. It was a picture of a woman with flowing brunette hair and majestic purple eyes. She wore very light armor that seemed to be in the form of a gown, silver and lustrous. She sat on a rock in what looked like a forest holding some type of bird. Her wings enfolded, closing in on her chest as she sat like a mermaid trying to attract a sailor. Eurich had only seen two other people as serene as the dragoon in the picture...Raine and the woman from his dreams.

“This picture kinda looks like *her*.” Eurich said absentmindedly with his eyes still on the page.

“Who is *her*?” Raine asked defensively.

“It’s a woman that sometimes appears in my dreams,” Eurich replied, eyes still on the page. “But, It can’t be her...she is not a dragoon...and not real.”

Eurich continued to read the page:

Dragoon Purity

This mystifying Dragoon is beautiful in essence and gifted with the ability to control mana betwixt life and death. Being the strongest and most rational of the initial three, she is burdened with the greatest responsibility in terms of decision-making and the maintenance of order. Also called the Goddess of rationalizing overwhelming fear, Dragoon Purity received her gift upon conquering what she was most afraid of.

Still, with a fascination pasted on his face, Eurich set down the page. His smirk was short lived. A frown of confusion now riddled his visage, as he looked his teacher in the eye.

“Why would you hide the other dragoons from me? I thought I was the only one.”

“Hope comes in numbers. I did not want you to think that you would have help. The other dragoons perished long ago...and they do not concern you,” Gala responded, voice stern, but still polite.

“What do you mean...does not concern-”

“Hold on, Eurich.” Jason interrupted. He stared, hard, at the page that was in front of him. “Another dragoon...” He said while handing the page to Eurich.

“Really?” Eurich was hesitant in grabbing the page.

“Yeah, you have eyes don’t you?” Jason pushed the page into Eurich’s hand.

“I suppose...” Eurich scanned the page, noticing that each dragoon was similar to each other, but at the same time, completely different. Eurich saw a man with slightly heavier armor than Oblivion, and did not look like anyone he recognized. The dragoon on the page looked older than Aster, but not by much. He had long black hair and a menacing goatee. He stood proud in his black and gold armor, wings fully expanded. The picture fascinated Eurich, but he continued to read the description:

Dragoon Sphinx

Oblivion’s counterpart, physically the strongest, but mentally absentminded. Sphinx, even more hot-blooded than his counterpart, is quarrelsome and easily persuaded by others. In the eyes, the bond is made. Gifted with the destructive ability to turn any terrain into sand, his brute strength and heavy armor makes him impervious to almost any attack. With his wingspan being wider than most, it grants Sphinx many opportunities to defend against mana-based strikes.

Eurich set down the page and smiled a little, proudly accepting that he was one of them. He looked over to Jason, who was smirking, waiting for Eurich to put the page down.

“Oblivion is cool.” Jason seemed happy for some reason. “But Sphinx is bad-ass. Gold and black can’t beat that combo.”

Eurich nudged Jason playfully. “I’d prefer fire over sand any day.”

The teacher just sat back, letting them form their own opinions of the dragoons. He found it quite amusing, but saw that Raine was frustrated, almost disappointed, at the page she was looking at.

“Finding everything okay?” Gala questioned, but Raine did not even return as much as a look.

“Raine?” Jason got up and walked over to her and stood there for a while. “What’s up?” Raine said nothing to him either. She just put her legs up and buried her face between them.

“I’m done reading.” She held the page up, indirectly wanting Jason to take it.

“Alright...” Jason grabbed the page from her and went back to sit next to Eurich. He and Eurich both skimmed through the page, it had magnificent lavender eyes and auburn hair as a border. It was enticing. Below, of course, was a short description. Eurich wanted to read it, but Jason saw something that especially caught his attention. Without any type of warning, Jason snatched the page and read it for himself:

Valkyries

Sworn dragoon hunters. These magical female beings have evolved far past the abilities of a normal sorcerer and even threaten to surpass the legendary dragoon. Very dangerous. Valkyries have the ability to drain mana from living things along with the ability to cytosear. Sephrym marks the ascending into this, almost, immaculate force.

Jason took his eyes off the page and looked at Eurich. “Dragoon hunters? With the ability to steal mana?”

Eurich returned a look, then swiftly looked to Raine, whose face was still covered. “Can’t you steal mana from living things?”

“She is not a valkyrie,” assured Gala. “She is very powerful, and just as strong, but her traits and lack of certain abilities assure that she is not a valkyrie.”

“What...what is cytosearing exactly?” Raine lifted her head, but her voice was still as muffled as if it had been between her legs.

“Cytosearing is an ability that breaks down the body into its mana basics and scatters it to a place of interest. I cannot speak of how it actually works, but legend says it’s faster than the speed of light. In other words, it’s instant teleportation.”

“Oh...okay.” Raine voiced, low and unsure. She placed her head back between her legs.

“Would valkyries still be in Samsera?” asked Eurich.

“Not likely. They feed off dragoon mana in order to survive,” replied Gala. “Chaos eliminated a vast majority of dragoons during his short reign and the ones that may have survived surely fell victim to the valkyries. The shortage of dragoons unquestionably depleted the valkyrie population as well.”

“Hmm...” Raine looked at him with her peripherals.

“Is anyone hungry?” asked Gala after a brief pause.

“I am,” Raine said, saddened because she did not know what Eurich was getting himself into.

“I’ll return shortly.” Gala got up and walked out of the living room, around the corner and out of sight.

“Raine?” Eurich wondered why she was speaking very little.

She did not answer, but she involuntarily looked at him, responding to his voice.

“Eurich.” Jason stood up and walked toward the front door, across an arch where Raine could not see him. “Well, what are you waiting for?” He curled his finger, wanting Eurich to follow.

“What?” Eurich questioned impatiently as he got up to meet with Jason. “I was trying to talk with--”.

“Which is why I had to stop you.” Jason interrupted.

“Why?”

“Don’t mess up your chances by asking her why she’s upset.”

“My chances?”

“I tried asking her to the ball,” Jason said, voice less than enthusiastic.

“Really...what did she say?” He prepared for him to respond with yes. His heart sped up because, either way, he did not want to fathom any of his answers.

“She wants to go with you. She actually told me that she was frustrated because you haven’t been getting her hints.” Jason replied.

“So...*she did choose me.*” Eurich turned around the arch to look at Raine, who was now sitting up, trying to look at them nonchalantly.

“Who are you going to go with?” He followed up.

“I was thinking of going with Patricia, I planned on asking her at the movies tomorrow. I mean, she seems to like me enough, so why not?”

“Why are they away from the girl?” Gala asked himself as he prepared to exit the kitchen with a platter of sandwiches and a pitcher of fruit punch. He stumbled as he tried to move past Eurich and Jason across the narrow foyer. “Can one of you gather the cups from the kitchen please?”

“Where is it?” Eurich was happier to help than he would have been just five minutes before.

“Down the corridor to the right. They are sitting on a counter.”

“Please hurry back. Raine looks like she wants to bite your head off.” The teacher attempted to laugh.

Eurich took his time walking. The last thing he wanted was to get lost in a strange house.

“Jason.” Gala took a tone that made Jason pause. He set the food on the table in front of Raine and returned to Jason.

“Listen...about earlier.” Jason began.

“Don’t worry about that.” Gala waved away his apology. “Those with true power aren’t born into it, it’s acquired.”

“What?” Jason was beginning to share Eurich’s hatred in riddles and ambiguous sentences.

“Eurich is on his way back, let’s sit.” He and Jason sat in their respective seats, waiting for the drink glasses.

“Back.” Eurich set the glasses on the table and sat next to Jason.

Gala reached over and filled each of the cups.

“Food’s good,” Jason complimented. “Don’t you think so, Raine?” He teased, knowing Raine would not answer because she was busy with her own food.

“Yeah, busy.” Raine barely responded in between chews. Jason did not notice that her orange eyes were out.

“What’s the deal with that page?” Jason saw earlier that the teacher came out with four pages, but only tossed three of them down.

“This one?” Gala thought he had it well hidden under his thigh, but apparently not. The page was shriveled, unlike the others, but still floated as though it were crisp as he threw it on the table. “This is where it all started.”

“All started?” Eurich grabbed the page delicately, afraid that it would crumble in his hands. He gasped and became wide-eyed.

“You, you alright?” Jason went in to grab him on the shoulder, but flinched back quickly, being singed by a barely visible purple aura that began to envelope Eurich.

Eurich did not return a response, but the look in his eye made Jason back up a little further.

“Jason...leave him be.” Gala was still calm, though he was aware that the aura surrounding Eurich could possibly harm everyone there.

“What’s happening to him?” Raine tossed her food aside.

“Please sit.” Gala waved his hand down. “It will pass, just stay calm, hostility will not help in this situation.” Gala went back to looking at Eurich with hopeful eyes that he would overcome it.

“*CHAOS!*” Eurich raged on within.

Raine bit her lip, frustrated that she could not help him. She saw what was ailing him, and began to feel the same way because she could not do anything for him in his time of need.

Eurich’s pupils narrowed as he forced himself to look at the page. The aura around him became more apparent and his eyebrows narrowed:

OMNI CHAOS

The name was enough to anger him, but the description infuriated him to no extent. All he could think about was how the red and black dragoon crippled his family. Chaos was vastly larger than the others and had a weapon that was more frightening, a jewel encrusted sword that he proudly boasted. Eurich’s eyes, now reptilian, grazed the page once more:

Almighty and sovereign. Absolute ruler of Samsera and its parallel. Evolving from an item into a God, Chaos learned to control the stars and deal himself infinite mana...

The rest of the page was no longer legible.

Eurich loosened his grip and the page fell slowly to the floor. He still faced forward, as if there were nothing around him.

“Eurich...” Raine called out again.

“...” A gasp escaped Eurich’s lips, it almost sounded like he was choking on something. The smoke inside his stone began to move vigorously and the energy around him almost consumed his entire body. A fierce glow came from the stone, but it was not a glow that would trigger the transformation. It was a shine that resonated with hatred, hatred for Chaos.

“Everyone, get down!” Gala yelled. He grabbed Jason and Raine in what seemed like the same instance. “Sentry!” A film-like barrier appeared over the three.

“Eurich... talk to me!” Raine demanded, assuming her voice would calm him down. She buckled as intense violet mana slowly wrapped around his entire body like a cloak.

“*I have to do something,*” she loosened her arm from Gala’s grip. “Teacher, forgive me.” She left the safety of the barrier and rushed over to Eurich, scared at heart, but willing to risk everything.

“Eurich...” She extended her warm, rosy arms and wrapped them around his neck. She held him tightly, unafraid of the singe that could have come from touching him. The malevolent, cloaking mana slowed down and his pupils took a human shape once more. It was working.

“Chaos is gone now,” she whispered in a low, serene voice, brushing his hair with her fingers. She felt every ounce of his pain and all she wanted was to be there for him. Her entire core shook, not because she was afraid of what Oblivion might make Eurich do to her, but because he looked at her like a total stranger. His eyes calmed down, but he snapped quickly once again.

“CHAOS!” Eurich only paid attention to one word. He threw Raine back and the smoky energy around his body burned brighter than it had before. A purple glint shone in his dragon-like eyes.

“CHAOS...” He repeated, this time looking at Jason.

Gala grabbed Raine once again and forced her to stay in the confines of his protection.

“Jason, Raine. Stay under the barrier!” Gala’s voice was sterner than it had been earlier, and not as polite.

“Eurich... I’m so sorry,” Raine made one last attempt to cut through his hatred with her words. Eurich looked so helpless, and she was not used to seeing him that way.

Seconds later, a blistering heat exploded from Eurich’s body, decimating the living room to the point that it was unrecognizable.

“Eurich!” After the wake, Raine ran over to him. Eurich was standing, clothes burned and barely breathing. She caught him right before he fell to the ground, unconscious.

“What the hell was that?” asked Jason, slowly getting up.

“Oblivion’s anger,” responded Gala, almost casually. “What a mess he caused this time.”

“This time?” asked Raine.

“This wouldn’t be the first time I had to clean up after Oblivion’s mess,” Gala smiled in reminiscence. “He really does take after his father.”

“Umm... while we are here... I have a question,” Raine voiced to Gala, trying to speak clearly under her tears.

“I would be more than happy to answer, but let me reverse the damage he has done,” he said, before walking swiftly to his study.

“What a boy you’ve got...” He picked up the picture of Aster and smiled. He then opened a drawer underneath the sink below the set of fangs. “This should do it.” He picked up a black vial that looked like it held no more than two ounces. He walked into the living room, appalled that such a small person could cause so much damage.

“What’s that?” Jason saw what Gala had come out with.

“A quick fix.” Gala’s eyes burned crimson as he recited a small incantation. He threw the vial to the ground and it released a black smoke that slowly warped the room to the state that it was in before destruction befell it. Everything was as it was, Eurich’s tattered clothing, blown out windows, furniture, and scorched paintings.

“I will let Eurich stay until he wakes,” said Gala. “There is something I would like to talk with him about.”

“Then we’ll stay too,” responded Jason. “I still have to get him home in one piece.”

“About that question,” Raine was a bit stricter in her voice.

“Of course.” Gala had already known better than to deal with Raine while she was upset.

“Who are you to Eurich? You said you knew his dad...and you also have pictures of him. Who are you?” Raine still cradled Eurich on the floor, but met Gala’s gaze, unafraid to look him in the eye.

“I never really thought about my juxtaposed existence to Eurich’s father. To Eurich, I am a promise.”

“A promise?”

“A promise I made to Aster, to look after his boy when he became the proper age to control mana.”

“Wait a second,” Jason allowed himself in. “This isn’t making any sense, how come his parents don’t remember you, Serra and Albert?”

“I know for a fact Serra still has lingering, restoring memories. Only a few of us remember our old days in Samsera. After the world split, our memories were supposed to be erased, to deny the existence of that world. We were supposed to live as regular humans, not knowing that we can control mana...but as you can see: Raine’s mother, Eurich’s mother, father and I are exceptions. Our powers have come back, but some of our memories are still a little frail.”

“So, you have no relation to Eurich at all?”

“Just our mana descendants.”

“Okay.” Raine focused her attention back to Eurich, running her hands through his hair and touching his face.

“I have to take care of something in my study. Please help yourselves to anything you find.”

The moonlight that cut through the darkness cast a shadow of the trees into the mansion. Leaves scattered in the breeze and owls cooed in the distance, a few managed to land by the living room window.

“Huh...” Eurich’s vision blurred as he opened his eyes. He looked around sluggishly, Raine was asleep, curled on the chair in the fetal position and Jason was by his side.

“Welcome back.” Jason smiled sincerely. “You scared Raine.”

“Raine!” Eurich shot up.

“Down, boy.” Jason held him down, worried he would strain himself. “She’s fine.”

“What did I do?” All he could remember was looking at Chaos and thinking evil thoughts, thoughts that he knew became reality.

“It’s more like what didn’t you do. That temper of yours needs to be checked. Worse could’ve happened.”

“I’m sorry...”

“Hey, man,” Jason smirked, it was wholesome and truly understanding. “No one was hurt.”

“I appreciate you staying and comforting Raine.”

“Yeah, yeah. You got strength to stand?”

“I think so.” Eurich grabbed Jason’s hand and stood erect, after wobbling a few times. Jason dusted him off. “The teacher wants to talk with you.”

“With me, why?”

“Like I know, he’s in the kitchen.”

“Thanks.” Eurich leaned on the walls of the corridor for balance as he went to see Gala. He arrived at the doorway, then stopped and sighed. He leaned against the wall and huffed before he went in.

“Good, you’re awake,” Gala said without turning around.

“That temper of yours is harmful.”

“I know, Jason said the same thing.” Back in the right state of mind, Eurich was now sure of what he wanted to ask him. He paused for a long second, but whatever was cooking in the oven sizzled loudly, breaking the peaceful silence. He mustered up the courage to ask him what he never asked Serra or Albert.

“What happened to the second Omni?”

“No one knows. Many doubt the existence of a second. Only one Omni was necessary, so I would think that there isn’t a second.”

Gala put on two oven mitts and took out a roasted chicken from the oven. The smell was overpowering. It was amazingly prepared in a dish along with garlic potatoes and string beans. It made Eurich’s mouth water and probably made Raine twitch in her sleep. The food was a small distraction, but Eurich had more questions that needed to be answered.

“What about these valkyries?” Eurich asked, a little pushy.

“You are worried that Raine might become one,” said Gala in a passive, cold voice. “I admit that she is about as strong as a valkyrie, but she shows no signs of becoming one. Your worry isn’t needed.”

“But what are the *chances* of her becoming...the enemy?” He asked hesitantly.

“There is always a small chance that any powerful female sorcerer will become a valkyrie...there is a substance called sephrym, harder than diamond. A chosen sorcerer needs that to transform. Another reason I tell you your worry isn’t needed, sephrym is a mineral that was lost with the second Omni.”

Eurich found it more believable by the second. He had the sephrym and the powerful sorcerer. There was little he could do to convince himself that Gala was right.

“*If* Raine were to become one, would she try to kill me? No, she wouldn’t,” Eurich declared.

“You love her. I can understand your concern, but valkyries can only survive so long without dragoon mana. Love is not strong enough to prevent death, unfortunately.”

Eurich tightly grabbed his stone around his neck and looked around the corner. Raine was awake and it looked like Jason found Gala’s gaming system.

“Dinner is done. Help me set the table please.” Gala opened the cabinet with the plates and glasses. Picking up the main dish, Gala began walking into the den.

Eurich quickly grabbed four plates and stacked cups on top of one another, in a hurry to follow the teacher.

A few steps down the corridor, there was a room that looked like it was set for a royal family. In the middle was a table that was beautifully set. It was colorful, decorated with a wide array of flowers and garnished with fruits. The wavy light from the candles scented the room with a nice aroma. French vanilla possibly mixed with ocean breeze.

“Put the plates out and fill the cups.” Gala instructed. “I’ll be back with your friends.”

Eurich found a bottle of sparkling white grape punch in a bowl, chilled on a bed of ice. He grabbed a knife and began carving away at the chicken. It did not take him as long as he thought, considering the table was set before Gala returned with the other two.

“Not bad.” Gala commented, pulling out chairs for Jason and Raine, gentlemanly.

Raine was not as expressive as she normally would have been around food, something was wrong.

“Raine.” Eurich called.

She looked and smiled, happy that Eurich was ok. Just like that, her appetite returned. She was the first to sit down.

Jason and the teacher sat down next, eating the butchered chicken. Eurich did not know how to carve but they still enjoyed it, even though the presentation was off.

“Eurich, won’t you join us?” Gala asked with a fork in his hand.

“Oh, yeah.” He stood for a while, watching how the candlelight reflected beautifully off Raine’s jade eyes. She ate like a wild boar, but that did not make her any less attractive to Eurich.

Eurich hastily sat down to join the others, it seemed like only a few minute passed until everyone was done.

“Well, I need to get these two kids home,” said Jason. He saw it in Raine and Eurich’s eyes that they were tired and wanted to leave. “Thanks for understanding about the door.”

“A door is a small thing.” The teacher helped Raine and Eurich to stand.

Jason started toward the door, seemingly leading Raine there as well.

“So, see you at school then?” Eurich asked the teacher, walking toward the door with Raine and Jason.

“Yes.” He answered.

Gala followed them out, happy to know that they left with a clearer understanding.

“Have a good weekend,” Gala said as they were boarding Jason’s vehicle.

“... You’ll need it.”

16. Revealed

“That was so nasty,” Raine laughed as she exited the movie theatre, but was disgusted at the same time. “It almost got on my leg!”

“Well,” Patricia began. “I didn’t exactly expect that.”

“Nasty...” Raine reiterated. “I hope they brought like mouthwash or gum or something. He blew chunks everywhere!” She threw her hands out with extensive hyperbole.

“It wasn’t that bad...leave my poor baby alone,” Patricia defended.

“I knew he hated zombies,” Raine said sitting down. “But I didn’t know it was that bad.”

“Shush, I think it’s cute that Jason is afraid of zombies,” claimed Patricia. “If he was afraid of vamps, it might be a turn off. So this is a better deal.”

“So I take it you said yes-are you going to be Mrs. Jason Stone?” asked Raine jokingly.

“Not sure about Mrs. Stone, but yes, we are going to the ball together.” Patricia’s giggling made it hard to make out actual words. “Speaking of...” She moved over to create some room for Eurich and Jason as they stumbled to her table

“Over here.” Patricia laughed, patting the seat next to her and moving her nachos to the side. “Set him down here.”

“I think he just needs some air.” Eurich commented as he set Jason down next to Patricia. The sun was vivid, but the air was cool. Umbrellas were set over the tables in the outside lounge though most were not in use.

“I don’t get it,” Eurich shook his head in pity, taking the seat on the other side of Raine. “You know you can’t stomach zombies, but yet you agree to come see this movie.”

“I think it’s cute, that he came and knew he couldn’t handle it.” Patricia spoke softly, cradling Jason’s head like a baby.

“You should have heard him in the bathroom...” Eurich continued, trying his hardest to mimic the sounds he was making.

“Leave him alone,” Raine smiled, pushing Eurich playfully.

“Isn’t it a little cold to be eating out here?” Eurich glanced at the food that Raine had been devouring.

“Speak for yourself, Mr. Fire-based Dragoon,” said Raine. “Besides, I think the air is nice and brisk for it to be the middle of November.” Raine said, picking up her food again, about to take a bite.

“Raine and I are going to pick dresses.” Patricia chimed in, taking Raine’s nachos and throwing them away.

“Uhh...” Raine tried to speak, glaring at Patricia for tossing her food in the trash. “*Did she really just do that?*”

“We may be a while,” Patricia began, ignoring the death glares Raine was sending her way. “So you and Jason go ahead and do whatever it is that boys do.” Her voice was friendly and calm, given the shivers in between her voice. “Just make sure Jason comes back in one piece.”

“We’ll see you guys in a bit.” Raine smiled to Eurich, while Patricia gave Jason a hug.

“Are you gonna look around here?” Jason questioned, still a little pale from the movie.

“Nah, we are going to look around the mall, see what they have there. It’s only a fifteen-minute walk there, so we shouldn’t be too long.” Raine responded, answering as though she wanted to reassure Eurich more than answer Jason.

“Yeah, we already have some stores in mind.” Patricia whispered, hugging Jason for the last time before leaving. Turning back once more, smiling, Raine waved to Eurich and then walked off with Patricia.

“Looks like it’s just you and me,” Jason gave Eurich a really smug look.

“Someone’s feeling better.” Eurich nudged Jason lightly.

“Just a bit...” Jason stood up along with him.

“What’s on the agenda for us?”

“I guess we need to go get tuxedos.” Jason looked around, trying to spot somewhere that was in good distance.

“Why can’t we just wear jeans?”

“Because we don’t want to look like complete idiots in front of our dates,” replied Jason. “Now come on, there should be a store around here somewhere. Like five minutes away, we can walk.”

“Can’t we just drive there?” Eurich complained.

“That’s why your legs are scrawny and mine aren’t.” Jason began walking across the street, opposite the direction of Raine and Patricia. “You coming?”

“Yeah.” Eurich jogged to catch up to him.

The air was nice and had the scent of the mountains. Crisp. A glorious day indeed, but was threatened to be brought down by the mood Eurich tried to hide.

Jason glanced over, to see his partner in crime’s eyes wandering the ground.

“Eurich?” He asked.

“Yeah?” A less than diligent response.

“How long have I known you?”

“Five...six years I think. We moved here together,” He looked up to Jason, meeting his eyes directly. “Why?”

“It may just be me, but I think it’s almost instinctual to know when something is buggin’ you.”

“It’s nothing really.” Eurich slowed his pace after Jason halted.

“You’re even worse at lying than you are at singing.”

“That was years ago, Jason. You can’t keep using that against me.” Eurich said in his defense.

“I’ll keep that in mind the next time I hear AFI.”

“You’re no vocalist either,” Eurich said, throwing the fire off himself.

“Maybe not...but seriously, what’s up?” Jason picked up his pace, walking beside Eurich.

“It’s this valkyrie thing. I’m trying not to think negatively, but this is my life,” Eurich responded. “I mean, it could be true. Serra told me that Raine is stronger than she was in her prime.”

“That just means she’s strong, you heard the teacher.”

“You on his side now?”

“No, I just know you’re being paranoid,” Jason alleged. “Out of all people, I didn’t think that you would be so opposed to Raine having power.”

“That’s not it. She could try to kill me if she becomes one...just because I’m a dragoon.”

“Pssht! I would try to kill you too, at that point it would be in my nature,” the smug look was back on his face and a large smile crept in there somewhere. “But seriously, I think Raine would have enough self-control.”

“You think so?” Eurich was looking for a sympathetic answer, an understanding answer to his plea.

“Of course, there’s probably no chance at all of her to becoming one. Just chill out a bit.”

“If you think so.”

“I do, now there’s the store. I’ll have to take a rain check on the rest of the conversation.”

“That’s the store?” Eurich looked at the name and immediately thought that he would not like it:

ZOOTS AND BOOTS!

The bright lights instantly caught Eurich’s attention: it looked like something that belonged on the Vegas strip. It didn’t appeal to Eurich right off the bat, but apparently there were lots of people who liked the store, at least, based on the amount of cars that were parked outside.

“Don’t judge a book by its cover,” Jason defended.

“Not saying I don’t like...but I don’t quite...like it.”

“You have to go in, trust me, you’ll find something here.”

Jason opened the door and walked in, Eurich followed shortly.

“And how may I help you today?” An overzealous associate greeted them, the sort who looked like he hadn’t earned commission in a while.

“Anything in particular that you’re looking for,” he followed up, hands together like he was rushing a response from them.

“Actually,” Jason started. “We need tuxedos for a winter wonderland themed ball.”

“Of course, this way please.” The associate walked them to the back of the store with a smile that seemed to be permanently drawn on his lined façade. “And congratulations on being selected for early graduation.”

“You know about that?” Eurich ran his fingers through some pants.

“Word spreads fast. I remember when I was in high school.”

“Yeah...” Jason wanted to stop the conversation before it went on any further. If it was one thing that annoyed him, it was people talking about when they were young. “You mind if we look around?”

“Of course. Let me know if I can be of any assistance.” He left, but still hovered around their area.

Jason and Eurich had a good look around. The suits were all arranged by color, which were predominately light to match the snow that would soon be falling to the ground. They were elegant...and pricey to say the least.

“I...I think I like this white one.” Eurich tried on a cream-colored tux with a teal inseam, his shirt mirrored handsomely. “It kinda looks like Dragoon Purity. I’m pretty sure I don’t want to wear purple and black.”

“I can understand that.” Jason had on a black tux with a golden inseam along with a shirt of the same color. “I guess we’re both mimicking dragoons here.”

“Is Sphinx really that cool to you?” Eurich was pressing his collar.

“Damn straight!” He and Eurich walked into separate dressing rooms and put on their original clothes back on.

“I like your suit and all.” Eurich walked out of his changing room, almost at the same time Jason did. “But I thought you wanted a winter color.”

“True, but these are my favorite colors. Patricia likes gold, so I have a feeling she’ll get that color dress.”

“I take it you two have reached a consensus,” the salesman appeared out of nowhere. Eurich and Jason both flinched. It seemed like the associate moved in and out of the shadows. “Those tuxedos fit you both. It’s like, it resonates with you.”

“Actually, I think you’re right.” Jason agreed, just trying to make small talk. He was feeling pestered, so he thought talking to him would hint that he really wanted the man to go away. “It was something about these tuxedos, drew us in.”

“That’s excellent!” The clerk clasped his hands together again. “Are we ready to check out?”

Eurich looked at Jason, unsure if he wanted to answer.

“We’re ready.” Jason followed the clerk to the front in the middle of the store, to the cash register.

“I’m glad you found everything alright.” The clerk began scanning the items.

Eurich went to pull out his wallet, a leathered, slim brand, which was guarded by a chain that connected to his belt loop.

“I got this.” Jason patted downward, signaling Eurich it put it away.

“You sure?” Eurich was giving him a last chance.

“Yeah.” Jason reached into his pocket and pulled out a wallet of his own.

“Is-is that Prada?” Eurich tried his hardest to fight back a smile. “I thought that was only for girls, I didn’t know it was for guys too.”

“Only the secure ones.” Jason casually responded.

“Nine-hundred and eighteen dollars and eleven cents.” The clerk butted in with his hand on the register. “Debit or credit?”

“Cash.” Jason counted the bills as he pulled them out. “One, two, three, four, five, six, seven, eight, nine... a thousand.” He handed the money to the cashier and grabbed the bags the clothes were placed in. “Keep the change.”

“Thank you.” The man swiftly opened the register to make change and put it in his pocket. “Here is your receipt.”

“Thanks.” Jason grabbed it and was headed out the door.

“I’ll pay you back.” Eurich allowed.

“Don’t worry about it. This is a big event, so I don’t mind.”

“I never asked, but what do you do exactly?” Eurich had known Jason for years, but still wasn’t sure about one thing, what Jason did for money.

“I try to visit my dad’s oil rig when I can, work some here and there. Business is good.”

“Don’t you have the house all to yourself?”

“Hehe.” A blush began overcoming Jason’s face. “Yeah, probably why Patricia and I get along so well.” He handed Eurich the bag that his stuff was in, preparing to cross the street.

“TMI, Jay.” Eurich laughed, but his focus was more on getting things to make him look good in front of Raine. Therefore, he tossed that disturbing thought aside.

The sun seemed to have gotten brighter, but it was a bit odd that the full moon was clearly visible.

“Now, all I need to do is get a corsage and we’ll be done.” Jason saw a flower shop, not ten feet away.

“Don’t you need to see what color dress Patricia is wearing first?” asked Eurich.

A demanding, almost obnoxious noise came from Jason's pocket, alerting him to a new text message. He opened up his phone to a message from Patricia:

"I found the cutest goldenrod dress xoxo"

Jason smirked, as if the message came just at the right moment.

"You really need to change that ringtone," Eurich bullied while grinning heavily.

"Hey hey hey, at least now I know what color corsage to get her," Jason condoned.

They walked across the road to a small flower shop. It was one of the more humble stores in that villa. There were flowers on the outside to give it a fresh smell, along with a fountain next to the doorway to make it feel welcoming.

"Far better impression," Eurich commented. He opened the door to a colorful array of exotic flowers, set up brilliantly by type and color. Finding the perfect one would be a matter of looking.

Jason instantly spotted where the roses were, in the back of the store, where it was the brightest. Those looked to be the only flowers in the store that were self-watered. He gently picked up each color rose, to paint a picture in his mind how it would look with a goldenrod dress. Red was tacky, pink would have made Patricia seem more girly than she really was, blue didn't suit her at all, and yellow just did not match, but he saw a black one that appealed to him.

"Eurich, what do you think?" He lifted the black one and showed it to Eurich.

"It matches. I say go for it."

"Looks like we have a winner." Jason found the florist in the front of the store, a pretty girl with short, brunette hair with white highlights.

"Tell me in all honesty." Jason prompted her. "Is this corsage worthy?"

"I would think so. I absolutely love the black rose," she responded, happy that she could talk about her love of flowers. "What is the occasion?"

"Winter Ball," Jason smiled, trying to seem cool in front of a pretty girl. "It's for a goldenrod dress."

"Oh, you must be an early graduate at Winbrook." She gently grabbed the rose.

"You know about that?" Eurich butted in.

"I go there too, just wasn't chosen. I'm envious. I have to stay there the other six months."

"I thought I've seen you before, didn't we have class together as freshmen... Jessica?"

"Yes." She said timidly. "Then you got all smart and we didn't have classes together anymore."

"I hear that there is gonna be two valedictorians for your class?" She went on to say.

"Two?" Eurich came into the conversation again. "Why not just a runner up?"

"People are saying that there are two people that are neck and neck with GPA. It's fair, I think."

"Oh...ok." Eurich backed up, giving Jason some more room.

"I'm so sorry. Let's take care of this flower." She walked behind the front counter. "I can see why you got this."

"You gonna surprise me?" Jason asked.

"Yes, I know just what to do with it." She walked into the back room with the flower, leaving Jason and Eurich together for a few minutes.

"I hope it looks good." Jason turned his back to the counter, leaning on it.

“I wouldn’t do that, it’s glass,” Eurich pointed out.

“Back.” She walked out the back room with the corsage in a clear box, with holes throughout it.

Jason immediately fell in love with it.

She had laced the black rose together with a golden ribbon and sprinkled a light, yellow glitter that really made it sparkle.

“Wow! I’m actually speechless, this is wonderful.” Jason’s compliment seemed to have made her day.

“Thank you,” she said as though she had never received any praise for her work.

“I’ve never seen one like this,” Jason continued. “You made the glitter on the petals seem natural.”

“I try to make each one unique, like a snowflake,” she responded.

“It’s amazing...so, uh...how do I go about keeping this thing fresh?”

“Lightly spray just a bit of water onto it each day, and keep it refrigerated,” she said with an unusually perky smile on her face, probably to offset the blush. “It’ll look like brand new. I’m sure she’ll be glad to have it.”

She handed the box to Jason.

“I didn’t pay for it yet.” Jason almost left the store, but he remembered just in time.

“It’s on me. Anyone who can see the true beauty of my work shouldn’t have to pay.” Her eyes watered, they could tell she was passionate about what she did.

“Thanks, but I really should.” Jason reached for his wallet.

“I won’t let you,” she guarded.

“Fine,” Jason smirked. “Can you at least accept tips?”

“Yes.”

Jason reached into his wallet, pulled out a fifty, and handed it her.

“You’re right,” Jason continued. “You can’t put a price on real art.”

“Thank you...” she muttered under her breath, walking back into the room where she prepared the corsage.

Eurich made his way toward the exit. Jason was done and Eurich had no need to be there.

“Aren’t you going to get one?” asked Jason.

“I have something better in mind,” Eurich said, touching his stone. He knew the bangle would make a perfect addition to any dress Raine would have chosen.

The sun was still high, warmth meeting the chill of the cool winter air. Jason and Eurich walked back to the movie theater to wait for Raine and Patricia to finish picking out their dresses.

“Didn’t think it would take them this long?” Eurich grabbed a seat, the same one they sat in before they went their separate ways.

“You should know better than to rush girls, especially the prettiest ones in school.” Jason reminded.

“I don’t really care about them being pretty. I like them just fine, though I think Patricia could be a little taller.” Eurich chuckled.

“I see them.” Jason stood with his back leaning on the table.

“Boy am I tired,” Raine complained, dropping her black garment bag on the table when she approached it.

“Raine made me put back at least ten dresses, she’s got really picky taste.” Patricia huffed and then sat down.

“I think she was getting back at you for throwing her food away.” Eurich got up and turned on the flat panel television that hung from the foundation.

“Let’s hope not, I found some really cute ones.” Patricia turned toward the TV as soon as Eurich turned it on.

“CNN?” Raine complained again. Everyone that she could see through the glass doors were watching in awe for some reason, the same reaction came from the people who were outside.

“Just moments ago.” Raine turned as the newscaster on the television spoke. “A strange occurrence has people questioning about what is happening in the sky. Not only was it seen here, but it was also seen in the Bahamas and across the North Atlantic. It is worldwide and given the short time in which it’s risen, scientists cannot even begin to explain what is happening. The appearance of a second moon visible from earth, what does this mean? Are the doomsday prophecies correct? Are aliens finally giving us a final clue? Stay tuned for more.”

The message stunned almost everyone.

Eurich and the others walked out from under the sheltered tables and into the middle of the street to look at the phenomenon that had caught everyone’s attention.

Not only was the original moon in plain sight, but the newly risen moon appeared to be across from it, in the opposite end of the sky.

Commotion came from everyone, those who were working left their posts to observe as well. To them, it seemed like the end of days.

“Guess it isn’t a hoax...” Jason put his hands on his hip, looking up as hard as he could.

“How-when did that happen?” Raine moved in closer to Eurich.

“I...I don’t know, I think I know what’s happening.” Eurich’s gaze was fixated upon the sky as well.

“Hey you, kid!” A hysterical, older man said as he approached Eurich. “You know something about thi-” His voice trailed off, as if he was speaking in slow motion.

“Huh?” Eurich moved back, not only did the man’s speech slow down, but so did his movement.

“What the...?” Jason maneuvered around the people that seemed to be frozen in time, stuck in their previous action.

“What is going on?” Patricia asked hysterically.

“Wait a minute, Raine?” Eurich turned to look at her.

“Not me...” Raine looked up. Everything had stopped, down to the rain that would soon be falling. “It’s mom!” She said happily.

“Aurora?” Jason questioned.

A large vehicle came swerving around the corner, missing every stoplight and sign, good thing there were not many cars in the street. It could have gotten ugly. There Aurora was, driving recklessly, just like her daughter.

“*That must be where Raine gets her driving from,*” Eurich thought to himself. He quickly looked to Raine, who returned a piercing look. Once again, Eurich had no idea her orange eyes were out.

“I heard that,” Raine scowled.

Eurich flinched, but then saw a familiar face to change the subject.

“Albert!” Eurich and the others walked closer to the sidewalk. Albert was in the back, concentrating hard to maintain the vehicle, which was made purely of his mana. It was see-through, if it were not for the light refraction, it would have appeared as if Albert and Aurora were floating.

“Get in,” said Aurora, skidding to a halt. Her tone of voice left no room for objections.

The car was fashioned like a normal SUV, it made Eurich wonder why they didn’t just drive a regular car.

“Albert, couldn’t we just have taken your car?” Eurich asked, getting into the vehicle along with the others.

He returned no response.

“It takes quite a bit to form something like this.” Aurora answered for him, now merging onto a highway. “No car made is as fast as mana travel, lucky for us, Albert’s got the old spark. He’s using sheer will and energy, magic at its finest.”

“Mom, what’s going on?” Raine looked out the window, noticing that the cars on the highway were slowly gaining motion.

“I’ll explain later. My time spell can’t hold a crowd like this for long,” Aurora sped up, more anxious than ever to get to her destination.

Turning onto an access road, time resumed. There was no interruption in traffic, nor were there any accidents.

“What’s happening?” Raine asked again, more persistently that time.

“The seal dividing our worlds is weaker than we thought,” responded Aurora, only having enough words for a vague response. They arrived at her home in one piece, but were a little shaken up because of how fast they were moving.

“Everyone out,” Aurora demanded.

Eurich and Jason got out after Aurora, then helped out their dates.

“I need to rest after that one.” Albert dispersed the vehicle and followed Aurora inside.

“We’ve got them!” Albert lazily walked around the corner and plopped on the couch in the living room. Mr. Andrews and Serra were there, both with serious looks on their faces.

Eurich followed. He looked to the teacher, then switched to Serra, whose serious look had a little sadness.

“Why is this happening now?” Eurich asked Serra. “It’s not supposed to be happening this fast. I thought we had more time.”

“Calm down, Eurich,” said Jason, who moved beside him and grabbed his shoulder.

“Why?” Eurich pushed Jason’s hand off. Oblivion’s anger was starting to get the best of him again. “What if Chaos comes back today? Do you think that we will be able to fight him?”

“You won’t fight him...not now at least,” interrupted Serra, getting up. “The seal that was placed on him is a lot stronger than the barrier that separates our worlds.”

“Samsera is starting to slowly intertwine with this world once again,” said Gala, his voice sounded so neutral all the time. “The moon that has appeared is a Samseran moon, we don’t have to rush, but we must move faster than we have.”

“Then what are we waiting for, we have to stop it!” shouted Eurich. He ran outside and looked up at the newly ascended moon.

Albert ran out to follow, still cautious of what Eurich could do.

“There is nothing you can do right now, Eurich,” he said, trying to calm him down.

“There is something I can do,” responded Eurich. “I am the one who is supposed to restore the mana balance. I am the one who needs to fight Chaos.”

“Now is not the time, the second moon appearing is minor-”

“So when is the time, when everything is gone?”

“The portal to Samsera has been lost for centuries,” said Albert, trying to bargain with him now. “There is no way for you to get there now, like I said. A new moon appearing can only harm the oceans a bit, nothing more.”

“Whatever.” Eurich walked back inside the house, slightly overhearing a conversation Raine and her mother were having.

“How long have you known,” Aurora asked her daughter.

“About two months.”

Eurich interrupted, not fully sure of what they were talking about. “Syrehnity told me to find the eyes filled with mana. That they would take me to Samsera.”

“Syrehnity told you that?” asked Aurora. “How did Syrehnity tell you-?”

Serra interrupted, “Syrehnity...is the woman who appears in his dreams, she apparently hasn't been wrong.”

“I need some air,” Jason started feeling helpless again, so he walked outside. Patricia followed.

“Is everything okay?” she asked, grabbing his arm.

“Yeah, everything's fine. I just wish there was more I could do to help.”

“Jason, you being supportive is helping them plenty.” She stood on her tiptoes and kissed Jason on the cheek, then turned around to go back in the house. “Don't worry too much, 'kay?”

“Yeah.” Jason remained outside, standing alone, taking in the crisp air, when he heard a voice whisper, “Jason...” it was painfully deep and marked with a northern accent.

“...Jason!”

“Who's there?” Jason walked to the far edge of the driveway, closer to where the woods were starting. No one was seen, but a rustle in the leaves made Jason check more carefully in the direction the noise came from.

The noise stopped and Jason stood on guard.

“No need to be hostile, Jason.” The same man who ran into Eurich came out from behind a tree. He was still just as shrouded he was before, under his hood was complete blackness.

“How do you know my name?” Jason questioned.

“You've been traveling with Oblivion,” he stated.

Jason started to back up as the man reached over and tried to touch him.

“You are jealous of his abilities-”

“I *was* jealous, now you need to get out of here before you get hurt.” Jason was sure to say it like he meant it.

“Idol threats...you have impressive qualities.” The man's voice was sinister.

“I'm not above fighting you here. Now I'll give you once last chance before I get angry.”

A golden glint of light came from the eyes of the hooded man. “You'll need me.” Instantly, he vanished under a cloak of sand as Eurich ran back outside.

“If I can't find these damn eyes, then I'll just look for Samsera myself,” Eurich said indignantly while triggering his stone. With his armor and wings slowly bonding to his skin, he prepared to take flight.

“Wait!” Raine yelled. “I am the mana-filled eyes!” Her voice was an unpleasant mix between anger and care. She knew, but avoided telling him because she wanted to spend more time with him

Eurich descended and deactivated the onyx.

“What did you just say?” He walked over to her and grasped her firmly by the shoulders.

“I have been able to see the barrier for about two months now,” she lowly responded.

“You have to open it!” Eurich pressured.

“I don’t know how, all I know is I can see it.” Raine continued. “And I don’t know what you think you are doing, going by yourself. I am coming with you.”

“I can’t let you come with me. This wasn’t your battle in the first place and I won’t get you hurt.”

“Just in case you haven’t noticed, I am plenty strong. Even if I am hurt, I want you to protect me like I plan to protect you.” Her face got softer and her eyes began to water.

“...Eurich, don’t you get it, I love-,” Raine cut herself off when she noticed Jason standing off to the side in a peculiar way, as if he had just been shot.

“Jason!” Raine yelled to get his attention.

The sound of her voice quickly snapped him out of his hypnotic state.

Patricia came out of the house again, jogging towards Eurich and Raine.

Jason approached the group, walking very sluggishly and unsure.

“Where did this sand on your shoulders come from?” Patricia asked as she dusted him off. “Messy.”

Albert also stepped out of the house. “The events today are menial. You still have quite a bit of time left. You should go back out and enjoy the rest of your day.”

“No car.” Jason stated.

“Yeah...” Albert put his hand on his head. “About that...”

“Don’t worry, my car is around back.” Serra walked behind him with her keys out. She led everyone to it. “Get in.”

“Thanks, Mrs. Wheeler.” Raine and Patricia said in unison.

“Movie theater, right?” Serra turned the key, starting the engine.

“Yeah, just to where my car is.” Jason spoke up.

“The rain is starting to catch up with us, don’t get soaked.”

“I think we’ll be fine,” Jason clicked his seatbelt on.

No one sat in the passenger seat. They were all in the back.

“Why did dad not take this car to come get us?” Eurich asked.

“Practice, I guess.”

“It was cool,” Eurich admitted

“You think? It was a little showy.” She backed out of Aurora’s driveway and began down the road.

“I thought it was cool too.” Raine backed Eurich up, but at the same time to get his attention. “I’m sorry I didn’t tell you sooner...”

“Raine...listen,” Eurich started.

“You don’t have to apologize.” Raine lightly placed her hand along his jaw line, cupping his face to meet her eyes. Her forest-like gems gazed deeply into Eurich’s. She kissed him delicately on the cheek, and then changed her eyes back to orange. “...I promise to lead you there, don’t worry about a thing.”

17. The Offering

The weekend was over, but that held little weight for Raine, Jason, Eurich, and Patricia. They did not dread the beginning of the week like some of the other students, mainly because the beginning of each week meant that they would be leaving a lot sooner.

“Looks like we’re out of here soon,” Jason reached into his pocket and pulled out a receipt of some sort. “I just put the final touches in for the ball. I got a limo.”

“Leave the school in style, I suppose,” Eurich responded. “Must’ve cost quite a bit.”

“Well, we only have a week left.” Jason moved aside his cafeteria tray. “No more of this nasty crap.”

“I would have to agree with you.” Eurich had a tray in front of him as well, odd because they never embraced the cafeteria’s food. “I’ll have to get back in the habit of packing lunch, just not enough time these days.”

“I wonder what Patricia is talking about?” Jason looked over to another table. She was with Raine, laughing and talking about things that did not involve everyone else for once.

“The ball, of course.” Eurich replied, taking a bit of his yellow apple. In recent days, that seemed to be Raine and Patricia’s main concern.

“I don’t see what they’re worried about, not like they have to try hard.” Jason stretched.

“You know...” Eurich began, wanting to change the subject before the bell rang to release them from lunch. “Dodging mana bolts and swords aren’t that hard anymore,” he explained.

“Okay, so what are you getting at?” Jason was curious.

“Well, I need to train with brawn, to increase my stamina-”

“So, you’re asking me to train with you?”

“Only if you don’t mind.”

Jason smiled, thrilled that he would finally be able to help.

“When can I start?”

“After school today,” Eurich answered. “I’m sure Albert would be happy that he can take a break for once...getting beat by a teenager and all. Can’t be too good for his self-esteem.”

Jason grinned, “I guess after a thousand years or so people start to get rusty.” He took it as a compliment that Eurich was asking.

“Rusty isn’t the word for it. I’m glad to be alive after how we train. He doesn’t show me any mercy at all.”

The bell rang and Eurich got up, putting his bag over his shoulder, preparing to leave.

“So, how do we train, no mercy?” asked Jason jokingly, not expecting an honest answer.

“No, none at all, kill me if you have to,” Eurich said in a very serious manner.

“Kill?” Jason was surprised at the risks Eurich went through to become stronger.

Eurich paused, then turned around to look at Jason.

“Don’t hold back, if you were a dragoon, I’d expect you to try to kill me. Because...I would try to kill you, train like I’m the enemy.” Eurich turned his back and proceeded to his next class.

“I hope Jason is ready.” Eurich counted the last few minutes until the bell rang to let him out of school. He glided to his locker, quickly putting his things away, in full anticipation of what would happen in just a few minutes. Eurich’s days were becoming quite routine: Wake up, go to school, eat lunch, finish the day, then train. The weekends were his only sanctuary.

“The big day with Jason, huh?” Raine came out of nowhere. She tapped his shoulder and put her back against the locker next to his.

“Yeah, this should be fun. Maybe it’ll make us a bit closer.”

“Let’s hope.” Raine shut his locker after he was done putting his books away.

“Maybe it’s me, but Jason doesn’t seem the same.”

“I know, but...I would know if he was hiding something,” Raine grabbed Eurich’s arm and walked with him out to the parking lot.

There, Jason was standing next to his car with the front door open. His car had new art, it was still coated black, but it had a hint of gold dust painted on the sides. The scratches were buffed out and the dents were lifted. In a way, it looked like a brand new car.

“Finally!” Eurich looked over Jason’s car. “Look’s much better. When did you get it done?”

“Last night, the paintjob was complimentary. Couldn’t turn it down.”

“Nice.” Eurich opened the back door and tossed in his bag before moving to the passenger side and opening its door. “You ready?”

“I didn’t think I’d be this excited about it, it’s been buggin’ me all day,” Jason replied. “You mind if Patricia watches?”

“The more the merrier,” Raine said cheerfully. “Just make sure she isn’t close.”

“She’s wanted to see this in action since the theater. Just give her about two minutes, I think she’s at her locker.” Jason said.

“I’m here.” Patricia came jogging to the car. “We all ready?”

“He thinks so.” Raine joked.

“Funny...” Jason got in, started his car, and began driving down the road.

“My work is cut out for me.” Eurich was just putting on his seatbelt. “I’ll be fighting for humanity, what are you going to do after graduation?”

“Well, I won’t need a job for a while. Maybe start my own business.” Jason’s eyes were on the road, he was going the correct speed for once.

“Business man? I don’t see that at all.” Eurich laughed a little.

“Yeah...me neither.” Jason sounded as if he had another plan for himself.

“Boring.” Raine leaned up to the front seat. Her hair blew nicely in the cold, stiff air Jason was happy to save money on air conditioning by letting the windows down.

“Well, I’ll be in the real world. Magical...just...wasn’t for me,” Jason stated regretfully.

“Magical isn’t that great...” Patricia joined in, trying to cheer him up. “Did I ever mention I have a twin sister?” She really wanted to throw them off. She did not like seeing Jason beat himself up over what he could not possess.

“What?” Jason stopped the car several feet before the stop sign. “When?” A rushed response.

“When I was born, I think.” She giggled.

“Really?” Raine was equally surprised. Surely she would have known that.

“Isn’t that something you would have wanted us to know a lot sooner?” Jason moved past the sign, taking a left and continuing down the road.

“Is she identical?” Eurich asked.

“Yes.” Patricia responded.

“Does she have a name?” Raine asked.

“I would think so,” she chuckled.

“Don’t make me use these.” Raine pointed to her eyes.

“Fira, like fire.”

“Fire-a?” Jason joked.

“No, like...fear-a. We were at the orphanage together, I was chosen for adoption and she wasn’t. I haven’t...seen her since.”

“Where did this come from?” Raine embraced her tightly. They were now pulling into Eurich’s driveway.

“I guess I just...remembered. It never came up before.”

“Are you going to be ok?” Jason turned his car off and opened his door.

“Yup!” She said cheerfully. “I get to see a fight.” She and the others got out of the car and walked into the house.

“So Jason, you’re my relief.” Albert said as Jason walked in the front door.

“Aren’t you happy?” Jason said jokingly.

“Actually, yes.” He countered, walking into the kitchen to pick up six mugs filled with hot cocoa. “Serra predicted Patricia would come.”

“And here I thought I was surprising everyone.” Patricia giggled lightly.

“It’s hard to resist watching a battle that deals with magic.” Eurich added, smiling.

“No magic.” Albert was moving toward the back door.

“But dad, I thought...”

“Well, nothing to give you an unfair advantage at least.”

“Don’t hurt him. I still need him for the ball.” Patricia added jokingly.

“Hey! I’m right here...” Jason said from behind them.

“I was only joking.” She said hugging him.

“Are you ready?” Albert asked, holding a tray with the mugs of hot chocolate.

“I think so...” Raine looked around at everyone.

“Sure am.” Eurich answered. “Where’s mom?”

“She’s already there, which probably means we should get going.” Albert nodded towards the door. “A little help?”

“Oh, yeah.” Eurich rushed over to the back door, opening it to let Albert out. Cold air came rushing in around everyone like an uninvited guest.

“Wow, that’s cold.” Patricia zipped up her chocolate brown coat, it was slim and thick, but fit her frame perfectly.

Raine took a similar action, zipping her coat and covering her head with her feathered hood.

“Everyone set?” Albert asked once more.

“Yeah, just had to get past the cold.” Raine said, pulling a jacket over Eurich. “You need one, even if you don’t get cold that easily.”

“Nah, give it to Jason. He’ll need it more than me.” Eurich passed the jacket over to Jason.

“Thanks,” Jason said, shivering, putting the jacket on and zipping it.

“Training warms me up,” Eurich said mainly to Jason, walking out the door. “I usually work up a sweat, so you won’t need that for too long.”

Snow fell slowly to the ground as they made their way to the clearing. Albert was stumbling a little carrying the tray. Raine walked with her arm wrapped around Patricia, holding tightly for heat. Snow covered their hoods and occupied most of Jason, Eurich, and Albert's hair.

"Might want to take that off now." Eurich stood on the middle ground in the clearing. Serra was in front of him, holding two swords.

"Heh." Jason took off his thin jacket, shivering heavily almost immediately afterwards. "Give me a chance to warm up." He jumped up and down, threw a few punches, even jogged in place.

"Better?" Eurich kicked some of the snow.

"Not by much, but at least I can feel my fingers."

"Same rules as every day," shouted Serra. "I will not allow the use of Celest or Oblivion. You need to be physically strong. Learn not to rely on magic and use mana sparingly. This may be waived if your life is threatened."

"Whoa!" exclaimed Jason. "Tough rules for training, I take it I won't have to fight you in dragoon form?"

"Not if you're losing you don't," Albert said jokingly. "Serra if I may?" He walked over to her and grabbed the swords from her hand. "Ah, the emotionless steel...anytime you're ready." Walking beside Eurich and Jason, he laid the swords at their feet.

Jason looked down to the sword, taking a second to grasp what it was that he was about to do. His vision blurred for a second, but soon corrected itself as he balled his fists. Terrified, cold, and thrilled, the adrenaline heated him up. He took off his over shirt and carelessly tossed it to the ground. He was ready.

"Woo! Go Jason." Patricia could not help but notice how cool Jason made himself seem. She cheered him on in the outskirts; away from what she knew could have become fierce and dangerous.

"Eurich, woo!" Raine opposed, hugging Patricia tightly for warmth.

"Looks like we've got fans," Jason smiled.

"Team Jason," Patricia cheered.

"Team Eurich," Raine was louder.

"Teams, seriously?" Eurich scratched his head.

"Can't get around it, I guess." Jason started to shiver again. "We should probably get started."

"Have you ever used a sword before?" Eurich was still thrown off by Raine's cheering.

"Once or twice, but nothing like this."

"Then this isn't exactly new." Eurich pointed to the sword that lay at Jason's feet. "Pick it up."

"You sure?" Jason kneeled down and picked it up.

"Yeah, this is a sword fight after all."

"Aren't you going to pick up yours up?" Jason tossed and caught his sword multiple times.

"Eventually, now swing!"

"*You heard the boy, swing!*" The sinister voice of the hooded man rose in Jason's head. He paused, holding his head like it was hurting.

"Yo, Jay. You ok?" Eurich ran over to him.

Jason growled, suddenly swinging directly at Eurich's face.

Patricia screamed, closing her eyes and facing away.

“Look,” Raine comforted. “Don’t turn away.”

“I can’t...” Patricia peeked through her fingers. “Euri-Eurich’s okay...”

“It’s gonna take a bit more than that to bring Eurich down.” Raine hugged Patricia, trying to slow her heart down, lessen the tension.

“You have to do a bit better than that!” A steel-like purple flame surrounded Eurich’s index finger.

“What the...?” Jason was surprised that Eurich was able to stop his swing with one finger, especially without being hurt. His blade was stuck, slowly being cut through by the flame. Pulling away made no difference. Eurich had the upper hand.

“Don’t swing so fast.” Eurich dissipated the fire from his finger and raised his hand. Concentrating little mana into his hand, he pushed Jason back.

“Damn...” Jason had to stab his sword into the ground to catch himself. “You little...” Jason was not acting like normal. He began picking up speed to swing at Eurich again.

“Jason!” Eurich saw him getting fiercer. He knew that he would have to enforce the conditions of battle, soon. Jason grew closer and something had to be done. Eurich looked down to his fist, which was glowing because mana was pumping throughout it subtly.

“I’ve got you!” Jason raised his arm as high as it could go before swinging down.

Eurich dodged, punching Jason in the stomach. He did not plan on hitting him that hard, but he felt as if Jason was really trying to kill him.

“AH!” The blow made Jason kneel to the ground, it sounded as if he were almost crying. He cradled his stomach as if he was going to throw up. Panting and coughing heavily, he still tried to stand.

“Stopping early?” asked Albert as he started to walk over to Jason.

“No,” Jason managed to say in between breaths. He grabbed his sword from out of the ground and stood up. Trying the same strategy, he slashed down, possibly aiming to hit a vital spot.

“No, Jason!” Eurich caught the sword in his hand, without assistance of the flame. He took the cut, which was healed upon the glowing of the stone, then went to backhand Jason with his free hand.

“Yes, Eurich!” Jason blocked Eurich’s arm and tossed him to the ground in what seemed like the same instance. He regained control of his sword and stabbed straight down, aiming for Eurich’s head.

Impervious purple flames gathered in front of Eurich’s face, warding off the sword once again. Just in time. Eurich rolled out of the way and quickly stood up. He saw that Jason meant business, so he went for his sword, but was stopped by Jason’s constant swinging. All Eurich could do was dodge.

“*Gotta do something...*” Eurich found an opening between Jason’s swings. Quickly jumping into the air to escape the blade at his knees, Eurich twisted, connecting it with a kick that knocked Jason off his feet. He used the down time to pick up the sword, twirling it in his hands, measuring its capacity.

Jason regained balance, holding his shoulder and wiping off the snowy shoeprint.

“I guess you did need that sword after all.” Jason said, walking slowly over to Eurich.

“Don’t be so smug.” Eurich gripped his sword with both hands, walking around Jason, like a standoff.

“Well...” Jason darted forward, striking more like a pirate, Eurich dodging of course. “I’m better than you thought.”

“*What is taking you so long?*” The hooded man spoke to Jason again.

“Get-out!” Jason swung around carelessly.

“Jay, what’s wrong?” Eurich let his defense down, moving in to aid him.

Jason swung at Eurich, blade clashing with Eurich’s. Sparks flew, and Jason was actually moving Eurich, almost lifting him off the ground.

“Dammit...” Eurich succumbed, but saw that Jason was becoming weary. He pushed Jason back and clashed with his sword again, this time, making Jason fall to the ground.

“Jason!” Eurich ran over to him. “Jason!” He slapped him awake. “You alright?”

“Jason!” Patricia wiggled out of Raine’s grasp.

“Hey.” Raine pulled her close again, forcing Patricia to look at her. “It’s training, remember?”

“Yeah...I forgot.” She looked over to Jason, afraid he would be hurt.

Jason cracked his neck, lying on the ground, trying to sit up. “I’m fine. Help me up.”

Eurich extended a hand, lifting Jason, who staggered a bit.

“Break time!” Serra yelled. She handed out the cocoa to everyone, which was still hot for some reason.

Eurich and Jason took theirs and went to sit with Patricia and Raine.

“You’re doing fine,” Patricia declared, hugging Jason. “I’m so proud of you.”

Jason leaned over and gave Patricia a kiss, then faced Eurich.

“How hard were you going on me?”

“We covered basics today...but I haven’t picked up that sword in about seven weeks.”

Eurich replied. “Way stronger than the arm wrestling match. I can tell.”

“Thanks...” Jason closed his eyes, sighing.

“Hmm...” Raine looked at Jason, orange eyes on him.

“It’s my turn,” Serra was in the middle of the clearing. “Eurich, we can’t have you taking too many breaks.”

“Guess I’m up again.” Eurich wiped the snow of his pants and jogged over to his mother.

Serra grabbed the tattered sword that Jason dropped and stood weirdly, way different style than both Albert and Eurich.

“You’ll be needing yours against me.” She waited until Eurich picked up his sword. She blocked every one of his attacks without any sign of breaking a sweat.

“Have you learned nothing?” Serra kicked him down and held the sword’s tip to his throat.

“Guess we’re done for now?” Eurich tried to move the tip from his throat.

For some reason, Serra was serious, her eyes illuminated heavily and the snow began to swirl around her.

“Dammit, guess not.” Eurich pushed the blade out of his face and scurried to his feet. He held out his right arm and opened his hand.

“Celest!” Eurich did not want to take any chances. Serra looked frustrated and what she preparing, no ordinary sword could handle. The teal mana gathered around his and quickly formed the diamond blade that was gifted to him.

Serra’s sword dropped to the ground and her body ascended slightly above the ground upon a cryptic seal blossoming at her feet.

“Ascendiate-morphos!”

“No, Serra!” Albert bit his lip.

Serra's vulnerable body dropped to the ground and her mana began to turn into a clear ball in the air.

Eurich backed up, flinching at what the ball was starting to form.

Serra laid there, almost lifeless, and her mana was leaking through her mouth and eyes.

"Mom?" Eurich asked, shocked and scared.

"Don't let your guard down, boy!" Albert yelled from behind.

The clear, liquid-like ball began to take a humanoid shape. Not too long after, the being began to grow wings and archaic armor similar to Eurich when he transformed. Its wings were wide set, the being barely translucent with subtle hints of black and red. Fully figured, it hovered in above the ground, as if it were waiting for something.

"Chaos?" Albert whispered to himself. "But why would she..."

"Some part of this still seems unreal to me." Jason said to Raine, looking between her and the battlefield.

"Ok, get ready." The being that stood before Eurich had uneven breathing, like it was ready to strike at any moment. Eurich clenched his sword while backing up, he did not know what to expect from it.

The Chaos replica spread its wings and charge at Eurich with a speed that made Oblivion's seem novice.

There was no time for Eurich to swing. It would only lessen his guard.

Chaos roared, finally reaching Eurich to punch him in the face. The force was massive. Eurich dropped his sword and slammed, spine first, into an aged tree.

"Eurich!" Raine screamed.

"Don't worry, he'll be fine," comforted Albert. "*Serra, what are you thinking?*"

Raine looked at Albert like he was crazy. "*Why would he say this is okay?*" Before doing any deeper digging, she decided that there must have been a reason Albert was letting the one-sided fight continue.

Eurich got up, touching the deep gash on his face and coughing up blood. The stone looked over his wound, but could not do much for his loss of stamina and body ache.

"*Serra...why?*" Raine looked at her body, in an attempt to read her thoughts. Her mind was blank, but filled with rage. It was as if she was no longer herself.

"Sentify!" Raine's eyes glowed as she placed a barrier over the training grounds. She knew something bad was coming and decided to take precaution.

Pseudo Chaos flew towards Eurich again, this time he was ready. He ran to his sword, crouch rolling to pick it up. Eurich dodged as much as he could, to wait for an opening. It was then, that Chaos moved toward Eurich with his arm out, reaching to grab him. Eurich did not hesitate before slashing down, cutting off Chaos's forearm.

Chaos roared loudly, watching his arm fade away into nothing as it hit the ground. He huffed, then used his mighty wings to ascended high in the sky.

"A new moon comes out, and now I'm fighting Chaos...what exactly are you getting me ready for, mom?" Eurich took his focus off Chaos for just a second to look at his mother.

It took Eurich a moment to realize what Chaos was doing up there. He did not think that the replica would possess the same abilities as the real thing.

Silver light flowed into Chaos' hand, slowly illuminating the core of his armor. Though he wasn't as strong as the original, Eurich didn't want to take any risks by just standing there.

Using Chaos' prowess for training was one thing, but having him use a spell that has killed so many was another. Eurich hesitated, if Serra was not able to stop Chaos, how could he?

It was his first instinct to activate the stone. Eurich watched as the armor slowly bonded to his skin, feet first. It took longer. Most of his mana went toward not making his body ache so bad. After another few seconds, Eurich was fully armored, flapping his wings to ascend to where Chaos hovered.

Chaos stopped charging and swiped at Eurich, little could be done because he only had one arm.

Eurich quickly stabbed Celest in to Chaos' core. Within seconds, the mana from the slain Omni returned to Serra.

Mana particles rushed to Serra, overwhelming her body, forcing her awake through gasping and coughing.

"Serra," Albert was holding her. "Why did you summon Chaos?"

"I...didn't," Serra replied. "I summoned Aster, so Eurich...could...finally..." her voice dragged off into a faint snore.

"I think that is enough for today," Albert stood up, cradling Serra in his arms like a baby. Raine let Patricia go and walked over to where Eurich hovered.

"That wasn't a training thing. Why did Serra try to kill everyone, including herself...?"

Eurich was too stuck in thought to even realize Raine was waiting for him.

"Eurich, come down!" Raine yelled.

Still, Eurich did not budge. The look on his face was cold and impassive.

"I'll just...leave you alone then..." Raine did not know where to begin making sense of what was going on inside Eurich's head. She trailed behind everyone else, far behind, but not so much that she could not hear the praise Patricia was giving Jason. They were well deserved.

Albert pushed his way through the back door, carrying Serra to the couch in the living room and laying her down. Everyone else but Eurich soon followed.

"Is she going to be okay?" asked Raine, kneeling beside her. "Her mana is completely used up."

"She just needs to rest," replied Albert. "She may look it, but she is not as young as you, she overdid it this time."

"So?" Albert turned to Jason, trying to stay casual. "How was your first day of training?"

"He really wanted me to kill him...and I felt as if I couldn't hold back."

"Don't take it personally. This is how his training always goes. I was surprised you at least you got him down."

"I didn't know he was that much stronger than me," Jason pointed out. "Why do I feel like the weakest link?" Jason was so used to being the alpha of his group that he did not realize his title was slipping.

"You are strong in your own way," Patricia reassured him. They were both standing on the far wall in the living room, close to the kitchen entrance, giving Serra some space.

Eurich walked in through the back door, closing it lightly so the wind would not slam it shut.

Raine heard him walk in and instantly ran into the kitchen to greet Eurich at the back door.

"Are you going to be okay?" Raine moved closer to him, pressing her arms and head against his chest. "Your heart is beating really fast."

Eurich smiled without saying anything to her at all. It had been the first time he held Raine that way. His heart was not beating vigorously because of the danger, it was because of

her. There was not much room for words, impulse seemed to be the best way to answer Raine's question. He moved his face closer to hers, slowly, hunching over to reach her height.

"I don't know what to do..." Raine's body began to move by pure instinct. She stood on the tip of her toes, her lips just centimeters away from Eurich's.

There was absolutely no thought going on in Eurich's head. He closed his eyes, caressing her face, gently pressing his lips against hers. He kissed her as though he had been deprived of air, holding her as if she was the only thing kept him attached to the world.

"Eurich..." Though she had seen it coming, her eyes were widened, she did not actually think that Eurich was capable of making the first move. A blush all over her face, she closed her eyes and ran her fingers through his hair.

"Thank you for protecting me," Raine lightly brushed away, hugging him tightly.

"I didn't...think I would ever be so close to losing you." Defeating the false Chaos may have done more for Eurich than he thought. He did not seem fearful at all approaching Raine, a step in the right direction.

"I would've been fine." She laughed.

"You let me kiss you?" Eurich still did not believe what he had just done.

"It's been tough ignoring your thoughts for so long."

"So, why now?"

"It's been equally as hard to resist." She kissed him on the cheek, holding his hand to guide him into the living room.

The doorbell rang.

"I'll get it." Albert walked over to the door, opening with a smile.

"Got a package for ya." The postal carrier had a fairly large box in his hand with a clipboard on top. "What happened to the Wheelers?"

Albert laughed, grabbing the clipboard and signing the paper in a huff. He looked as if he had just battled for his life. His body ached and his hair was messy, but he still answered with a nonchalant smile. "I'm their nephew. I'm watching their house while they're out of town."

"Well, if you get the chance, tell them I said hey." He handed the box to Albert and headed for his truck.

"One package for Eurich." Albert set it down on the living room.

"What is it?" Eurich walked over to the table.

"All I did was sign for it." He smiled.

Eurich removed the wrapping and uncovered the lid. A smile instantly appeared on Eurich's face. It was what he had been waiting for since the counselor announced he was graduating early.

"It's my cap and gown!" He instantly took it out of the box, sizing it.

"To think that this day would come." Albert moved over to Serra, holding her hand. *"I wish you were awake to see this, Aster"*

"That means our stuff came today, too," Jason stood up. "There's nobody home to sign for me, so I gotta go. If I hurry, I can beat the postman."

"Off we go!" Raine gave Eurich a hug and quickly headed out to Jason's car.

"We'll catch up later. I think I still have to recover from the training." Jason grabbed Patricia's hand and began walking outside to meet Raine.

"Wait..." Eurich stopped Jason as she walked out the door. "You did well today... I appreciate you coming."

"Yeah..." He smirked, and then continued to his car.

“You can’t resist...what do you say?” The hooded man roamed Jason’s mind again.

“These are my friends...”

“What do you say?” The man asked again in the same cold tone.

“I may need that power after all...”

18. Commencement

Snow fell heavily to ground, covering cars, tress, and buildings. There was no longer any trace of grass, or the sidewalks for that matter. It flurried outside, the wind jerking the snow through the air like flakes in a snow globe.

Eurich woke up anxious. He did not need his alarm. He yawned and walked to his closet.

“Last day of school.” He smiled, knowing it was the day he had been waiting for since the beginning of the year. His cap and gown hung in the closet, perfectly pressed. Taking it off the hangar, he set the clothes down on his unmade bed.

Eurich took in a deep breath, opening his blinds and squinting his eyes. The light that came in was not as bright, and surprisingly blue.

“Eurich, you awake?” Serra called from downstairs.

“Yeah!” He shouted, walking out of his room, down the hallway to the bathroom. Eurich showered quickly, brushed his teeth, and even did something different with his hair. It was not often that he felt the need to brush it, but this day was an exception. He raced to his room, taking another few minutes to put on a suit, his cap and gown over it.

Ding!

The doorbell rang. Eurich finished up the last few things he had to do: making sure his tassel was on the correct side, and his sash was presentable. He breezed down the stairs, wanting to get the door before it rang again.

“Whoa,” Albert stepped aside. “Don’t knock anybody down.”

“Sorry.” Eurich opened the door.

“I can’t believe it!” Raine said excitedly, hugging Eurich almost instantly after he opened it. She had on her gown on, but instead of a cap, white, fluffy earmuffs protected her from the falling snow. “Last day, you ready?”

“You don’t even know how much.” Eurich walked outside, the snow instantly covered his gown. “Where’s Patricia?”

“Already at the school, preparing her speech.” Jason answered, playing off that the cold was not bothering him.

“I would just wing it.” He laughed, walking over to the car. “That’s what I plan to do.”

“Yours is different.” Jason said.

“How?”

“Your GPA got as high as hers last minute. You didn’t have time to do one.” Jason was about to open the door to his car.

“Hold on,” Raine said, opening the back door to get her ice blue handbag. “Before we go, I made something I wanted to give you guys to commemorate this moment.” She reached into the bag and pulled out three chains. “I gave Patricia hers already.”

Each chain had a charm hanging off it. They were necklaces that seemed to have been shattered pieces of a whole.

“It’s to represent our friendship,” Raine continued, giving Jason and Eurich each their chains.

“What is it?” Eurich said, putting it around his neck.

“It’s a heart,” she said cheerfully. “Each of us has a piece. I have the top left, Patricia has the top right. Jason, you have the spiky bottom... and Eurich, you have the middle. You are the glue that holds us together.”

“Thanks, I guess.” Jason said, getting into his car. “This sentimental stuff is gonna make me cry,” he continued sarcastically.

Raine climbed into the back seat, letting Eurich sit up front. With everyone situated, Jason turned the key and began down the road.

“Can you believe it?” Raine said, bouncing in the back seat.

“We all knew this day was coming.” Jason answered, halting at a stop sign.

“I know...but still.” Raine watched the snow fly past the window, thinking.

The next few miles until they reached the school were in silence. The snow stopped falling and what was on the ground began to melt. Jason saw the hooded man on the way, but all he did was sigh and ignore it.

Jason parked carefully, he had to. The ice on the street actually mattered. Eurich got out, moving the seat up to let Raine out.

“Thank you.” Raine took off her earmuffs and put her cap on. Jason did the same. She was grateful and praised herself for the hard work she put in to leave early.

“Last time we’ll ever see this place.” Jason rejoiced.

“Nope,” Raine corrected. “We’ll be back for the winter ball.”

“Academically then,” Jason bargained.

“I wish the ceremony was outside, it feels good out here,” said Raine, twirling.

“I think you’ve been around Eurich too long,” Jason allowed. “It’s freezing.”

Seniors in their caps and gowns were all over the parking lot, few of them were actually moving into the building. They were trying on their hats and talking.

“Hey, Jason!” Patricia spotted them. She ran towards Jason and knocked him off balance.

“I’m so excited. I can’t believe we’re graduating today!” Patricia exclaimed, throwing her hands in the air and hugging Raine.

Jason looked at her necklace. “All the pieces are together...” He grabbed Eurich and jumped in to join Raine and Patricia’s embrace.

“Jason?” Eurich did not expect that gesture from him.

“We’ll never know the next time that we are together.” Jason let everyone go, grabbing Patricia’s hand and walking to the building with her.

“I guess he forgot about the winter ball again,” she said lightly as just stood there, staring into the sky.

“What’s wrong?” asked Eurich.

“I hope Jason realizes we’ll all be together tomorrow.”

“I’m sure he was having another moment.”

They stood together in silence for a few moments. Eurich stared at Raine, and she just gazed soullessly into the sky.

“Have you ever noticed how beautiful that new moon is? Samseran moons look more graceful than ours.”

“I guess I haven’t been paying attention to it.” Eurich looked to the moon, then to Raine, noticing that her eyes were now orange.

“The mana around the moon is green, just like the seal that keeps Samsera away from us.” Raine continued.

“Where exactly is the seal to Samsera?” Eurich began walking, which triggered Raine to follow.

“It’s everywhere, right in front of our faces. I just don’t know how to get there.”

“Raine...” Eurich’s voice became softer. “I know you have to get me there, but...what if something happens to you?”

“Nothing can happen as long as you are by my side, right? Besides, I’m coming whether you like it or not. I’m pretty sure this isn’t a place I can just drop you off at.”

The school band flared, the ceremony was about to begin. Raine and Eurich hastily moved to the auditorium.

“Over here!” Jason called. “We saved you a seat.”

Raine and Eurich sat down and easily blended in with everyone else. The senior class never looked so organized. They were assorted the same way, true blue and majestic gold, the color of choice for the Winbrook Hallows.

The counselor walked across the stage, shaking the hands of the rest of the staff who were there. She waved to the students and took the podium.

“Congratulations, seniors, for excelling beyond the greatest challenges this school has had to offer. The school is, of course, disappointed to let such bright students go, but the parents must proud.” She waved toward the main door, signaling the teachers standing there to open it.

Parents came flooding in. They sat across from the students, in their own section.

“Something feels wrong,” Raine whispered to Eurich.

“What do you mean?” he whispered back. “Is it Jason?”

“No...I don’t think so. A strange mana, I felt it at my house and on the way here, but I don’t know who it’s from.”

Eurich looked around, trying to find what Raine could not. All he came across were some weird looking people who did not seem to realize what year they were in. He glimpsed a man with a strange hood, and then looked to Raine.

“Wait a minute...” He looked back quickly, noticing that someone was there that he recognized. It was odd that the hooded man was there, still dressing like that in plain sight.

Eurich then turned back to Raine.

“I’ve seen that guy.”

“What guy?” Raine’s eyes blazed, she was ready to find out who this person was finally. She placed her fingers over her eyes to peek through, hoping no one would see the change in her eyes.

Eurich nodded, not wanting to point at him. “I ran into him the first day of school. He had some weird interest in my stone.”

She glanced at the man, and turned back to Eurich.

“Sounds like a suspect to me.” She removed her fingers from her face and focused on the man, at this point not caring who saw her eyes. Turning back to Eurich, a worried look crossed her face.

“I can’t...look into his thoughts,” she sounded somewhat fearful, like she could not fathom not being able to read the mind of someone random. “It’s like...a sandstorm is blocking me.”

“Don’t worry about it. I can’t sense the mana that you’re feeling, but I doubt it’s coming from him.”

“But Eurich...” Raine proceeded to push.

“Patricia, help me out a bit?” Eurich asked, leaning over Raine to get to her.

“What’s up?” Patricia asked, too, leaning over Raine as if she was not there.

“Raine thinks that guy over there,” Eurich nodded to him. “...Has some strange mana. She’s upset because she can’t read his mind. Talk to her please.”

“Raine, remember, everyone has mana. He’s probably just giving you a bad feeling.” Patricia said in an understanding manner.

“I can’t read his mind. I’ve never been blocked.” She argued, Jason just sitting there, listening.

“How do you know you’re being blocked?” Eurich asked.

“It feels like I’m being forced out...”

Patricia grabbed Raine’s hand, smiling at her. “Let it go for now, today’s our big day.”

“Yeah...” Raine smiled at Eurich and Patricia, but quickly glanced over to the man, not wanting to let it go. “But I won’t change my eyes back.”

“That’s fair,” Patricia compromised.

The hooded man looked around and then stopped when he saw Raine. He waved to her, smirking under his cloak of darkness.

Raine gasped and quickly turned her head.

“I think he saw me...Eurich, I think he saw me.” There was panic in her voice, with subtle hints of fear.

“Raine!” Jason’s voice was a little cold, he had heard enough from her. “Leave him alone. This is our big day, enjoy the ceremony,” his voice both pissed and sarcastic.

“Yeah, Raine. Don’t let him ruin our day.” Eurich said, squeezing her hand softly.

“But...”

“No buts, just enjoy the ceremony.” Eurich smiled at her.

“*Enjoy* and *ceremony* in the same sentence?” She began to pout, still thinking about the man. “This should be fun.”

The counselor’s voice became louder, easily drowning out the side conversation. It seemed like they did not hear her at all.

“At this time, I would like for the parents of these proud seniors to stand up and give them a round of applause.”

All the students glanced around at their parents smiling and waving, clapping thunderously.

Everyone was there, Serra, Albert, Raine’s mother, Aurora, and Jason’s dad, Thomas.

“Jason, your dad is here!” Patricia leaned over Raine to nudge him.

“It’s just as much of a surprise to me too.” Jason did not sound too enthusiastic. “This is the first I’ve seen of him since the summer...” Jason’s dad looked just like him, with the exception of the long hair. Had it been just three months before, he and Jason would almost looked to be the same person.

“Jason...” Patricia looked at him, apparently not getting through to him at all. “*I’d be more appreciative...my parents aren’t even here...*”

The counselor continued. “Special thanks to everyone who has earned their right to be here today and everyone who supported them. Before handing out the diplomas, I would like to hear a word from this class’ valedictorians, Patricia Falkner and Eurich Aurion.”

“I guess we really do have the same GPA,” said Patricia jokingly.

They both got up and headed to the podium where the counselor was standing

“Go Eurich!” Raine wanted to be sure that he heard her, though it was misconduct. At the same time, Albert and Serra got up, taking pictures of him as he stood on the stage.

The doors opened, two more people entered the auditorium, walking to the section where they were supposed to sit.

“Patricia.” Eurich tapped her and nodded to the door.

“Mom...dad?” Patricia instantly began to tear up, waving ferociously at them.” They were average height, probably in their forties.

“See, they’re here.” Eurich smiled.

Patricia smiled and covered her mouth, she did not want show her teeth because she was smiling so hard and big. She stepped to the podium, moving the hair out of face where the cap didn’t catch it.

“Speech ready to go?” The principal walked over to her.

“Since sophomore year.” She laughed, still trying to wipe away some tears. Clearing her throat, she moved the malleable microphone closer to her face, which meant down, since she was a bit height challenged.

“I don’t know where to start,” she chuckled.

She cleared her throat again, this time taking a deep breath. The lights in the room seemed to have gotten brighter. She was nervous and everyone could tell.

“This has been the most exciting half-year of my, and most of your lives. There has been a plethora of challenges that we have all overcome individually and as a team. This was our chance, our chance to be what we wanted to be and to be with whom we wanted to be with. We excelled and we failed, but only to make us stronger for tomorrow.” She smiled and her eyes started to tear, she paused often to stop herself from becoming inaudible from her crying.

Patricia wiped her eyes and took another breath. “This was the time to make *a lot* of mistakes...and also to hurt the ones that we love most. We can all try to get past it, I know I have.” She looked over to Jason and most of the students met the destination of her glare. They sympathized with the tears that were running down her face. She turned away for a second and leaned on Eurich, using a handkerchief to wipe the tears from her eyes. He reciprocated, hugging her as hard as he felt she needed.

“It’s gonna be okay, your speech is beautiful, please continue.” Eurich’s calming voice seemed to be all she needed to maintain her composure.

“Thank you.” She whispered to Eurich, barely smiling, mainly because she could not get it out.

Eurich smiled, nodding, encouraging her to keep going with her speech.

Patricia fanned her face and approached the microphone once more.

“It was...another great year with the Hallows, the staff here is excellent and the students here are just as wonderful. My only regret is that we cannot stay here longer.” She overlooked the crowd, who were trying to fight back some tears as well. The sight made her pause again. No one thought she would be that emotional. “Our futures. Be your own bosses and have big weddings and give that guy that you hate so much a chance.” She, along with almost every girl in the auditorium began to laugh.

The guys did not find it as funny, but they chuckled sparingly.

“I want to say thank you to each and every one of you personally, but I can only talk so much.” She chuckled again, in relief for breath. “Thank you, and be proud of yourself for making it here.”

She stepped down from the podium, applause roaring wild as soon as she turned her back. At first, Eurich was a little intimidated because he knew she gave a better speech, but soon realized that she had gotten a lot off her chest and was happy for her.

“I’m glad to have graduated hearing those words, you look wonderful.” Eurich congratulated as she walked by. “I guess it’s my turn,” He took a deep breath, then walked up to the podium.

Eurich stepped up, adjusting the microphone. *"I'll have to make up in humor."* He smiled to himself, now ready to deliver.

"What can I say, seniors? No offense to the school, but I'm sure glad to be out of here." Everyone in the audience laughed in harmony, even Patricia gave a silent giggle from the background. "There isn't much more I can say that Patricia didn't cover. But if there is one thing I can leave you all with is the true meaning of love." His tone grew serious and confident. The faces in the crowd grew anxious, what could Eurich possibly know about that? "There is always that special someone in your life, the trick is to not let them go. I know that many of us have lost that person and that person tried to come back and it still did not work out. Don't give up is what I'm saying, some of us know when it's time to move on and when we should stay. Not just love, but anything in life: like a job, or a friendship. But I think this is more focused on the *people*." He distinctively looked towards Raine, who returned a wave, blushing of course, covering her face with one hand.

"But seriously," Eurich continued. "These have been the best years of most of our lives and-

Eurich's sentence was cut short. He began fanning in front of his face, like a fly was bothering him. "-And."

"Everything okay?" The principal approached him.

"Where is this sand coming from?" He asked, eventually stepping down from the podium when it became too much a nuisance.

It was not a normal sight. Magic had been kept a secret thus far, but traces of sand were hovering in front of Eurich's face that everyone saw plain as day.

Raine focused on the sand, instantly matching it with the presence that had been bothering her since she reached the school.

"Hey, Jason!" Raine tugged at his arm.

"What?" Jason asked, head forward.

"That guy back there is controlling the sand."

Jason turned around, looking amongst the crowd. "That narrows it down by a ton."

She slapped Jason on the arm and huffed at him. "The man I was talking about earlier!"

"Ouch," Jason rubbed his arm, turning slightly to look at the hooded man. "Just leave him alone," he focused his attention back to the podium.

"You're not surprised that someone else can control mana? He's messing up Eurich's speech!" She yelled under a whisper, adamantly letting Jason know that she was pissed off.

"It'll blow over," he said, like it was not bothering him at all.

"Jason!" She instantly made Jason the focus of her piercing orange eyes, staring at him while his attention was elsewhere.

"I can't believe him! I didn't want to have to read your mind..." she thought to herself. "WHAT?" She let out a gasp just after seconds fondling around in Jason's head.

"You okay?" He asked, confused as to why she was looking at him like the enemy.

"Everything's fine..." Her voice trailed. She was not ready to accept what she just saw. The golden orbs under the man's hood went away. He crossed his legs, and the sand went away.

"No you don't," she whispered to herself. Her eyes burned with mana-ignited fire.

"What are you doing?" Jason saw her hand glow red. He was surprised that no one else saw.

“What you won’t.” Thin red strings leaked from her fingertips and slowly slithered to the neck of the hooded man.

“Raine, stop!” He tried to move her hand, but she just tightened her grip.

“What’s the matter, Jason? Why protect someone like that?” Her hair began to blow in the still air. She was preparing to do more.

A loud cough came from the back of the auditorium. It drew everyone’s attention.

Eurich squinted his eyes, looking at the man that seemed as if he was suffocating. The threads tightened around his throat.

“*Raine, STOP!*” Hoping his thoughts would get to her.

Raine looked down, hearing the scorn from Eurich’s thoughts. Her eyes changed back to green and she loosened her grip.

Coughing profusely, the man ran out the double doors. The attention was on him for second, but it quickly went back to Eurich.

The counselor walked to the podium. “It looks like we may have to clean the vents. I apologize for the interruption, please continue.” She moved aside and let Eurich take over the microphone.

“Well, I’ll close it up now. No matter where we go in life, remember where we started. Hallows for life. Thank you all for making this school worth the three and a half years that we spent here.”

Eurich walked down, triggering a loud applause from the audience; not as loud as Patricia, but he expected that.

“Without any further delay.” The counselor took Eurich’s place. “We would like to present our graduates with their diplomas.”

Eurich and Patricia walked down, taking their seats next to Raine and Jason.

“That was a great speech,” Raine said to Eurich, smiling and tugging his arm.

“Thanks...that guy, what was up with him?”

“I-I don’t know...Jason was-”

“Eurich Aurion.” The counselor called his name with a diploma in her hand.

“I’ll be back. I swear this last name is a curse.” He walked gracefully to the stage and waved to his parents while he received his diploma. After shaking hands with the principal, he was forced to take a seat next to the staff.

He sighed as the names of each of the seniors were called. Patricia’s name was called, she too had to take a seat next to Eurich.

They both grimaced from boredom as they watched everyone take the same action. Raine walked across the stage, her golden hair blowing with the amazing speed of her walk. Then Jason walked, not enthusiastic at all to receive his diploma.

“Congratulations seniors,” the principal now graced the stage. “I have faith in every one of you. You will all make the right choices, I’m sure. As of right now, today. I officially commemorate all of the students...sorry, young Hallows, as full-fledged adults. Please enjoy the winter ball tomorrow...and I wish you luck with the rest of your lives.”

“About time,” after the applause, Eurich helped Patricia out of her chair and moved hastily to Raine and Jason.

Jason’s dad left as soon as the doors opened, not wanting to congratulate him.

“Figures...” Jason watched as he left, and then saw Serra and Albert approaching, along with Raine’s mom.

“We are so proud of you!” Serra crept up behind him and hugged him tightly.

“Can’t breathe...” Eurich pinched his face, taking in small breaths so he wouldn’t pass out.

“Sorry,” She loosened, chuckling. “My little man is growing up.”

“Little man?” Jason laughed.

“They’re having moment!” Patricia slapped him on the arm.

“We’re proud of you, boy.” Albert joined in.

“So proud that you had to be young coming here?” Eurich pursued.

“Being that way is exhausting, you’ll find out in about forty years.”

“I plan to control that mana by then.”

“Practice, practice.” Serra instructed, grabbing Albert’s hand.

“Yup, practice.” Raine kissed him on the cheek, afterwards, taking off her cap.

“She’s right,” Aurora backed up. “It seems easy, but defying death isn’t exactly rudimentary. You can’t achieve immortality with laziness.”

“Celebration at my hideout,” Jason insisted. Hearing talk of what he couldn’t do bothered him.

“Do you mind?” He looked to Albert, who was hinting that he should be asking his mother.

“Mom?” Eurich followed up.

“Just be careful,” she allowed. “Try to be home for dinner.”

“Dinner it is.” He waved to them as they walked out the auditorium. Aurora kissed Raine on the cheek and followed Eurich’s parents out.

Jason exited with Patricia. Raine stayed behind, grimacing in thought.

“Something wrong?” Eurich grabbed her hand.

“I-I think there is something wrong with Jason...”

“You know Jay. Honestly it’s just him being him.”

“It’s just...that man and him-”

“Raine,” he hugged her and let her go. “We just graduated after all, no need to let him ruin our big day.”

“Yeah...I guess you’re right.” She quickly put on a fake smile and clung to his arm. “*You didn’t see what I saw...*”

“Hurry up.” Jason came back in, rushing them before walking out again.

“Guess we should go.” Eurich met Jason outside. Sliding the front seats forward, Raine and Patricia got in the back.

The ice on the roads melted and the snow was barely visible. Going down the roads were not as dangerous. Jason managed to get everyone there in one piece.

“At least it won’t be crowded like last time.” Eurich got out of the car, helping Raine to stand.

“Finally free.” Jason stretched before letting Patricia out.

“I’ve never been here.” Patricia did not look impressed. The lone shed was run down, nothing special.

“You’re in for a treat.” Jason smiled.

The subtle breeze of brisk winter welcomed them as they moved into the shed. The lights on the way down were hung higher and the stairwell was not as narrow.

“So what’s on the menu today?” Raine chuckled and hurried off with Patricia. “We’ll see you inside.”

Still standing in the corridor, Jason stopped Eurich, wanting to talk.

“So, ready for the ball tomorrow?” Jason sounded as if that was not what he wanted to talk about.

“I guess I am...but I’m gonna go off on a tangent and say that something is bothering you.”

“Why don’t you turn into that dragoon more often? If I had that power I would never want to be a regular again. You could be like Spider-Man or something.”

“Vigilante would be cool, but I’m not supposed to use this power, not for this world at least.”

Jason grimaced, then widened to a smile. “You just don’t know how lucky you are.” He slumped his arm over Eurich’s shoulders and continued into the club.

“Hey! Who turned to the news?” Jason noticed that instantly as he walked in.

“Over here,” Patricia yelled from across the way. “We’ve got a table.”

“And CNN too?” Jason complained. “I’ll have to check the dish, running out of channels.” He was just surprised that no games were on. Then again, there were not many people there. “I would rather The Daily Show be on. I like John Stewart,” he laughed.

Jason took a seat next to Raine and Eurich sat next to Patricia.

“Hungry,” Raine protested.

“Um...yeah, me too,” Patricia whined along with her.

“Hold on...” Jason looked over to the television. “Hey,” he saw a classmate sitting in front of it, watching it with his mouth wide open. “Turn that up.”

“Sure thing.” He grabbed the remote and increased the volume.

“The crescent of what seems like a third moon has been reported in London.” The same news reporter as earlier was delivering the story.

“No way,” Eurich gasped. He and the others moved a bit closer to sit on the couch.

“Reporting live from all over the world, we have different opinions as to what may be going. I’ll bring it over to Rikki in London. What is going on over there?” An open panel then opened, channeling the anchor in Europe.

“Well...” Rikki responded. “We have a few responses here. The second moon ascending was thought to be a hoax, but scientific confirmation has us all thinking that there are other life forms wanting to assimilate us.”

“Other life forms? How can people be so stupid?” Eurich whispered to himself. He felt powerful, knowing the full situation.

“I’ve asked three people today about their opinions about the matter and I got three, very different answers.” Rikki continued. “One thought it was the apocalypse. The second thought it was a gift, bringing in more rainwater for crops, and the last was the weirdest. A man in a black cloak, speaking of...Samsera of some sort. Definitely strange. This man was hysterical. I cannot disclose the entire conversation due its graphic nature.”

“Samsera...” Raine breathed.

“*How did he get to Europe just that fast?*” Jason’s eyebrows narrowed, perplexed.

“I have to go-,” Eurich hastily got up, not wanting to finish the rest of the broadcast.

“No,” Raine tugged him back down. “You don’t have to go anywhere. You said this is our big day.”

“But, you don’t understand,” Eurich protested.

“I do understand,” Raine went on. “We can’t get there right now, but at least we have another pretty moon.” Raine smiled, trying to lighten the situation.

“You know,” Jason began. “I never imagined for a second that magic would be real.”

“What’s this all of a sudden?” She asked with squinted eyes. Jason was already on very thin ice with her.

“I think it’s time you tell them of me.” The hooded man contacted Jason again. *“The third moon has ascended. We must act now.”*

Jason buckled.

“I want to come to Samsera with you too,” Jason said quickly, facing Eurich.

“Jason, I can’t.” Eurich sighed. “I don’t know how to get there.”

“You can’t go. I need you here with me.” Patricia looked down to the floor, then back to the broadcast. *“Samsera isn’t that great...”*

“Yeah, Jason. You can’t leave her here alone,” Raine briskly snapped, almost trying to find any reason to jump down his throat.

Jason did not return any kind of response.

Raine looked at him, with unchanged green eyes. For once, she was genuinely interested in asking him what was wrong.

“Jason, is something wrong?”

Jason sighed, not prepared for what he was going to say.

“I was just thinking about a conversation I had with this man.”

“Really, What man?” asked Patricia.

Raine sat there, smirking because she was getting to the heart of the problem.

“I don’t really know. He was at the graduation, the one with the hood...”

“Hmm.” Raine did not say any more than that.

Eurich looked at him hesitantly.

“What did he want with you?” Raine asked. Jason finally seemed to spill the truth. She had already known, but she wanted to see if he would tell everyone else.

“He knows about Eurich’s power...but he disappeared before he told me anything else.”

“That’s enough, boy.” The hooded man voiced painstakingly clearly. Jason buckled again.

“He controls sand, he was the one messing with you at the graduation,” Raine crossed her legs, feeling almighty because she was right.

“Sphinx!” Eurich exclaimed. “He must be another dragoon trying to reach out to me.”

“His mana is different than yours,” explained Raine. “Your mana doesn’t swirl, it’s free-flowing. I’m not sure that it’s the same for all dragoons, but it’s a good guess.”

“Let’s...not think about it now,” Patricia was still a little torn from Jason’s earlier comment.

“She’s right...” Raine did not want to agree, but it was better to avoid it, considering there were people across from them. “Besides, I’m still hungry.” She held her stomach as if she were cradling a baby.

They spent the next couple of hours in the lounge eating, playing, and laughing before they decided to leave.

“I’ve got to train some more,” said Eurich, opening the passenger side door to get in, letting Raine and Patricia in the backseat first. “Any takers?”

“Not today,” said Jason. “I’m still sore from last week.”

“I’m skipping training today to get ready for the ball.” Raine huddled closer to Patricia for heat. It was getting colder and colder by the day.

Jason drove Eurich, Raine, and Patricia home within a half an hour. The sun was setting, odd because it was so early. It was not just the daylight savings anymore. Surely another moon in the sky played a part in that.

Not wanting to go home quite yet, Jason drove to the river. He stepped out of the car and put his coat on, staring at the body of water.

“You’re alone,” a dry voice came from the woods. “The time is almost upon us.”

Jason turned around, sighing. A talk with him was inevitable.

“Why don’t you just leave me alone? I don’t want any part in what you’re doing.”

The hooded man crawled from the shadow of the whitened, black woods. “You have so much potential.”

“I don’t even know who you are!” Jason asked. “You’re crazy! Stop bothering me.”

Jason turned back to the lake, not wanting to look at the man.

“My identity isn’t important...LOOK AT ME!” His voice became demanding.

“Sto-stop.” Jason’s head was turning, no longer of his free will.

“That’s better.” The man slumped over to him. “I can give you what you want. I just need you to give me what I want.”

His voice made Jason cringe.

“I don’t...want anything.” Jason was desperate to free himself from his grip, but nothing could be done.

“Did you know? Your mana changes horribly when you lie.” The golden spheres under the darkness of his hood lit up.

“I’ve done what you’ve asked!”

“Don’t...raise your voice to me.” The man pointed to the ground, making Jason kneel to his feet.

“If I could replace you, I would. You are another chosen. You have to be heir to my power.”

“I don’t want it...” Jason’s nose was in the dirt, now turning into mud because of the rain.

“But you do. You long for it. It’s what your mana wants.” He let Jason up.

“Then...what do you want me to do?”

The man turned his back to Jason and began walking into the forest.

“Come with me.”

19. New Life

Foggy dawn crept its way into the small division of Roanoke. Day seemed just a bit brighter with three moons in the sky, but the night came faster. The last of the leaves fell off the trees and the air grew colder.

“What was that?” Albert set down his newspaper.

“The door, want me to get it?” Serra was in the kitchen preparing breakfast.

“I’ve got it.” He walked to the door cautiously as the knock became a bang. “Hold on, I’m coming.”

“What is it, honey?” Serra asked.

Albert peeked around the corner after opening the door and stepped out. “Nothing, no one’s out here, must be a prank.” He turned around to walk back inside, but a golden shimmer on the ground caught his attention. “What’s this?” He kneeled to find a picture, covered in sand with an additional note taped to the back.

“...The sands?” He hastily picked the picture up and walked inside to show Serra.

“What’s this?” Serra was now sitting at the table in the den.

Albert tossed the picture onto the table and sighed out of grief. “It’s us...along with the sands...”

“Let me see...” Serra picked up the picture and detached the note. “Oblivion is new life born into a world ruled by Chaos.”

“Well, what the hell is that supposed to mean?” Serra became a little agitated. “Do you think anyone knows? Dammit!”

“There are just a few in Samsera, but-”

“Gala!” Serra interrupted without any kind of hesitation, as if she wanted it to be him. “I’ll be back.” Serra’s eyes burned with fiery resolve.

“What will you do? What if he has nothing to do with this?” Albert pled.

“Then, I will find out.” Cryptic seals appeared at her feet, shortly after, her translucent spirit hovered as her body lay unconscious.

“Serra, please don’t do this. It’s too dangerous,” trying to reason with her. “You can’t do this anymore, don’t try to be Raine’s equal...please.”

“I have breakfast ready for Eurich when he wakes up,” Serra negotiated. “I won’t be long.”

“You have no idea where he lives.”

“I’ll trace the mana from the note.”

“Serra, no!” Albert begged. “Just wait and we can go together.”

“We’ve been together for over two thousand years,” Her voice softened as it began to ripple. “I love you, I’ll be back.”

Serra’s spirit soared through the roof with an intense speed, windows in the living room shattering in her wake. She arrived at Gala’s house in a matter of seconds, breaking his fine dishware in both the living room and kitchen.

“Gala!” Serra shouted. “I knew it was you trying to release Chaos...Gala!”

There was no answer.

“Gala, I swear on my son’s life I will drag you to hell!” Serra continued to yell indignantly. “Answer me!”

Someone came from upstairs, but it was not the teacher. He walked slowly down the stairwell, just a bit shocked at Serra's figure. For protection, he placed a thin cloak of sand around himself.

"Interesting that you think a school teacher can control my sands." The hooded man laughed.

"Then, it's you torturing my son about a past that isn't his. How do you see the good in that?"

"I have no idea what you are talking about. My goals are mine alone."

Serra hovered closer to the man. "What have you done with Gala?"

"He's...sleeping. He won't remember a thing." The man gave a sinister chuckle.

"How can you use the sands?"

"It is a rightful power of mine. Now I seek to steal what was stolen from me."

"What do you mean?"

The man walked further down the stairs. "I have no intention of harming the boy. Just his legacy." He laughed again.

"His legacy—wait, you don't mean?" She staggered back.

"Aster took it from me. I want to reclaim it."

"It was you...you were the sand Aster put out?" Serra's figure was starting to fade. "I loved him like a brother and he's gone because of you!" Tears ran down her face as she screamed loudly, easily busting out the second story windows. Weaker, she fell to her knees.

"I have a few loose ends to tie up. You'd better return to that body of yours before that mana of yours is gone forever."

"If you harm my boy, I'll kill you myself. I'll hunt you down until you are dead," She breathed, balling her fists tightly.

"Another chosen must be made on the night that the barrier is exposed." The lower half of his body dissipated into sand. "Your boy does not interest me...you have about seven seconds before you are erased from existence."

Serra held her palm toward him. It began to glow with the essence of wind. "Ranty—"

"Look like your time is up." The man completely faded into sand and disappeared.

"Dammit..." Serra soared through the roof, swaying weakly amongst the clouds, and returning to her body before her life force was completely diminished.

Upon more glass shattering, a deep gasp filled most of the living room.

"Serra!" Albert turned to her from the foot of the couch.

She had exhausted herself, twitching and shaking.

"Dammit, Serra!" Albert put his hands together and began pressing them against her chest. "Stay with me..."

Her shaking stopped, as well as her breathing.

"Serra!" He held her hand, crying because he had just lost what was so precious to him. "I didn't make it in time..."

He thought back to the time when Serra was happiest, when Aster was together with them.

"Wait...Aster!" Albert lit his finger with blue mana and drew a circle above his torso. "Hope this works...angelus crudelis." He reached into the middle of his chest and pull out a beating, blue orb.

"Cut my life-span in half...to save yours." He slammed the ball into Serra's chest.

She gasped and leaned forward. Her eyes shot open, then closed as she lay back down to rest.

“Serra...” Albert sighed out of subtle happiness, combing through her hair with his fingers. “You are not as strong as you were. “Don’t use that spell for that long...I can’t save you again. I can’t perform that spell again.”

“But...it’s all for him...” Her voice trailed and snore took its place.

“Rest.” He let go of her and stumbled into the den. “I lied...I can use this spell once more, but with someone else,” He sat down and picked up a novel.

“Mana, huh?”

The sunlight crept through the blinds and forced Eurich’s eyes open. He took care of his daily morning hygiene and went downstairs with long boxer shorts on and the teal button up shirt that Jason bought for him.

“Are you two ever going to turn back into old people?” Eurich said while walking down the stairs.

“There is no need to...Serra made you breakfast,” Albert responded. “It’s cold now, but you can microwave it.”

“It’s okay. I’m not really that hungry.” Eurich walked past the living room and took notice to Serra’s pale face. “What’s wrong with mom?”

“She just needed a nap. She should be up soon.”

Serra opened her eyes and weakly positioned herself to sit erect. “I’m awake,” she grabbed her forehead and squinted her eyes, the sun was too bright.

“Eurich, shouldn’t you be getting ready for the ball?” Her voice was tired and weak, but that did not stop her from being a mother.

“Eurich, straighten out your tux. I’ll help you put it on later,” Albert smiled and stood up, heading toward the living room.

“Okay, I’ll be down in a bit.” He glided upstairs and into his room.

“Serra, you really don’t need to be putting matters into your own hands,” Albert spoke to her sternly. “We both know that you are strong, but not like back then.”

“It’s just, looking at Raine reminds me so much of me,” She tried laughing, but coughing stopped her. “I remember when I was destined to be the most powerful sorceress. I guess the younger people are taking over.”

“Serra...I used heartless angel,” Albert solemnly changed the subject.

“Aster taught you that to save someone close from death-wait?”

“Yeah, Serra,” He looked down and grabbed both her hands. “That spell really backfired this time.”

“Half your life...?”

“Gladly given up.” Albert smiled.

Serra quickly wrapped her arms around his neck. “Thank you...”

“Listen...you’re just as beautiful as you were back then, and your mana is just as appealing.”

“Thank you, honey,” she grabbed his face and kissed him innocently.

“I’m on my way down!” Eurich announced, skipping over three steps at a time. “Just remembered that it was in the closet down here.”

“Well, aren’t you happy,” Serra smiled and got off the couch.

“Well, this is kind of a big deal, gotta look perfect. So says Jason.” He opened the linen closet and pulled out his tux from off the hangars.

“Let me iron that for you,” Serra offered, looking at the clothing with disgust. “You are trying to impress a lady, wrinkles like that will get you smacked.”

“Where’s the ironing board?” Eurich set his clothes on the table

“In the laundry room.”

Eurich quickly retrieved the board and iron and brought it to her. He walked back in the den, grabbed his tux, and laid it out on the board.

“This should only take a second,” she picked up the tuxedo, sorting out the wrinkles ironing them. “What kind of corsage did you plan on getting for Raine?”

“Oh,” he stumbled over his words. “Well, I have this big issue with conformity...so, not a flower.”

“Then, what do you want to give her?” asked Albert, walking up behind Eurich to sit on the sofa.

“She likes butterflies...”

“You mean the saphyr...you know the risks of giving her that bangle as a corsage,” Serra reminded.

“Yes...I do,” Eurich said with uncertainty.

“The last valkyrie was born before I was,” Serra said with remembrance. “I met her a few times. Aster said he had many dangerous run-ins with her in the past.”

“What happened to her, then?”

“I don’t know,” Serra responded fast and hesitantly. “It amazes me how much you are like your father. Your shoulders are about the same width now...” She finished ironing and handed the article to Eurich. “Go put it on.”

“Alright” He started putting on his pants.

“Yeah, in the bathroom. Shoo,” Serra laughed.

“Got carried away.” He grabbed his clothes went into the bathroom behind the stairwell. He came out after a few moments, walking smugly into the living room.

“You look dashing in that tuxedo.” Serra complimented.

“Dashing?” Eurich asked, mockingly. “Seriously, dashing?”

“Well, sorry if I’m a bit too old fashioned for you,” Serra said comically. “Looks really are deceiving.”

“Now get over here, boy,” directed Albert. “You need a tie to finish off that masterpiece.”

Albert reached into the drawer under the living room table and pulled out a stunning silk tie the same color as Eurich’s shirt, maybe just a shade off. “I wore this to a dance with Serra many years ago. I guess it’s yours now.”

Albert cracked his knuckles as he walked over to Eurich, tying it under his collar. “The ball starts in about four hours. Any communication with your date?”

“No,” Eurich replied. “I’m waiting for her to call me.”

Albert chuckled. “Then you’ll be waiting a long time. You obviously don’t know girls.” He put the finishing touches on the tie, pulling it down to secure it tightly.

“I never imagined you would be dating a sorcerer.” He sat down on the sofa. “One piece of advice I can give you is to not be intimidated by their power.”

Eurich nodded, then turned around and began walking to his room. Between the dead trees, ash colored snow, and three moons, the sunlight was surprisingly radiant.

He walked into his room, took the bangle out of the drawer, and walked over to the windowsill.

Instantly, the message streamed from the saphrym and onto the wall on again.

“Who would’ve thought you were talking about *her*.” Troubled by the message, he moved the bangle and dispelled it. “You’re wrong, she won’t become one.”

He tossed the bangle on the bed, looking at its morbid beauty before deciding to lie next to it. Watching the ceiling, his eye began to close.

“Guess I was more tired than I thought, a quick nap won’t hurt...” In a matter of minutes, he drifted off into a world of vivid fantasy.

Eurich dreamt himself in a ravine, nothing around him but dead trees, dust, and arid wind. The three moons hovered directly above him, as if they were watching his every move.

He cautiously walked around the empty valley, avoiding the crows that were picking withered berries off the cadaverous trees.

“Eurich,” Syrehnity was calling for him, sitting on a branch at the top of a very large tree.

Eurich looked up, shielding his eyes with an arm.

“Eurich, there’s no need to worry,” Syrehnity swung as her feet draped down. “Come up.”

Eurich smiled, happy to see her again. He grabbed his stone as it began to glow. The amethyst mana began to cover his body, armor slowly following afterwards.

Syrehnity smiled, giggling as he transformed.

“What’s going on?” He looked around, holding up his arms and checking the ground around his feet. The armor began retracting after it halfway enveloped his body.

“Don’t be alarmed, Eurich.” She floated down with her gown and walked next to him. “It’s hard to use mana in a place where it doesn’t exist.”

She curled her fingers and gently touched his face. “You and Aster are so similar.”

“What do you know about my dad?”

“In time, boy.” She stared at him, similar to the way Raine does when she’s reading minds. Her lavender eyes moved from left to right, as if she was reading a book.

“You are wondering why I gave you the saphrym.”

“Yes I am actually, what if she becomes a valkyrie?”

“Raine is strong. She can see the seal that cloaks Samsera, but without saphrym...she won’t be strong enough to reveal it.” She walked behind Eurich and he turned.

She pivoted. “I don’t think that anyone told you that valkyries are the only beings strong enough to break seals that strong. The barrier forged long ago used magic that can only become overcome by them.”

“That’s not true,” Eurich argued. “Raine broke a seal placed by a druid, and she is just a sorceress.”

“I was a sorcerer once...” She placed her flowing mahogany hair behind her ear. She had on the most beautiful earrings that Eurich had ever seen.

“Wait, you mean-”

“Yes, these earrings are saphrym...and...I am a valkyrie.”

Eurich jaunted backwards, fully hesitant. He immediately took a defensive stance.

“Eurich...” She reached out for him with a sense of longing.

“Celest!” Eurich smacked her hand away. He figured if there was not enough mana to transform, maybe he could call for his sword.

Shimmering teal mana in the form of the sword swirled in his hand.

“Stay away from me!” He held the blade pointed toward her.

“Don’t jump to conclusions!” She moved back as Eurich walked closer to her.

“Conclusions?” He raised the sword, but it immediately dissipated.

“Celest!” He called again, but it would not come to him. “What’s going on?”

“Don’t be so rash.” She held her hand up, balling her fist around the teals sparkles the fled to her. In seconds, the blade materialized in her grip, under her control.

Eurich fell to the ground, helpless and scared.

“What did you do?”

“Celest belongs to me,” there was no ill will harbored in her voice.

“That’s not possible. This is a dragoon’s weapon...you must have killed a dragoon to get this.”

“Eurich...I’m sorry.” Her lecture about jumping to conclusions obviously meant nothing to him. She would have to prove it.

She threw the sword far into the air. Her eyes shone and bled unto the blade, reflecting the majestic purple light back onto her. A column of amethyst light descended from the blade, covering her entire body.

A strong wind blew, uprooting trees and tossing boulders through the air.

The purple light that enveloped Syrehnity started to shatter and silver radiance bled from the cracks. A cryptic seal appeared around her and as the platinum glow faded out, she was visible, but as no more than a silhouette.

Eurich covered his eyes, almost blinded by the luminosity.

The glow on her went away and the first thing Eurich saw was her piercing purple eyes. She was staring directly at him.

Eurich ran as fast as he could, afraid of Syrehnity’s new image. Sweat trickled down his as he ran with no sense of direction. An intense heat waved toward him from the energy produced by Syrehnity, but was warded off by his onyx.

Syrehnity walked slowly toward him, letting him run because she knew she could catch up at any time.

“You stay back!” Eurich brandished her, turning around slightly. He picked his pace back up, running at full speed before tripping on a rock.

Eurich held his elbow, sprawling on the ground. He kneeled, trying to get up, but staggered backwards when he saw Syrehnity in front of him. Teal sparkles appeared before him as he sat there with his mouth wide open. First, he looked at her armored boots and then his gazed moved up. He got up as quickly as he could when he saw her armored gown. It was magnificently pearl white with a teal undertone. The metallic wings completed the image.

“You’re...” Eurich could not get the words out.

“That’s right,” she extended her hand to help Eurich off the ground. “I’m Dragoon Purity.”

Eurich did not know what to say. He sat there, not accepting her offered hand.

“Eurich, I am proof that a valkyrie can be one with a dragoon.” She drove the tip of her blade deep into the ground. Suddenly, the arid desert began to flourish with grass, flowers, vivid trees, and freshwater springs.

“New life is the power of Purity, where Oblivion only seeks to destroy in a world ruled by Chaos.” She picked the sword up and handed it Eurich.

“Thanks...” He took the diamond blade and accepted her hand.

“Eurich, you are that life, which is why only you can defeat Chaos,” Syrehnity continued.

“What if I fail?” His stone began to glow.

“You mustn’t. You have to be the one to reach Chaos to set things right. It’s in the prophecy.”

“What prophecy?”

“You’ll figure it out in time...” She disappeared and in the blink of an eye, she appeared behind Eurich.

“Don’t ever doubt Raine, even if she does become a valkyrie.” Syrehnity said, now next to a tree.

“But wh-what if she tries to kill me?” He looked at the ground.

She appeared in front of him again and smiled.

“I was in love with a dragoon once, it wasn’t easy not trying to take his mana. A few times I gave in, but love is a force more powerful than Chaos’ mana.”

“Syrehnity, are you real?”

“I am very real, just no longer physical. I can’t return as long as you wear that stone.”

“Why not?” Eurich asked quickly, not wanting to accept that as an answer.

“My place is with you Eurich...I will show myself to you one day.” Syrehnity began to fade.

“Where are you going?” Eurich reached for her, but his hand went through her body.

“You’re waking up...” She seemed disappointed that Eurich would be leaving so soon.

“I have more I want to ask!” Eurich looked at his hands tried his hardest to remain asleep as his translucent hands began to mimic the look of the ground.

“You have an important date today.” Syrehnity glided into the air, watching what was left of Eurich fade.

“You’ve grown up well.”

20. Shattering Ice

“Eurich!” Serra called from downstairs. “Jason is at the door.”

Eurich’s eyes bolted open and he quickly sprang up to look at his clock. “Was I really asleep for three hours?” He jumped off the bed and began patting his wrinkles out.

“Damn, mom is gonna yell at me...hopefully she won’t see.”

He raced downstairs and hastily twisted the golden knob on his front door, urging Jason to leave before Serra saw him.

“Eurich, your tux is wrinkled!” Serra scolded, looking directly at him from the den. “Let me iron it again for you.”

“I can wait while mommy irons your clothes.” Jason’s voice was filled with ridicule and arrogance.

“Very funny,” Eurich sighed. “I’ll be out in a minute.” He slumped over to the bathroom and removed his clothes, holding them just outside the crack of the door.

“I can’t believe it,” Serra’s voice got louder as she moved closer to the door to grab his clothes. “Were you actually going to let Eurich leave looking like that, in front of Raine?” Her piercing gaze was fixated on Jason.

He thought about his answer for a second, but could not find a witty comeback. “Of course not...” That was all he could muster. Serra intimidated him.

“Hmm...I’m pretty sure Raine told you about the similarities between snake tongues and mana,” she hissed.

“Huh?” Jason looked at Serra confused as she walked past him and into the living room.

“Don’t worry about it.” Albert laughed opening a cabinet next to the refrigerator.

“Need me to iron yours?” Serra asked, unfolding the ironing board.

“Nah,” Jason responded. “I made sure that it was ready to go.”

“Suit yourself.” She quickly ran through the wrinkles and went back to the bathroom door, knocking.

“Yes?” Eurich answered.

“Clothes are done.” She handed him the tux through the crack of the door. “Hurry and get your clothes on.”

“How’s Patricia, heard anything from her?” Albert walked over to Jason with a nutrition bar in his hand.

“Nothing yet. I was waiting for her to contact me.”

Albert laughed. “People nowadays must not want long relationships.”

“What?” Jason took the statement to heart.

“Joking.” He laughed again and then went to sit in the living room.

“Better?” Eurich stepped out of the bathroom and presented himself to his mother.

Serra smiled and nodded her head.

“Are we all set to leave?” Jason impatiently asked.

“Yeah.” Eurich turned the knob, fully prepared to leave.

“Don’t forget your bangle,” Albert reminded just as Eurich opened the door.

“Crap...I’ll be back.” He dashed to his room and smiled as he lifted the marvelous saphrym.

“Love is stronger than Chaos’ mana, huh?” He smiled, knowing that it could be true. Everything she said had turned out right thus far, so Eurich was less concerned. “Thanks, Syrehnity.”

“Eurich, we gotta go!” Jason yelled impatiently.

“Coming.” Eurich trotted down the stairs, again, on his way out.

“One more thing,” Albert stopped him, standing there with a black box in his hand. “Take this.”

“What’s this for?” Eurich stepped back inside and approached Albert.

“Something to put that bangle in. I know it won’t scratch, but at least it’ll keep the surprise. Trust me, when it comes to a woman...” he looked back to Serra, who returned a nod. “It can takes years to repent for ruining a surprise.”

“Thanks for understanding.” Eurich grabbed the box.

“Of course, just be careful.”

“I will.” Eurich shook Albert’s hand and wrapped him in a hug, then approached the door once more.

“One...last thing.” Serra wrapped her arms around Eurich and kissed him on the cheek.

“Pictures?” Eurich guessed.

“Yep!” She said like it was a hidden desire. “You both look so nice. Much different than the boys you used to be.” She hurried about the living room until she returned to them with the camera.

“Ready when you are,” Eurich said with his arm over Jason’s shoulders.

Serra flashed at least four pictures before setting the camera down. She put her head down and tears fell to the floor.

“I just don’t want to let you go...” She hugged Eurich tightly.

“You act like this is the last night you’ll see me.” He smiled, slightly embarrassed because Jason was witnessing the whole thing.

“I’ll keep the boy safe. I promise to bring him home in one piece.” Jason lightly tugged Eurich out of his mothers’ grip.

“Tell Aurora I want pictures of Raine and Patricia.”

“Have fun you two.” Albert said, walking up beside Serra.

“We will.” Eurich waved to them, then walked out to the driveway. “Where’s your car?”

“Around the corner.” Jason pointed toward the hedge leading into the street.

Eurich rounded the corner to see a luxurious limousine parked with the driver waiting outside. It was marvelously black with sleek, chrome wheels--the works.

“I didn’t expect the limo to look like this.” He hurried over to the vehicle, getting in after the chauffeur opened the door.

Jason got in shortly after, taking a bottle of water out of the mini-fridge. “Well, I figured this was the last hoorah. Plus, we gotta make our dates look good. Patricia is at Raine’s house, gonna meet them there before we take off.”

“I would hope so...” Eurich’s sarcasm was met with a look of awe. Around him were brightly lit aquariums and a snack tray.

The limo took off and was well on its way to Raine’s house. The smooth engine made the ride quiet and enjoyable, but the sights are what made time seem to pass a bit faster for Eurich.

“You okay over there?” Jason smirked, happy to see that Eurich was content.

“Are you kidding me? I can live in here, please tell me you’re getting me this for my birthday.”

Jason laughed. "February is a couple months away, we'll see."

"Is it too late to change my present idea?"

"We'll see. Tuck your stone in, we're at Raine's."

"Why do I have to tuck it in?" Eurich grabbed it and slid it under his shirt.

"Doesn't match."

Eurich opened the door, getting out to head up the driveway. "You coming?" He tucked the box into his jacket, which was obviously still seen.

"In a sec, I gotta talk to the driver."

"Alright." Eurich strode up the marble walkway with an eager smile on his face. Before ringing the bell, he reached into his pocket and popped a mint into his mouth.

The door opened to the second most alluring orange eyes Eurich had ever seen.

"Come on in." Aurora greeted him with a pleasant, smiling face. "They'll be ready in a little while. They're just putting the finishing touches on their makeup."

"Makeup?" asked Eurich, slightly surprised. "Raine never wears makeup..."

"Don't worry, it's natural," Aurora replied. "And I can promise you it won't be an everyday thing."

"Is it me, or was it just light outside..." he walked in, looking down at his watch. "It's only five-thirty."

"Daylight savings typically does that," Eurich joked.

"It's the moons, I'm sure." Aurora took Jason's defense.

"The moons," Jason echoed. He looked over to the staircase, hearing the clicking of heels making their way down the stairs.

"Mom," Raine turned the corner, but quickly turned back when she saw Eurich was down there.

"Don't come down, dear. The boys are here. What do you need?" Aurora walked to the staircase on the far right side of the house.

"We need some help with the mascara!" Raine yelled from upstairs, almost a cry of terror.

"Hold on boys, this sounds like an emergency." She quickly ran up the stairs, fearing the worst.

"That bangle... show me again," Jason requested, pointing to the box.

"Just a quick peek." He reached into his jacket and pulled out the black velvet box, taking a second to open it. The marvelous saphyre butterfly still looked as pristine as a rippling freshwater spring. With slight hesitation, he handed it over to Jason.

"This is amazing." Jason took notice that he was leaving behind no fingerprints. "But, you realize that no corsage is breaking tradition?"

"I don't believe in assimilated tradition," Eurich explained, grinning. "An assimilated mind is no mind at all. It's like, what if I wanted to write a novel about my exploits as a dragoon and lose out because all people know are vampires?"

Jason smiled and nudged Eurich in the arm. "You're really unique, ya know that? Not just the dragoon thing, you all over. Kinda weird."

"I think I get it," Eurich agreed, laughing. He turned his head and tapped Jason, nodding at the staircase. He grabbed the bangle from Jason and placed it back in the box and into the jacket.

"Wow..." Jason leaped over the bottom of the staircase and waited as the soft click of the heels led Patricia to him.

She gallantly walked down the stairs, trying not to step over her flowing goldenrod dress. The light in the house reflected nicely off the gold and orange accents on the dress and off her shoes. She laced her fingers through her curled hair and fluttered her lengthy eyelashes.

Jason was lost. He had never seen her look that way before. Patricia had always been a jeans and blouse type of girl. She was astoundingly beautiful...it was almost unreal.

"Don't just stare," she tittered.

"You look...amazing." Jason's words finally came forth.

"And you're not bad yourself, handsome," Patricia added. She adjusted the tiara on her head and walked next to Jason, kissing him on the cheek.

Aurora made her way around the corner. "Raine will be down shortly."

"You should see her," Patricia teased. "She's beautiful."

Jason grabbed Patricia's wrist and knelt down on one knee. He reached for his side and pulled out the clear container from the inside of his jacket. Smiling, he removed the laced, black rose and presented it to her, putting it around her wrist.

"You make this rose look perfect." His voice was soft and caring. It was unusual, but appropriate.

"Jason, it's so pretty. Did you pick this out on your own?" The color would not return to her face, it was still beet red.

"Of course I did, only the best," he kissed her hand. "Thank you for being my date. You're the best thing that has ever happened to me."

"What a cupcake," Eurich cheered from across the room.

"Just a sec." Jason looked to Eurich and walked into the living room. He found the hardest pillow on the couch and tossed it at Eurich before returning to Patricia.

"Isn't that cute," Raine's gentle voice seemed to have a knife-like effect, everyone halted at her approach. She slowly walked down the stairs, holding the panels for balance. High heels were not necessarily an ordinary thing for her.

"There's one fairy tale ending, now where is mine?"

"My...god," Eurich moved over to the staircase, absentmindedly-pushing Jason aside.

Raine chuckled, walking down each stair slowly with her high, black heels clacking. Eyes wandering around the room, she lifted her long, shimmering, silver gown and moved the bangs from her face.

"The haircut looks nice, huh?" Jason leaned over and whispered to Eurich.

He did not return an answer. He was still overwhelmed by someone who should be out of his league.

Raine continued down the stairs, running her hand over the crystal accents that were on the bust of the dress—blue topaz and small traces of onyx. Her eyelashes were immensely longer and the black and silver around her eyes made the green stand out a lot more.

"Don't just stand there," Jason whispered. "Say something about the dress."

"It's...you-look perfect," said Eurich timidly. He swallowed harshly. *"I wish I knew what to say."*

"And you look very dashing too," Raine responded, giggling. "You don't have to say anything. I know what you mean."

"Everybody, get together for a picture." Aurora stood on the top of the staircase, waiting until everyone was close to each other before flashing the photo.

"Oh, before I forget. My mom wants to know if she can get a copy of the pictures." Eurich wiped his eyes to correct his vision.

“Of course, I’ll be sure to make extras.” She responded, walking down the stairs.

Beep! Beep!

“I forgot the limo was still out there,” said Jason. “We all ready to leave?”

“Forgot what is out where?” Patricia walked over to the door.

“You’ll see in a sec, everyone got everything-purses, wallets, coats?”

“Check,” Raine and Patricia said in unison, eager to see what the surprise was.

Patricia opened the door and smiled heavily, screeching. She grabbed Raine’s hand and ran over to the limo.

“He’ll be out in just a second,” Aurora said to Jason as he was on his way out. She turned to Eurich.

“I take it you still plan on giving the saphrym to my daughter.”

“Yes...” Eurich responded hesitantly.

“I’m sure she’ll like it,” she added with a smile.

“Aren’t you worried?”

“Of course I’m worried,” her voice became rigid. “Valkyries are rare...just bring her home before too long. Now go have fun.”

“Thank you...” Eurich hurried outside, watching everyone get into the limousine.

“Wait for me,” he yelled. He jumped in after Jason. Soon after, the driver was headed to Winbrook High School.

The sky darkened and there was no trace of wind. The snow was barely visible. It only remained prominent on trees and buildings.

They reached the school with little time to spare. Parked, Eurich and Jason were to first to get out. They stretched before opening the door for their dates on the other side.

“The cold isn’t that bad. Guess I’ll thank global warming.” Jason stood, looking at the lights that were placed around the borders of the roof.

Eurich laughed. “I wouldn’t know. I haven’t been cold in a while.”

Raine looked up at the moons with her carrot eyes, getting lost in the stars around them.

“Is everything okay?” Eurich asked, putting his arm around her.

“Yes. I know you can’t see it, but celestial mana is so pretty.”

“Hey, doesn’t Chaos control that mana?” asked Jason.

“Yes, but somehow I doubt he controls what she’s seeing,” replied Eurich with a slight attitude.

“I’m cold, let’s go inside.” Patricia ran ahead of everyone else, careful not to trip over her heels or dress.

“Alright, alright.” Jason and the others shadowed her.

They entered the doors to the school and walked down the hallway that led to where the ball was being held. There were other students walking down the hallway with them, but Eurich and his group seemed to have stood out the most. Raine and Patricia had on extravagant dresses and slight facial glitter, while the other girls wore dresses that did not seem to match the event, not to mention Eurich and Jason smugly walking in their expensive tuxedos.

Jason was the only one who walked cautiously, feeling strangely paranoid. He kept glancing to the right and left, thinking he was catching glimpses of the hooded man.

“Eurich did you see that?” Jason pointed over to a group of students.

“No, what was it?” Eurich looked around but saw nothing.

“Nothing...” Jason turned to another group of students and saw the hooded man before he disappeared into the crowd.

“Jason, it’s okay. Don’t worry about it.” Patricia grabbed his hand and led him to a set of large, decorated, double doors. Intense silver light came from the room, almost like a beckoning.

They walked through the opening. The room was elegant. It had ice sculptures located around the room: swans, doves, and ice flakes. The ceiling was decorated with Victorian-style chandeliers and hanging crystals, tailored to look like ice. It was set up like an ice cavern, silver light reflecting off the crystals to create a tundra feeling.

“I didn’t think the school would do this for us,” Jason stood there, mainly trying to price how much the school actually spent.

Raine and Patricia ran into the room first, twirling as if they were in paradise.

“Looks like they are enjoying themselves,” a sinister voice whispered to Jason.

Jason looked down to the floor. “Sand? Dammit...” He tapped Eurich on the shoulder.

“Yeah?”

“I’ve gotta step out for a second...”

“You sure?” Eurich was a little concerned.

“Yeah...I’ll be back in a minute. Just don’t let my date get away.” He threw in a cheeky smile to offset the seriousness.

“Understood.” Eurich walked into the room and mingled with the rest of the crowd while Jason followed the trail of sand. It led him outside, where it was near pitch black. The only light came from the moons and the twinkle of the stars.

“Have you given it any thought?” the hooded man emerged from the shadows, appearing behind him.

“What happens if I say yes?”

“If you say yes, then you’ll forfeit your life as a human in exchange for power.”

“Is that all that will happen, just the power?”

The man laughed in a devious tone that almost sounded like a cough.

“The power is only the beginning...but I’ll need you to do something for me.”

“Like what?”

“For now, I just need you to stay by Oblivion’s side-”

“Eurich is his name,” Jason interrupted.

“Of course,” said the hooded man. He reached under his hood, pulled two small pieces of studded, golden jewelry and handed them to Jason.

“What do I do with these?” he mocked the golden studs that were given to him.

“Drop them into your eyes,” he instructed purposefully.

“These are hard as rock. Not a chance.”

“Trust in me,” his voice was ominous. “Just as you trust in the boy.”

Jason hesitated, but dropped the beads of gold into his eyes. They dissolved quickly, before touching his iris.

“Now, just wait...” The man disappeared, leaving Jason alone.

Thunder cracked as Jason held his side in pain. There was not much he could do but let out a scream.

“Did you hear that?” Eurich asked, panicking as he heard the sound.

“Hear what?” asked Patricia. “Is something wrong?”

“You didn’t hear that?” Eurich asked again. The sound was prevalent in his head, like resonance.

“No...what is it?”

“It’s Jason. He’s in pain,” replied Eurich. “I...can’t really explain it.”

Eurich ran down the hallway. He was able to sense Jason for some reason, so finding him was easy. Bursting through the front doors of the school, he found Jason lying on the ground.

“Jason! Jason!” Eurich shook him heavily until he woke up. “Are you alright?”

“Yeah, I’m fine...it was that guy again.”

“What did he want?”

“I...don’t know, he knocked me down and ran.”

Raine and Patricia followed outside shortly.

“What happened?” Raine demanded.

“Nothing too big, everything’s fine,” Jason replied.

“*What makes you think you can lie to me?*” Her eyes saw through him, but his mind was jumbled like a sandstorm, and was unreadable. “*His mana is blacker than usual...*”

“Raine...” Patricia grabbed her shoulder, then grabbed the necklace that was made for them. “Learn to trust him,” she whispered.

“Well...if everything is ok, we should head back inside and enjoy the rest of the dance.” It was hard for Raine to let it go, but it was for the best.

Eurich helped Jason up off the ground. “Why did you scream?”

“I...I didn’t.” Jason dusted himself off. “Not that I can remember.”

“It was weird though...I heard it and no one else did. Made my stone burn me.” Eurich halfheartedly joked. “Why were you on the ground?”

“He pulled a move on me...I’m good now.”

“If you say...” He and the others made their way back to the ballroom, where everyone was dancing to the soft music.

“Waltz, seriously?” Jason grimaced, but Patricia was happy. “I can’t dance.”

“Looks like you’re going to have to try,” Patricia said, pulling Jason to the dance floor.

“We should dance too,” Raine suggested.

Eurich laughed. “I’m a worse dancer than Jason.”

“It doesn’t matter, just dance with me.”

Raine grabbed Eurich’s hand and led him out next to Jason and Patricia.

“I’ve never done this before,” said Eurich, grabbing Raine’s hand.

“Not yet,” she rejected his hand. “Follow my lead, it’s not hard.”

She lined Eurich up with her face and put his right hand on her waist. She put her left hand on Eurich’s shoulder.

“Now, grab my hand,” she instructed.

Eurich followed her direction, wondering what to do next. Raine knew Eurich had no idea what he was doing, so she read his mind for safe measure.

“Step forward with your left foot while I back up with the opposite.”

Eurich followed her instruction, moving to the best of his ability.

“Now slide your feet. Mirror what I do.”

“This is kind of fun,” Eurich admitted.

“You just have a good partner,” Raine smiled gracefully.

The song changed and the dancing took a faster pace. Eurich stopped, staring into Raine’s green eyes as she touched his face. He leaned in for a kiss, but Patricia interrupted them.

“Wasn’t that dance fun? I just hope that Eurich was better than Jason was.”

“I somehow think he was.” Raine laughed.

“It’s getting a little hot in here,” Eurich said suddenly, tugging on his tie. “I’m going out for some air.”

Eurich walked out the back door and sat in a gazebo that sat directly under two of the moons. He took off his jacket and leaned on the panes, looking at the sky through the glass roof.

“We’ll see what happens.” He took the box out of his jacket and set it down on the bench. Moments later, he saw Raine walking toward him.

“Eurich,” she walked awkwardly in her heels. “Do you mind if I join you?”

“Thought you’d never ask,” he smiled.

“It feels good out here, doesn’t it?” She was obviously cold, but wanted to resort to Eurich’s body heat.

Eurich remained silent, still looking into the sky, almost as if he was looking at something specific.

“I’m surprised you’re not looking at their mana.” Eurich looked to her, wondering why her eyes were still green.

“I like the sky the way it is. Just the way you see it.”

The breeze began to pick up. One strong enough to topple the velvet box Eurich put on the bench.

“You know...you never gave me my corsage...” She said suddenly, looking at the box.

“Oh, this thing...sephrym.”

“It’s the valkyrie thing, isn’t it?” Raine empathized.

“How do you know?”

“I don’t need to change my eyes to figure that out.”

Raine looked over to the balcony where she saw Jason and Patricia standing, watching them.

“Isn’t that cute?” Patricia grabbed onto Jason’s arm.

“Heh, what a cupcake,” Jason smirked.

“Spying on our dragoon are we?” said Gala from behind them.

Jason flinched, startled. “When did you get here?”

“I’ve been here for a while,” replied Gala. “The scenery out here is nice, isn’t it? The moons and the stars, like something out of a fairy tale...which don’t exist, by the way.”

Gala looked at Jason and nodded, then looked to Eurich.

“Open it please. I want to see what’s inside,” Raine insisted.

Eurich moved out into the grass, directly under the magnificent light of the Samseran moons. Raine followed him out, pressing herself into Eurich’s arms.

“Raine...” Eurich said as he turned to her. “I want to tell you something...”

“Yes?” Raine’s orange eyes were out.

“Reading my thoughts now?”

“No, I’m just blushing. I’m sorry, I can’t control it.”

Eurich chuckled. “It’s okay...your eyes are really beautiful.” He sighed before continuing. “I can’t do this. You already know what I’m going to say.”

Raine wrapped her hands around his waist and lightly kissed him on the lips. She squinted her eyes and smiled gingerly at him, blushing. “I know, but I want to hear you say it.”

“I lo-” Eurich could not quite get it out. His heart raced as he tried over and over to get out a simple phrase. He did not know why it was so hard because he honestly felt truly about her.

“Need some help?” Raine chuckled.

“I love you,” he finally said, face now fluttered. He reached for the box and slowly opened it. He thought hard before he removed the bangle.

The wind picked up and Raine held her forehead, as if she was having a migraine.

“Are you okay?” asked Eurich.

“Of course...the bangle is beautiful.” Raine replied, still hiding the fact that the mineral bothered her.

Eurich got down on one knee and placed the bangle around her wrist.

Raine’s eyes flickered between orange and green, head throbbing. She knew her fate, but wanted to seem okay for Eurich.

“I love you too, Eurich.” Her voice was less passionate, suffering from the bangle.

Dark clouds began to swirl around the stars, moving faster as Raine’s flickering eyes picked up speed.

“Eurich...I’m sorry.” She held her palm toward him. “Rantyx!” She pushed him back before she was hoisted into the air by a heavy wind.

Raine’s eyes burned with a heavier glow and she remained stationery in the air.

“Raine!” Eurich cried out. He got up and ran under her. He turned and saw Jason and the others run toward him.

Raine continued to float toward the moons, eyes open, but not conscious.

“Raine!” Eurich grabbed his stone. Purple mana fiercely wrapped around him as Oblivion’s armor completely consumed him.

“Raine, hold on!” Eurich flew with violent speed toward her.

Light from Raine’s eyes met the green mana coming down from the moon with a burst of energy that slowed time to an abrupt halt. The very particles that made up breathable oxygen became crystallized and nature became stuck, like stationery pieces of shattering glass in a portrait.

“Raine, I’m coming!” Eurich reached out to grab her. Time only seemed to move for him.

He tackled her out of the sky, breaking through the glass-like barrier, entering a void that took them away from everyone.

The wave of energy dissipated and the crystallized surroundings returned to normal as the void closed behind Eurich and Raine.

Eurich’s eyes opened slowly. Still dazed and blurred, he turned to Raine.

“Raine...” he tried calling out, but words escaped him. His eyes were closing slowly, but he was determined to keep them open. There were men in royal linens pulling Raine toward a castle.

A tear crept down Eurich’s eyes. He urgently tried to scurry toward her but it felt like bricks were weighing him down. As he blinked, Raine was taken further and further away from him. There was nothing he could do and that hurt him more than her being taken away. He had lost her without a fight.

“What do we have here?” A strange man said, looking at Eurich, hand over a hilt at his waist.

Eurich tried squinting, but the man was no more than a silhouette. He closed his eyes once more, but forcefully pulled them back open to multiple spears being pointed in his face.

“Sir...” a guard approached the man.

“What!?” He harshly responded.

Eurich managed to get a look at one of his features--his long crimson hair.

“You must read him his rights,” the guard handed the man a note.
“For crimes committed—blah, blah, blah,” he tossed the note to the ground.
“Oblivion, you are hereby sentenced to death.”

Asher's Reflections on Mana

Mana, Asher's first published novel, is a book that really spoke to him personally... almost as if it kept telling him to write it. Mana, as a term, is the Pacific Islander view that all things consist of this energy that cannot be seen, except by those few that are favored.

That is where Mana, the novel concept, came from. What if people could actually see this energy that exists in everything? What if people could use it similarly to magic? What if people who could do this became greedy? What if this was brought to the real world? He wanted to answer all of those questions, as well as telling the best story he knew how.

He wanted to write a book that really conveyed his unique vision—also, he wanted a book with rain and lots of forests. Twilight basically claimed Washington. After some intense research, he ultimately decided that Roanoke, Virginia was an ideal setting! Surprisingly, after choosing the setting, he then quickly figured out that he could play off an old piece of history, which set a new foundation to the book. Mana is not just the beginning of a saga, but the start of a revolution!



Connect with him on his website <http://ashertensei.blogspot.com/>

Join the conversation about Mana and stay updated <http://www.facebook.com/TheManaSaga>

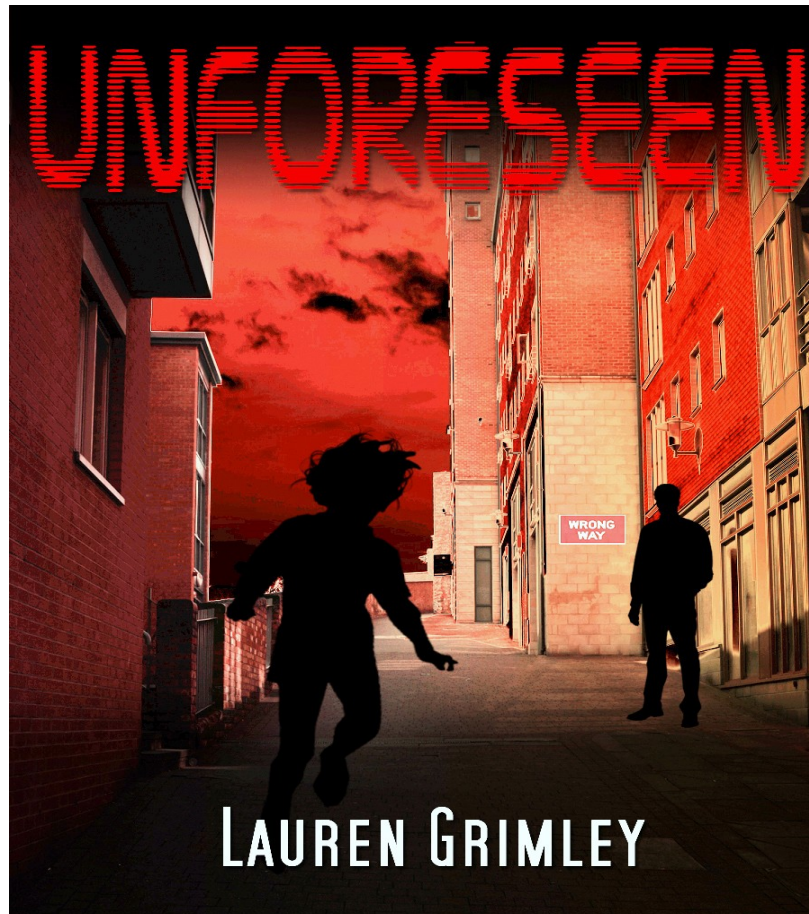
What did you think of Mana? Tensei loves nothing more than hearing feedback! Did Mana make you laugh? Cry? Smile or blush?

Leave a review for Mana on your favorite site to let him, and others, know what you think of the story or how it has impacted you. Your input may be just what he needs to finish the saga!

Don't miss the special Valentine's Day edition! Stay connected though his website or the highly active Facebook page for updates!



Paramance presents another work of great fiction:

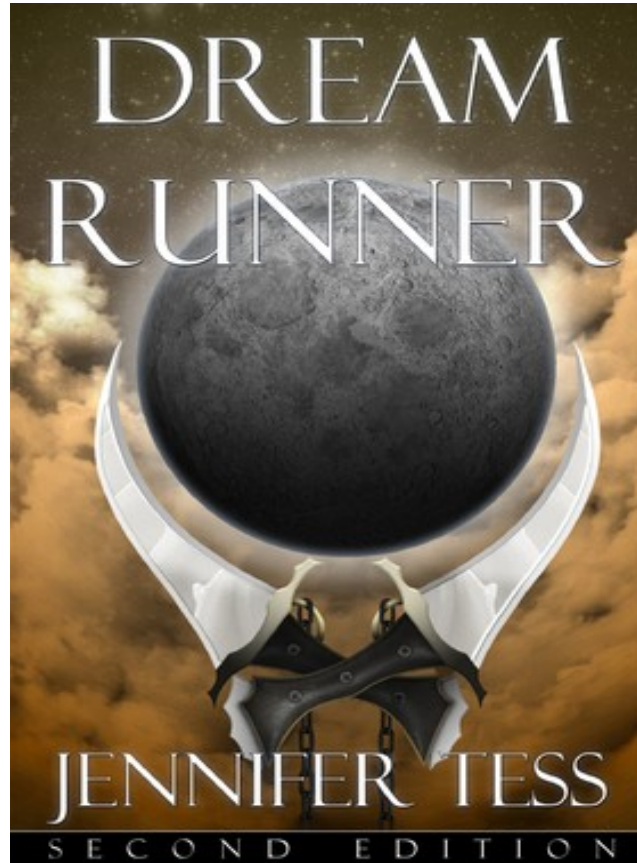


“Alex was quite sure that "gifted" was a term which delusional parents applied to their strictly average children, that vampires were gorgeous dead guys in her eighth-grade girls' novels, and "Seers" was a middle schooler's misspelling of a department store famous for power tools. Teachers, however, don't know everything, and it's Alex's turn to be educated.

Hoping just to clear her mind, Alex Crocker leaves work for a late night run across the small city of Bristol, Massachusetts. Instead she is dragged violently into a feud she never would have known existed. She quickly learns she's being hunted for possessing a gift she never wanted, one that could kill her or provide her the power she'll need to protect herself and those she cares for.

Despite her desire to maintain her independence, Alex quickly becomes tied to the Rectinatti vampires through bonds of friendship, loyalty, and most surprisingly, love. These bonds, coupled with the new knowledge that she is in grave danger are enough to make her want to stay, but it's learning what is really at stake that drives her to fight.”

Paramance presents *Dream Runner* by Jennifer Tess:



“Monsters hunt through people’s dreams. They’re called phantoms, and they’re nearly unstoppable. They slip into the realities between night and morning when their victims are most vulnerable. The dream runners once fought them and protected humanity. As the centuries passed, their numbers dwindled.

Now Mike Carpenter is the last dream runner. His parents are dead. His grandfather is dead. He is alone. But he doesn’t stop hunting the phantoms. He goes through a normal life during the day and battles the phantoms at night. No one remembers him. Fighting alone, he is going to die, but Mike doesn’t care. He’s lost everyone he loves and refuses to yield even as the phantoms grow stronger and begin to show signs of intelligence.

When Mike chases a phantom through three different dreams, he stumbles into the last person he expected. Cora. He found his way into her dream. Except this time something impossible happens. She remembers him. For the first time, he is confronted by the chance that he might not have to fight alone.”