

The Legend of Damiano's Disk

Tales of Aria (Book #1)

By: Carl Russ, III

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TO:

“My sister, Lindsey Russ. For all of her support throughout the writing process. Also, to you, dear reader. For without you, I’m but a dreamer with a keyboard.”

–Carl Russ, III

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Introduction/About The Author

“Now for the obligatory page about me. My name is Carl Russ, III. I live in a small apartment in Bartow, Florida, where I spend most of my time writing and drinking way too much black coffee. I’m a bit of a nerd, and am especially fond of RPGs: those of the video game and table top variety. As you may notice, my work is heavily influenced by the genre. In fact, the ‘Tales of Aria’ series traces its origins to a scrapped RPG project of my own. However, to prevent from making this section of the book far too long, I’ll refrain from elaborating further.

“Oh look, a second paragraph. You’re still reading this? Oh, good. Anyhow, ‘Tales of Aria: The Legend of Damiano’s Disk’ is my first venture into writing. I’ll admit, I’m no professional. But that doesn’t mean I haven’t put a great deal of time, effort, and passion into this story. This is my world, and these are my characters. I hope you enjoy them as much as I have.”

–Carl Russ, III

Prologue

Lucas Bardsson awoke to the sound of scratching at his front door. He sprang out of bed and seized a small lantern resting on his night stand. Quickly grabbing a match out of the drawer, he lit the lantern and bolted out of his room. As he made his way toward the source of the disturbance, he collected a battered sword from the kitchen table.

He pressed his ear against the door. The sound of claws digging into wood was accompanied by a low growling.

“An imp,” he softly whispered, gently hanging the lantern nearby. He tightened his grip on the hilt of his weapon, slowly reaching toward the doorknob with his free hand.

“Go back to bed,” a voice behind him said. He glanced back to see his grandfather, Marvin. “Give me the sword, Lucas. I’ll take care of it.”

Lucas shook his head. “No, Grandpa. I told you, I don’t want you doing this anymore. Let me handle it.”

“Those beasts are dangerous, Lucas.”

“I know,” Lucas responded sternly as the scratching and growling grew increasingly furious. “That’s exactly why you need to let me handle this. Losing dad was hard enough.”

Reluctantly, Marvin took several steps back. Again, reaching for the doorknob, Lucas prepared himself. In one swift motion, he swung the door wide open and thrust his blade into the beast. It screamed in agony as it fell to the ground.

These visits from strange monsters had become a regular occurrence for the Bardsson household. Most often they were imps: short, aggressive hominoid creatures with sharp teeth and claws. For the first few months or so, Lucas found these

encounters frightening. But with time, it became a normal part of his life.

It had been two long years since the day these beasts first began appearing in his homeland of Aria. They arrived without warning, their origin unknown, quickly sweeping across the land, overtaking cities and wreaking havoc. In an attempt to quell the onslaught, King Ashraf sent massive armies of his finest warriors to combat the bizarre invaders. The brutal fighting lasted for several days, and despite the tremendous number of casualties, the monsters only continued to resurface.

Suddenly, when all seemed lost, a mysterious group emerged calling themselves the “Knowms.” They arrived in the royal city of Cymbeline dressed in dark-green cloaks. Promising safety for the cities of Aria, they asked only that the king fund their campaign. Quick to seize any advantage over the seemingly unstoppable foes, he agreed. With the full financial support of the royal crown, the Knowms were successful in keeping the cities of Aria clean.

Considering they were no longer needed within the cities, the king’s knights were assigned the responsibility of delivering mail and transporting goods throughout the land. The battle-hardened men were not pleased by the idea of being demoted to such mundane duty. Regardless, with the presence of the wild beasts, their experience in combat proved to be absolutely essential in completing these once simple tasks.

While King Ashraf had managed to gain control of the situation, the city limits became a type of gilded cage for many of the Arialites; most citizens were far too afraid of monster attacks to traverse the land between cities. Though the majority of Arialites outside of the urban areas had relocated to neighboring towns and cities, the Bardsson family remained in the small house in a vast field just west of Cymbeline. A bold move, but it came with a terrible price.

* * * *

Lucas awoke the next morning to the sound of his grandfather preparing breakfast. The aroma of boiling potatoes filled the house. “Smells good,” Lucas commented as he passed through the kitchen, making his way to a large iron pail resting on the countertop.

Marvin turned to his grandson. “If you get some milk while you’re in town today, I can make us porridge.” Lucas inspected the inside of the pail. It was nearly empty; almost no water remained. He picked it up and turned around to collect the sword from the kitchen table.

The water pump was in the backyard. Lucas’s eyes darted around the landscape as he closed the front door behind him and made his way around the side of the house. The field appeared to be peaceful, but he knew better than to let his guard down when he wasn’t in the safe confines of his home. Placing the pail under the spigot, he began pumping. As he did, his eyes wandered to a large oak tree in the distance. Every time he saw it, he was reminded of that day. Two decaying wooden crosses were planted in the dirt beneath its branches. *I need to replace those again... Mom, Dad... I miss you every day.*

His thoughts were abruptly interrupted by a loud buzzing sound coming from the woods behind him. He looked over his shoulder, continuing to pump as the noise grew louder. All too familiar with the sound, Lucas knew that he would have no choice but to run if its source were to emerge from the trees. Startled by a splash of cold water on his leg, the pail overflowing, he turned his attention back to his task.

Returning inside with the pail in tow, he placed the sword on the kitchen table and made his way into the washroom. Splashing some water on his messy, blond hair, he attempted to tame its wild appearance with a small comb. As a result of the restless nights, thick black rings were visible beneath his green eyes. Here he was, only eighteen years old, yet he had the worn face of an experienced adult. Using the water he had fetched, he cleaned himself up and got dressed.

Lucas entered the kitchen wearing a brown, long-sleeved shirt with dark-gray pants and a black belt. He seated himself at the table and put on his boots as his grandfather placed a plate of sliced potatoes in front of him. “Thanks,” Lucas said. He picked up one of the slices.

His grandfather sat down across from him and began to eat. “I wrote another poem yesterday. You’ll have to tell me what you think of it when you get home.”

Lucas nodded, “I’m sure it’ll be good.” Marvin smiled, a small piece of potato stuck to his thick gray beard. There was a short pause as the two ate. “About last night,” Lucas said, breaking the silence. “I want you to promise me you’ll let me handle all of the monsters from now on.”

“I’m a grown man,” his grandfather replied. “I don’t need protecting.” He ate another potato slice.

“It worries me when you go out there,” Lucas asserted.

Marvin glanced across the table at him. “Do you think I don’t get worried when you do the same?”

Lucas sighed. “Grandpa, you’re getting older. You’re a lot more vulnerable than you think you are.” Marvin did not reply to the remark. The two completed their meal in silence.

Lucas cleaned his plate and collected a sheath from his room. After securing it to his waist, he took the sword from the kitchen table and slid it inside. “I’ll try not to be too long, but I can’t make any promises,” he said as he opened the front door. “Hopefully the blacksmith isn’t too busy today. If any imps show up while I’m gone, don’t try to fight them. Just stay inside. The axe is by the washroom door, but I only want you to use it if it’s absolutely necessary.”

Marvin nodded. “Be careful.”

Chapter 1: The Strange Object

After making his way across the field to a large dirt road, Lucas headed east toward Cymbeline. He could still hear the buzzing sound resonating from the woods behind his house. Lightly placing his hand on his sword's hilt, he continued to walk down the trail. As Lucas neared the royal city of Cymbeline, he observed in the distance what appeared to be a group of imps in the road. Removing his sword from its sheath, he continued toward them, unabated. Something was off. Normally, imps would turn and attack him as he approached, yet they remained in place. It was then that he noticed they were gathered around something.

Suddenly, a shiver went down his spine and he was overcome with the feeling of fear. But this was not his own fear; it was the fear of death. *They're killing someone!* Moving his feet as fast as they would carry him, he bolted toward the assault he was witnessing. Once he was closer to the attack, he saw that there were four of them, clawing and scratching at a badly injured old man lying in the middle of the road. One of the imps looked up at Lucas and let out a dreadful shriek. Instantly, the other three ceased their attack and turned to see Lucas's fast-approaching body, sword in hand.

The group lunged at Lucas, viciously hissing and growling. He thrust his blade into the first imp, but the other three grabbed his limbs with their claws and teeth, biting and scratching at his legs, ripping the pant fabric and drawing blood. Lucas pulled his sword from the corpse and swiftly swung it at the attackers, managing to injure two of them. He kicked another off of his leg and took several steps backward. It growled and lunged toward him as the other two writhed in anguish. Thinking quickly, Lucas stuck his sword straight out in front of him, impaling the imp as it jumped. He scrambled toward the remaining two and ended their suffering.

Sheathing the blade, Lucas ran over to the old man lying in a massive pool of blood. He shuddered at the sight as his thoughts drifted to the conversation he had had with his grandfather before departing the house.

Kneeling down beside the old man, Lucas spoke. “Speak to me. What happened?”

The man slowly moved his lips. “My p-pocket... take it... t-to... Roshan.”

Lucas was confused. “Your pocket?”

“Y-yes! Look... inside. Take it... to Roshan. In Cymbeline... T-tell no one... you... h-have it. G-give it... to him... Aria is...” The man’s mouth swung wide open as his head limply fell to the side. The feeling of fear left Lucas.

Just then, he heard the sound of galloping hooves coming from the direction of Cymbeline. Looking up, he saw a small band of knights riding his way. Hastily reaching into the old man’s pocket, he found the object. It appeared to be a flat, golden semicircle, not much larger than his hand, containing several odd engravings that made no sense to him. *Take it to Roshan?* Still highly confused by the events that had just taken place, he swiftly put it in his pocket and rose to his feet.

The knights halted, inspecting Lucas and the surrounding cadavers. “What happened here?” the captain asked firmly.

“He was attacked by imps,” Lucas replied. “I tried to save him, but I wasn’t quick enough.”

The captain looked down at the old man, then back to Lucas. “I see. What are you doing outside of the city in the first place?”

“I don’t live in the city,” Lucas answered. “I was actually on my way there to run some errands.”

After a brief pause, the captain turned to one of his men. “Get those bodies out of the road,” he barked before turning back to

Lucas. “Go on! Nothing more to see here.” After taking one last look at the mysterious old man, Lucas continued his journey.

* * * *

Lucas stepped onto the cobblestone street that marked the Cymbeline city limit. The streets were bustling with people. Lucas felt a knot in his stomach as he was flooded with emotions. Joy, anger, sadness, fear... but confusion seemed to stand out the most. It was this very reason that he avoided the city when possible.

The Knowms stood on every street corner like statues. They wore dark-green cloaks, covering their heads and entire bodies. In the distance, he could see Regal Heights, a gated community for the upper class. The most notable resident was Lord Javan Quinn, King Ashraf’s trusted adviser. Lucas gazed at Quinn Manor, which dwarfed even the relatively large surrounding homes. *I can’t imagine what it must be like to live in a place like that. Servants, attending your every need. No monsters to worry about...*

Making his way through the crowd, Lucas gently placed his hand in his pocket. His fingers grazed the strange metallic object within. *What is this thing? Why can’t I show anyone?* He scanned the crowd. *Roshan... who’s Roshan?*

Lucas approached a vendor selling fruit. “Excuse me. Do you know of a man named Roshan?”

The vendor glanced at him and continued neatly preparing his display. “He runs a restaurant on the north side of town. It’s called Roshan’s Café. You can’t miss it.”

Lucas nodded, “Thanks,” and disappeared back into the crowd.

“You gonna buy something?” the vendor shouted.

Soon after arriving in northern Cymbeline, Lucas found a building with a brown roof and a sign that read “Roshan’s Café.” He opened the door and entered. There weren’t many people in the restaurant.

“Welcome to Roshan’s Café.” Lucas turned to see an older woman with curly brown hair. She smiled. “Table for one?”

Lucas reached into his pocket to make sure the strange object hadn’t fallen out. “Actually, I’m here to see Roshan.”

The woman looked puzzled. “Just one moment.” She disappeared through a door leading into the kitchen.

Lucas felt awkward standing alone near the doorway and sat down at a nearby table. Quietly observing the restaurant’s patrons, he noticed a man sitting by himself near the kitchen door. Lucas soon realized that the lone man was staring at his ripped pant leg, still stained with blood. Turning his head away from the stranger, Lucas sat and waited as the constantly shifting emotions of the city continued to churn inside him.

Moments later, an older man with a large gray moustache emerged through the kitchen door. He was wearing black pants and a thick brown coat, which was unbuttoned to reveal a red shirt covered in food stains. On his forehead, a red bandana was visible behind the bangs of his thinning gray hair. On his feet were two old brown shoes. He also seemed to be in good physical condition, despite his age. Lucas noticed that he was looking around the room. *That must be Roshan.*

Lucas got up to approach the man, but the nearer he got, the stronger a sense of distrust came over him. “Are you Roshan?” Lucas asked.

The man turned to him, startled, then quickly smiled. “Yes, I am. And who do I have the pleasure of speaking to?”

He extended his hand to Lucas, who took it and replied, “Lucas Bardsson. May I please speak to you in private?”

Roshan’s eyes widened. “Private? Why, whatever you have to say to me in private you can say to me out here. I am quite open to criticism. Did you get poor service? I do apologize.”

Lucas shook his head. “No, no it has nothing to do with the restaurant. I just...”

Roshan’s eyebrows raised as Lucas stumbled to find a way to complete the sentence. “You just?”

“I live just outside of town,” Lucas explained. “I was on my way here to visit the blacksmith when I saw an old man being attacked by imps. I fought them off of him and checked to see if he was okay,” Lucas paused. “Sadly, he didn’t make it. But in his dying breath, he asked that I bring you this.” He took the strange object out of his pocket and displayed it for Roshan to see.

Instantly, Lucas felt an intense surge of panic as Roshan snapped his head around the room. “Put that away!” Roshan whispered sharply. Lucas quickly pocketed the object. Roshan opened his mouth to speak, but stopped himself from talking as a man walked by. Lucas observed that it was the same man who had been eying his injuries moments before. He felt a chill as the man quickly left the restaurant.

“Follow me,” Roshan ordered, hurrying into the kitchen. Lucas obeyed, following him into a sizeable store room. Boxes of food stuffs and ingredients adorned the wall. In the corner, Lucas noticed a tarp draped over something rather large. It was several feet taller than him, and at a height of 5’10”, Lucas wasn’t exactly a short-statured young man.

“Sorry,” Roshan began as he shut the door behind him, securing several locks, “but I cannot risk anyone knowing about this. Please, show it to me.” Lucas was puzzled, but he reached into his pocket and once again pulled out the strange object. Roshan’s mouth gaped. “The disk fragment...” He paused, gazing at the mysterious treasure.

Lucas raised an eyebrow. “Disk fragment?”

Roshan took the object from Lucas’s hands and continued to marvel at it. “I cannot thank you enough for bringing this to me.

Aria cannot thank you enough!” He reached into his pocket, pulling out a small brown sack. “Take this. It’s one hundred gold.”

Lucas crinkled his brow as he took the generous gift. “I appreciate it, but I would still like to know what exactly I’ve just delivered to you.”

Roshan put the object into his pocket and began undoing the various locks on the door. “There are some things you’re better off not knowing. Now, go on to the blacksmith and forget what you saw here.” He turned to Lucas. “I mean that. Do not tell anyone. In return, you and your family may eat at my restaurant for free any time, any day.”

He placed his hand on the doorknob when Lucas sternly interjected. “I didn’t have to take that thing to you in the first place. I at least deserve to know what’s going on here.”

Roshan snapped his head back in Lucas’s direction. “I’m immensely thankful for what you’ve done, but that information is strictly classified. And with good reason!” He grabbed Lucas’s arm and attempted to move him closer to the door. “Now, out you go!”

Lucas threw Roshan’s arm off of him. “I’m not going anywhere until you tell me what that thing is and why no one can know about it.” Lucas could feel Roshan’s nervousness growing. “Why won’t you tell me? Is it stolen?! Answer me!”

“Shhh!” Roshan shushed. “Keep your voice down!”

“No,” Lucas firmly replied. “If you’re not going to tell me what’s going on, I have no reason to keep this quiet.”

Roshan hesitated for a moment, then sighed as he secured the door’s numerous locks once more. “I suppose. You already know this much, so I see no harm.” He turned to Lucas. “But as I said before, this stays between you and me. No one else must know.” Lucas nodded eagerly. Roshan’s eyes darted around the room, as though someone might be hiding and listening.

After a slight delay, he spoke. “I am a member of an organization known as the Spades.”

Lucas’s eyes widened; he had heard whispers of the Spades before. While their true purpose remained unknown, they were rumored to be a thieves’ or assassins’ guild. *I can’t believe this! This man is a thief and possibly a murderer!* Lucas’s hand slowly slid near the hilt of his sword as he continued to listen.

“You see, the Knowms are not at all what they claim to be. Did you ever find it odd that this group seemingly popped up from out of nowhere, just in time to save Aria’s cities from the monster crisis?” Lucas’s eyebrows rose. He pondered the thought as Roshan went on. “It’s no coincidence, son. They are responsible for releasing the creatures into Aria. They are capable of controlling these beasts, creating the illusion that having them around ‘protects’ the cities. Using this method, they were successful in receiving funding for their campaign.”

Lucas thought for a moment. “But where did they get the monsters from? How do they control them? Why did they do this to Aria? What does that thing I gave you have to do with any of this? I don’t understand!” He took a step back. “It doesn’t make sense.”

“You have not allowed me to finish,” Roshan rebutted. Lucas stared blankly, creating an awkward pause before Roshan spoke again. “So do you want to know, or not? I’m simply giving you the information you’ve requested. Whether or not you choose to believe it makes no difference to me.”

Lucas could sense that Roshan was being sincere. *Even if his story is bogus, he sure seems to believe it.* “You’re right,” Lucas said finally. “Please, tell me the rest.”

There was another brief pause. Then, Roshan proceeded. “This object you’ve brought me is half of something called Damiano’s Disk. When united with the other fragment it becomes a key to The Temple of Damiano, a structure containing a source of raw, limitless power. This is why the Knowms ‘require

funding,' despite the little effort it takes for them to control their monster pets. They use the gold they receive from the king to aid their search for the very disk fragment you have just delivered. You see, the Knowms currently have one fragment. It's our sworn duty to protect the one we have here from them at all costs, but it's no easy task. As a result of our opposition, our organization's reputation has been slandered. This is why we've become known amongst most Arialites as an assassins' guild."

Lucas was unsure of what to think. *Temple of Damiano? I've never even heard of this place.* His mind flooded with questions. "So, what exactly is this power?"

"It's unknown," Roshan answered. "The origins of Damiano's Disk and the temple itself are hazy to say the least. All we know is what has been passed down through legend. It's said that this raw source of power has the capability of making its user truly immortal, though it's supposedly difficult to control. Many men throughout the ages have scoured Aria to find the disk, only to be met with disappointment. Eventually, it was widely considered to be a myth. In fact, most still believe that to be the case. But, as you have seen, Damiano's Disk is all too real. You see, the Knowms are simply pawns for the man on top of the chain. It was his unrelenting search that finally proved the legend was no myth." Roshan leaned in closely and whispered, "Lord Javan Quinn."

Lucas cocked his head to the side. "The king's adviser?"

Roshan nodded. "He manipulates the king while his Knowms do all the dirty work for him. King Ashraf believes he's in control while Quinn runs the show behind his veil, keeping his connection to the group hidden. No one suspects a thing. Anyone who does is dealt with. The Knowms are his eyes and ears. He knows everything they learn out on the streets. If he ever manages to obtain both fragments, there's no telling what sort of chaos would ensue. We know already that he plans to use its power to forcefully proclaim himself as Aria's new ruler, but it's doubtful he will stop there. Lord Quinn lusts for power. Even when he has reached the top, he will only want more. Aria has already suffered greatly at

his hands... I can't even fathom the destruction he will cause as king."

Lucas looked down at his torn, bloodstained pant leg. "So that man I tried to save, was he a Spade too?"

Roshan nodded. "His name was Morice. Our main base was recently raided. Countless Spades were lost, but the fragment was ultimately saved. It was then entrusted to Morice, one of many Spades such as myself who work from here, in Aria."

Lucas was perplexed. "Wait, what do you mean—"

Before anything else could be said, there was a loud bang in the dining area of the restaurant as the front door was aggressively kicked in. "Everybody out!" an unknown voice shouted. Lucas trembled, struck by a shot of sheer terror.

Roshan froze. "They're here! The Knowms! They know!" Immediately, he ran toward the large, tarp-covered object. "It's too late for me! They already know who I am! But I can still save you and the fragment!" He pulled the tarp to the ground, revealing what appeared to be a large stone doorway. However, the area where a door would belong contained a swirling vortex of brilliant colors. Lucas had to cover his eyes as the light radiating from it illuminated the room.

Roshan reached into his pocket and ran over to Lucas. Pulling out the disk fragment, he shoved it toward him. "Listen carefully," Roshan spat out hastily. "There's another member of our organization named Zoe waiting to receive the fragment on the other side. Bring it to her. There's no time to lose, now go!"

Lucas hesitated to take it. "B-but—"

"Now!" Roshan quickly stuffed the fragment into a protesting Lucas's pocket and pushed him into the vortex.

Running as far from the large stone doorway as he could, Roshan turned toward it and raised his hands above his head. Facing his palms upward he shouted, "Ignis inmanis sphaera!" A

small fireball formed above him, which quickly expanded to three feet in diameter. He flung his arms in a forward motion, directing the massive spear of flames to shoot quickly toward the top of the stone doorway, causing a magnificent explosion as it slammed into the frame. The stone crumbled on impact as the vortex instantly disappeared. Roshan was propelled backward into a wall and lost consciousness.

Chapter 2: The In Between

Lucas flew through the portal, screaming in terror. He felt as though a magnet were pulling him down the swirling tunnel of colors as his body flailed helplessly. Luckily, the journey only lasted a few seconds before he suddenly found his feet on the ground. He felt no impact and was standing upright, completely uninjured despite the high-velocity he had just experienced.

Speechless, he observed the surrounding landscape. He seemed to be in a small field surrounded by trees. However, the environment was completely colorless. He could see the outline of each plant as bright white lines filled in only with solid black. It was most intriguing, appearing as though the entire landscape had been drawn by a large pen with white ink on a black canvas.

Lucas bent down, mouth agape, and touched a small flower with his index finger. It felt normal enough. Looking up at the sky, his eyes were treated to a sea of stars. Despite the fact that it appeared to be a night sky, he had no trouble seeing the area around him. “Where am I?” he muttered to himself. *Grandpa! He has no idea where I am! I need to get out of here.* Lucas quickly turned around. The portal had disappeared. “Roshan?” he shouted. “I need to go home! Let me out of here!” There was no reply. Lucas felt fear, but this time it was definitely his own.

He turned around toward the direction he was originally facing. *Didn't Roshan say someone would be waiting for me? I don't see anyone.* After standing there for several minutes, Lucas finally decided to walk forward. He took small, slow steps at first. Gradually, he increased his stride to a normal walking pace and reached the edge of the surrounding forest. He gazed into it, unsure if he should continue onward, or return to the spot where he initially arrived. After a few moments of consideration, he slowly proceeded into the mysterious forest that lay before him.

Reaching into his pocket, he felt the disk fragment. As he walked along, Roshan's words zipped through his head.

Damiano's Disk... If what he said was true, my father was killed because of this damn thing.

He walked deeper into the woods, hopping over a small creek of gray water. Halting momentarily to look over his shoulder, he could now barely see the field. *Maybe I should stop here. If I go too far, I might not ever find my way back. Why me? Why am I here right now? I don't want to be involved with any of this. I just want to go home and forget everything that's happened to me. Roshan was right, some things are better left unknown.*

He reluctantly continued walking, occasionally glancing up at the sky which was hardly visible through the branches. Even though he expected it to get darker as he ventured deeper into the forest, the lighting never changed. He walked for several more minutes and was about to turn back when he felt it. *Emotion... someone's nearby.* As he slowly walked forward, the feeling grew stronger, though it remained too complicated to describe.

Suddenly, he heard a rustling in the trees overhead, not far in front of him. Lucas became frightened and unsheathed his sword. "I don't want any trouble," he said nervously, looking in the direction of the rustling, attempting to see what had caused it. Unfortunately, the leaves were far too thick and he was unable to make anything out.

He heard no reply from the stealthy lurker. *Maybe this is the person I'm supposed to give the fragment to.* Lucas spoke up again. "My name is Lucas Bardsson. Roshan sent me." After a few seconds of silence, he heard the rustling again. Suddenly, someone dropped out from the concealment of the tree branches and landed on their feet on the ground in front of him.

It was a girl with blue eyes and thick, shaggy, black hair which didn't extend far past her chin. She was wearing all black, dressed in a long-sleeved shirt accompanied by a skirt which went down below her knees. Her boots were similar to Lucas's, with the exception of their color. A brown sack was tied to the belt on her waist and a scythe strapped to her back. She was noticeably shorter than him and appeared to be around his age.

“Roshan sent you?” she queried with her arms crossed, raising an eyebrow.

“Yes,” Lucas replied, cautiously sheathing his sword. “I’m supposed to find someone named... uh...”

She stared blankly at him as he stammered.

“Zoe?” she asked, irritated.

“Yeah. That’s it. You’re her, right?”

She rolled her eyes and slumped her arms to her side. “Seriously? Is this a joke or something?”

Lucas shook his head. “I’m still, very... very confused about what’s going on here. Where am I?”

Zoe looked puzzled. “You really don’t know?”

Lucas shook his head again. “No. It all happened so fast.”

Zoe paused for a moment. “So what you’re telling me is that Roshan sent you here without explaining where you were going?” Lucas nodded as Zoe continued to stare at him in disbelief. Finally, she elaborated. “This is the In Between. It’s a dimension between Aria and the Netherworld.”

Lucas was shocked. “I’m in another dimension?!”

Zoe nodded. “Now that we have that cleared up, why did Roshan send you here?”

“Well, from what I understand,” Lucas replied, “I’m supposed to give you this.” He took the disk fragment out of his pocket and handed it to her.

Zoe’s expression changed to a mixture of surprise and confusion as she snatched it out of his hands. “What the hell are you doing with the disk fragment?!”

She examined the fragment before stuffing it into her bag. “Well? What happened?”

Lucas cleared his throat. “I was on my way to Cymbeline to visit the blacksmith, when I came across an old man being attacked by imps. I fought them off of him, but it was too late. In his final words, he asked me to take the fragment to Roshan. So when I got to Cymbeline, I found his restaurant and gave it to him. After he took it, he started to fill me in on some... interesting background information about the Knowms and the Spades. But we were interrupted when we heard the front door burst open and someone shout for everyone to get out. That’s when he handed the fragment back to me and sent me here. From what I gathered, some Knowms made their way into the restaurant and—”

Zoe’s eyes widened as Lucas experienced a surge of fear and worry. “Roshan!” she gasped, nearly knocking him to the ground as she bolted in the direction he had walked from.

Lucas ran after her. “Wait!” She was quick, but he managed to keep up. That is, until his right boot slammed into a tree root. He fell to the ground with a thud. The impact was painful, but he didn’t suffer any major injuries. After getting back to his feet, Zoe was nowhere to be seen. Still, he continued in the direction she had run. Only this time, he walked.

A minute later, in the distance, he heard her angrily shout, “Where’s the stupid portal?!” He soon reached the small field he had materialized in to find Zoe with her back turned, gazing where the portal should have been.

Lucas approached her, sensing sadness. “Is there supposed to be one on this side too? I don’t remember ever seeing one.” There was a pause.

Then Zoe spoke softly, “He destroyed it.” She turned around and faced Lucas. Her tone returned to normal. “Follow me.” She went back into the forest.

“Where are we going?” Lucas asked as he walked behind her.

“I’m taking you back to Aria,” she replied.

Lucas was delighted. *Thank goodness.* As they continued to walk, Lucas could feel Zoe’s sadness and worry growing with each passing minute. “I’m sorry about Roshan,” he finally said. Zoe didn’t reply. After another moment or two, he spoke again. “So, is what the Knowms are doing legal?”

“Yes,” she replied rigidly. “King Ashraf stupidly gave them the same level of legal jurisdiction as any other member of his royal guard. As long as they can come up with some bullcrap reason for what they did, Roshan’s fate is sealed.” Lucas sensed her emotion shifting into a deep sorrow, accompanied by the distinct feeling of frustration.

He took a few quick steps and walked beside her. “You know, it’s okay if you’re sad. You don’t have to—”

“Are you reading me?!” she screamed as Lucas’s heart jumped. After shooting him an ugly glare, she stopped walking and said, “*Umbra animi motus te go.*” Immediately, the feeling of sadness left Lucas. She continued walking, muttering, “Stupid Light magic.”

Lucas was intrigued. “Light magic?”

“I know what you can do!” she snapped. “You won’t fool me.”

Lucas continued to follow Zoe. “I’m not sure what you mean. I don’t know anything about magic.”

“Sure,” Zoe scoffed.

Lucas caught up and walked beside her again. “I’m serious! I’ve always been able to sense other people’s emotions. My grandpa is the same way. It’s one of the main reasons we continued to live outside of the city when the monster invasion began. Spending too much time around all of those people can be torturous.” Zoe didn’t reply. After a short pause, Lucas asked, “So, what did you do?” Zoe looked at him with a raised eyebrow. He

explained, “To stop it, I mean, just a minute ago. How did you do it?”

“I didn’t stop it. I possess Shadow magic. All I did was block my emotions from your dumb little ‘feelers.’” She glared at him. “What I feel is none of your business.”

Lucas was puzzled. “I didn’t even know there was such a thing as Light magic or Shadow magic. I’ve seen mages perform Ice magic and Fire magic, but that’s all. Granted, I’m not around mages very often...”

“You’re always around mages,” Zoe argued. “Everyone has the potential. It’s just a matter of taking the time to learn the art. That’s the part that stops most people. It takes a lot of practice just to learn basic conjuring.”

The pair jumped across another creek. Lucas glanced back at the gray water. “Everything here is so bizarre looking.” Zoe said nothing and continued to walk. Eying the scythe strapped to her back, Lucas asked, “What’s that for? Do you grow wheat?”

Zoe suppressed a smile. “Not quite. It’s a weapon.”

Lucas observed the woods around him for the next few minutes of their trek. “The In Between... what’s the difference between this place and the Netherworld?”

Zoe shrugged, “I wouldn’t know the specifics. I’ve never seen the Netherworld. No one who’s alive has. It’s where souls go to rest.”

Lucas raised his eyebrows in curiosity. “So what’s the purpose of this dimension?”

“It’s a buffer,” she explained, “Things are a lot different in the Netherworld. It’s very abstract. Trying to comprehend the way it looks and feels to be there is impossible. It’s nothing like the physical environment of our dimension. Think of the In Between as a little bit of both worlds. If souls stop here before moving fully into the Netherworld, it becomes somewhat of a playground for

them. They can become anything they want or do anything they please. But there are consequences. While they're here in this 'clay' form, they're weak. The In Between can be accessed from the physical world using things called 'gateways,' such as the one you went through. A mage well trained in advanced necromancy can go through one of these portals to hunt and transform these 'lost souls' into any shape they choose and enslave them. They can then be taken back to the physical world in their new form." Zoe paused for a second. "That's how the Knowms get their monsters."

Lucas gasped. "All this time... all those monsters I've killed. They were once people?"

Zoe gave a single nod. "The truth hurts sometimes. But don't worry about it; you've done them a favor. Hopefully they've learned their lesson and moved on to whatever's on the other side."

Lucas thought for a moment. "Why did Roshan even have a gateway in the first place?"

"You ask way too many questions!" Zoe quickly snapped. "Do I look like an information desk to you?!" Lucas turned away. After a few seconds, Zoe apologized. "Sorry, I don't have the best people skills. If you must know, we have a base here. The In Between is much larger than Aria. It's easier to hide from the Knowms, though they have found two of our hideouts so far. Luckily I wasn't there when the most recent event took place, but from what I was told, it was brutal. There was a lot of bloodshed. A few managed to slip away with the disk fragment and handed it off to Morice, who lives in Krywood Forest just southwest of Cymbeline. The majority of us live at the base, but we have some members still stationed in Aria. Mostly, they're small business owners who provide funding, though they also lend a hand in situations like the one I just described. Morice held onto it until we relocated to our current base. Today was the day he was supposed to deliver it to Roshan, then him to me... but..." She ceased talking.

Lucas didn't need his sense to be able to tell that she was upset over what had happened. He decided to change the subject. "Where's this Temple of Damiano, anyway?"

“Nazareno Island,” Zoe replied. “It’s isolated in the middle of the Western Ocean. No one’s really sure who built the temple. All we know is that it’s been there longer than recorded history.”

The two continued to walk for several hours through fields and forests. Lucas knew that they had traveled quite a way, but all of the surrounding landscape looked to him as though it were repeating itself. Eventually, they came to a large field bordered by massive mountains. In the middle was a bright vortex of swirling colors. After a little more walking, they reached the portal and stopped in front of it. “This will take you back to Aria,” Zoe explained. “I hope you’re ready to walk some more, because you’re going to have to do some traveling to make it back to Cymbeline.”

“How much traveling?” Lucas asked.

“A lot,” Zoe bluntly replied.

Lucas stared into the portal. He was happy to be returning home, but simultaneously anxious about the frightening journey back through the colorful tunnel. He clenched his fists and prepared to make the dive. “Goodbye Zoe. Thanks for everything.” There was no reply. He looked over his shoulder to see that she had already begun to make her way across the field back into the forest. Turning his attention back to the portal, he jumped inside.

Chapter 3: Snowblind

When Lucas emerged from the portal, the first thing he noticed was the temperature. It was cold. Very cold. He quickly realized that he had materialized deep within a cave. It was eerily quiet. If not for the vortex behind him emitting a brilliant glow, the area would have been in total darkness. Lucas, shivering, took a few steps away from the portal and looked around. He was in a wide open space, completely covered in ice crystals. Large stalactites and stalagmites nearly obstructed his view of a tunnel leading out of the room. Carefully, he made his way to the passage.

He encountered a problem as he walked down the icy corridor. The farther he got, the harder it became to see. Soon, he could see nothing at all. *Dammit! How am I supposed to get out of here when I can't even see an inch in front of my face?!* Despite this, he stretched his arms out in front of him and slowly made his way farther. The slippery ice floor made it difficult for him to keep his balance. He took each step forward with great caution.

On three separate occasions, Lucas's lack of vision caused him to nearly walk directly into a wall. Fortunately, his outstretched arms detected the threat before this occurred. The small stalagmites scattered throughout the passage proved to be another issue. Several times during his expedition, he was met with surprise when his foot randomly bumped into them. However, his careful pacing prevented him from tripping. Gradually, he found his way around each of the obstacles.

All he could think about was getting home. He had no idea how long it had been since he had left his house. *Grandpa is going to start worrying soon.* Lucas stopped walking. *Maybe I should go back to the In Between. At least I could see there. I might be able to find another one of those portals.* He was about to turn around but stopped himself. *No, I need to keep going. At least I know that if I make it out of this cave, I'll be somewhere in Aria. If I go back*

to that place, I could end up just as lost as I am now. It's not worth the risk. I've already come this far.

The lack of light wasn't the only problem Lucas was experiencing. The more he crept through the tunnel, the more unbearable the cold air became. Still he continued to push himself, focusing on each individual step as the bitter chill cut into his skin like millions of microscopic icicles. Then, at last, he saw a faint, distant light. *The exit!* Excitedly, he walked faster.

He soon emerged from the mouth of the cave into a snow blanketed forest. That's when it hit him. *I must be hundreds of miles away from home. I'll never make it back, even if I knew which direction to go in.* After some contemplation, he ultimately decided to walk straight forward.

Lucas journeyed through the cold forest as the snow fell softly around him. Although it was a peaceful trek, the piercing air and spinning anxiety made him miserable. *I would give anything for a coat right now.* It seemed that there was no end in sight.

He began to feel completely hopeless when, without warning, something thin, cold, and slimy wrapped tightly around his ankle. Suddenly, he found himself hanging upside-down. Before he could comprehend what had just taken place, he was slung through the air with great force into a tree. He screamed from the overwhelming pain as his body lay helpless.

Looking up, he saw an eight-foot-tall blue hominoid creature with piercing yellow eyes sitting in a tree from high above where he had been flung. Its thorax and abdomen were completely covered in a thick, armor-like shell. Two narrow spikes stuck out of its elbows while six long, slimy blue tentacles slithered from its back.

Suddenly, the lower two tentacles extended outward, wrapping around the branch the bizarre beast sat upon. Bending its knees, it leaped off of the branch and dangled. Lengthening its tentacles as needed, it began to lower itself to the ground. It did this in the same way a spider lowers itself on a line of web.

The moment he spotted the being, Lucas used every ounce of strength he had to hoist himself onto his feet. Without a second thought, he took off running. *It's huge! Even if I were in good shape right now, there's no way I'd be able to defeat it.* Each step worsened the ache of his injuries. Behind him, the monster let out a grisly scream as it continued its descent.

As soon as the creature hit the ground, it began its pursuit. Lucas could hear its footsteps in the snow, gaining on him at an alarming rate. It wasn't long before his body finally reached its limit and he plummeted to the ground.

That's when he felt the slimy blue tentacle grip his ankle once again. He quickly unsheathed his sword and sliced it off of his leg. The beast screamed loudly in pain as Lucas tried with all of his might to get back to his feet but before he could, the monster hastily grabbed his ankle with another one of its bizarre appendages and he was forcefully snatched into the air.

Lucas attempted to decapitate the blue brute as it dangled him upside-down, examining him momentarily. Unfortunately, it held him at just enough distance from its face that Lucas's wild swings were completely ineffective. Without warning, it threw him to the ground. The pain of the impact was far too intense for him to endure, causing him to drop his sword. Barely conscious and in total mental and physical agony, Lucas closed his eyes and awaited the inevitable.

He heard the terrifying sound of crunching snow as the beast approached him. *This is it. I'm going to die here.* Then, something strange happened. Lucas felt a flash of intense heat as the creature suddenly let out a loud shriek. He opened his eyes, slowly turning his head to see what was happening.

Through his blurry vision, Lucas saw the creature writhing in agony, producing another loud screech as it was hit with a speeding orb of fire. "Ignis orbis!" he heard from the distance. Again the beast was assaulted with a quick moving fireball. Unable to remain conscious any longer, Lucas collapsed.

Chapter 4: Iris, The Alchemist

Lucas slowly opened his eyes to see a woman in her early twenties standing over him. She had brown eyes and long, flowing silver hair. She was dressed in a white robe. Two blue sapphire earrings dangled from her ears as she stared down at him.

“Excellent, you’re awake,” she said with a soft smile.

“Where am I?” Lucas asked. “Who are you?”

“My name is Iris Ivaska,” she replied. “You’re currently located in the town of Azure. A local hunter named Hagan discovered you in the woods nearby struggling to combat a large creature.”

Lucas attempted to sit up but was met with sharp, burning pain. “Ah!” he yelped.

“You must remain still,” Iris informed. “You’ve been wounded greatly. Relax. I’ll return momentarily.” She exited the room.

Carefully lifting his head, Lucas could see that he was in a living room, lying on a sofa. Not far on his left side was a coffee table and beyond that, a lit fireplace. Its warmth was a welcome change from the bitter, freezing climate he had previously endured.

Iris returned several minutes later with a glass and a corked bottle containing a pink liquid. She set the glass on the coffee table beside him. Uncorking the bottle, she poured its contents into the glass. “This will alleviate your pain,” she explained. “Take a sip every few minutes until the glass is empty.”

Lucas took a small sip. It tasted strange. Not bad, but certainly not delicious. “Thank you,” he said. Iris nodded.

Lucas felt calmness in her presence. The sense was much like a pond without ripples; her emotions didn’t seem to stray very far

in any direction. It was somewhat similar to the feeling he often got around his grandfather. He found it soothing, especially given his current physical condition. “My name’s Lucas, by the way.”

Iris smiled. “It’s a pleasure to meet you. I’m pleased to see that you haven’t suffered amnesia.”

Lucas chuckled. “Yeah, that’s good to know.” He paused for a moment before going on. “You said a hunter found me? Where did he go? I feel like I should thank him. He saved my life.”

“Unfortunately, he’s been gone for several hours,” Iris responded. “You’ve been unconscious for a considerable duration.”

Lucas sat up quickly and was again hit with an intense pain. “Ahhh!!”

“I highly advise finishing the elixir before attempting to sit up,” she told him.

Lucas slowly turned his head to her. “My grandpa has no idea where I am. I need to go home.”

“I cannot allow you to leave in this condition,” said Iris.

Lucas sighed. Changing the subject, he asked, “So, are you a doctor?”

“Not at all,” she answered. “I’m simply well versed in the field of alchemy. I departed my hometown, Ivyvyne Village, at the age of sixteen to attend Azure College for the Magically Gifted. While my progress was hampered when the school closed temporarily during the monster invasion, classes quickly resumed once the Knowms arrived. I eventually received my degree in alchemy and currently work here, from the comfort of my home. I brew healing potions used by medical doctors, though I am not a doctor myself. Hagan, the man who brought you here, is a good friend of mine. He explained that he carried you to my home since the nearest doctor lives several miles away. He felt that you required immediate treatment, and he was correct to assume so.

While you were unconscious, I burned vitam leaves and applied sanatio cream to your wounds.”

“Vitam leaves?” Lucas asked, taking another sip of the pink concoction.

Iris picked up a small dish on the far end of the coffee table containing ashes. “Used in only the most extreme circumstances, these leaves are a key ingredient in Sitaraanju Potion. When burned, they can be ingested through the respiratory system as smoke. However, the leaves are becoming increasingly difficult to attain considering the multitudes of patients which have resulted from the monster invasion.” She walked out of the room with the dish.

It was then that Lucas had an awkward realization. Under the thick warm blanket that rested over him, his clothing was gone with the exception of his undergarment. Lifting the blanket, he inspected the various bandages and bruises which covered him from his chest to his legs. *That thing really did a number on me.*

“If you don’t mind me asking,” Iris said as she reentered the room, “what exactly were you doing out in the wilderness?”

Taking another sip of the elixir, Lucas hesitated to answer. “This is going to be hard to believe,” he finally said, “but bear with me...” He proceeded to tell Iris all about his encounter with Morice, the old man who was murdered by imps. He explained that after he had received the disk fragment he was sent to Roshan, who explained the object to him. “He said it was half of an object called Damiano’s Disk.”

“That’s impossible,” Iris interjected. “Damiano’s Disk is a mythical object.”

Lucas took another sip. “It’s not a myth. Apparently it unlocks some source of power sealed in a temple on Nazareno Island.”

Iris seemed slightly irritated by his response. “The rumors surrounding the structure on Nazareno Island are highly falsified,” she argued. “It’s nothing more than a remnant of an ancient culture. This man claimed he was a member of the Spades guild, correct? They’re thieves, Lucas.”

Lucas shook his head. “You don’t understand. There’s more.” He continued to elaborate, telling Iris all about the Knowms, Lord Quinn’s plot, the true purpose of the Spades, and finally The In Between. After telling her about how he had met Zoe, he could sense that Iris did not believe a single word. Still, he finished his account of what had happened. “...and that’s when I was attacked by that blue thing.”

There was a short pause after he finished his tale. He was taking another sip of the elixir when Iris spoke. “I know this might be difficult for you to understand right now, but I believe you’re suffering from delusions. Likely a result of the trauma you’ve recently endured.”

Lucas sat up. “I’m not delusional!” he protested. “It really happened! I swear!”

Iris looked surprised. “The elixir appears to be working rather quickly on you.” She was right. Lucas had sat up without feeling even a fraction of the pain he had experienced when he first tried.

Though he was relieved to be able to move a little more than before, Lucas was still upset that Iris considered him to be delusional. “If I made the whole thing up in my head, why am I here? It doesn’t make sense!”

Iris shrugged. “I’m uncertain. I apologize if I have offended you, but I simply find it hard to believe.”

With a little more thought, Lucas concluded that it would only be a waste of his time trying to argue with her. *Oh well. I know what happened. That’s all that really matters, I guess.* “Where are my clothes, anyway?” he asked.

“I put them in the washroom,” Iris answered. “Your pants are damaged, but your shirt, socks, and boots appear to be in good condition. I will wash them before returning them to you, though I would suggest that you purchase a new pair of pants.”

After a little more time had passed, Lucas finally finished the pink elixir. Though Iris did not allow him to leave, insisting he would require several days of rest, he was now able to sit up completely and even walk short distances without experiencing pain. He noticed a bookshelf in the corner and decided to rummage through its contents.

Lucas grabbed a poetry book from the shelf. “My grandpa wrote this,” he said, turning to Iris.

A look of surprise appeared on her face. “Your grandfather is Marvin Bardsson?” Lucas nodded. She smiled. “I absolutely adore his work. He’s a brilliant poet.”

Lucas put the book back. “I’ll tell him to mail you an autograph when I get home.”

He turned his attention to a chess table sitting in the corner. Iris noticed him eyeing it. “Do you play?” she asked.

Lucas turned to Iris. “Yeah, Grandpa and I play all the time.”

“Care for a game?” she offered, intrigued.

He smiled. “Alright, but I’m warning you, I’m pretty good at this.”

Iris slid the chess table out from the corner and collected two chairs from another room. “Do you prefer white or black?”

Lucas thought for a second. “I’ll play black.” They sat at the table. Lucas examined the board. Across the bottom and top perimeters, letters marked each square. From his side, ‘A’ was marked beneath the rightmost square proceeding to ‘B’ for the next, all the way through ‘H’ on the leftmost. The side perimeters were similar, only they were marked with numbers. ‘8’ was on

both sides of the row closest to Lucas's end, while '1' was marked on the ends closest to Iris. *This thing looks a lot fancier than the one we have back home.*

Iris began by moving a pawn forward two spaces to E4. Lucas thought carefully for a moment, unsure of which piece he would move first. He decided to move his pawn to E5. The moment he removed his hand from the pawn, Iris quickly slid her queen to H5. "You're going to risk your queen for a pawn?" Lucas joked. "You should take your time with that thing." Iris chuckled at the remark. Lucas moved a knight to C6. *If she goes after it now, that queen is all mine.*

Iris placed a bishop on C4, nodding to indicate it was Lucas's move. Taking his other knight, Lucas placed it on F6, positioning his piece to take Iris's queen in his next move. When he removed his hand from the piece, Iris moved her queen to F7 and softly said, "Checkmate."

Lucas was shocked. "Already?!" He eyed the board. She was right. If he took out the queen with his king, her bishop was in place to capture it. Considering he could not put his king into direct danger and no other pieces were positioned to attack the queen, Iris had won.

"Good game," she remarked. "Would you like to play again?" Lucas continued to stare blankly at the chess board. Iris smiled and rolled her eyes as she got out of her chair. "It's only a game, Lucas."

There was a knock at the front door. Lucas returned the chess pieces to their starting positions as Iris walked to answer it. She opened the door. "Hagan! Come inside. He's awake." Lucas turned around to see a large, muscular man in his mid-twenties. He had blue eyes and strong, defined facial features. Dressed in a brown cloak with massive black boots, he removed his hood and revealed that he was completely bald. He walked inside as Iris closed the door behind him. Lucas got a similar feeling from Hagan as he did from Iris. It was somewhat different in a way that was hard for him

to comprehend, but he could understand why they were good friends.

“How’re you feeling?” Hagan asked. “That thing gave you a pretty good ass kicking.”

Lucas slowly got up and approached him. “I’m doing alright. I can’t thank you enough for saving my life.” He extended his hand. “Lucas Bardsson.”

Hagan took his hand with a mighty grip and shook it. “Hagan Caine. Don’t mention it. You’re just lucky I was in the area. I’m surprised you’re even walking.”

“As am I,” Iris commented. “I find it quite intriguing that he was capable of walking after merely one bottle of Anodynum Elixir.” She turned to Lucas. “I had expected that it would take several doses over a period of days to achieve such results.”

Lucas shrugged. “I don’t know. I guess I’m just lucky.”

Hagan eyed Lucas. “Any reason you’re still half naked?”

Lucas felt slightly embarrassed. He had completely forgotten that his clothing had been removed.

Seeing the look on his face, Iris explained, “I have not had a chance to wash his clothing.”

Hagan chuckled, casually walking toward the kitchen. “You got any ‘magic potions’ in here that’ll get me drunk, Iris?”

She followed him into the other room. “I do not participate in the consumption of alcohol! You’re well aware of this! Why would you suggest such a ridiculous idea?”

Lucas heard Hagan laugh from the kitchen as he heartily said, “I’m just messing with you! Calm down, I brought my own flask.”

Shortly after the pair had left the room, Lucas went back to the bookshelf. *I guess I’ll find something to read to pass the time.* His grandpa’s book caught his eye. *I hope you’re alright Grandpa.*

I'm sorry about all of this. Scanning the shelf, a particular book grasped his attention entitled, The Basics of Light Magic. Remembering his conversation with Zoe in the In Between, he took the book and sat down on the couch.

Chapter 5: The Interrogation

Roshan's vision started out blurry as he slowly gained consciousness. He could hear faint voices as his sight focused.

“He is waking.”

“Seize him.”

As his senses returned to him, Roshan could see that he was now being carried by his arms down a long stone corridor. Iron bars were visible on both sides of the hallway. He began to remember what had happened and realized that he was in prison.

Turning his head slightly left and right, he saw that he was being carried by two Knowms. At the end of the corridor, they turned right and proceeded to a set of doors with a Knowm standing on each side. As they approached, the Knowms simultaneously opened both doors and Roshan was thrown inside. The doors shut behind him with a loud slam. He slowly got to his feet.

The dark room was illuminated by only a single lamp which rested atop a desk. Sitting at the desk on the opposite side of where Roshan stood was a man dressed in a cloak similar to the ones worn by the Knowms. The only difference was that his cloak was colored a deep red. Nothing else decorated the room other than an empty chair which rested on the side of the desk closest to Roshan.

“Have a seat,” the man said calmly, gesturing toward the chair. Roshan gradually approached the desk and sat down. The man said nothing for nearly a minute. Roshan attempted to make out his face, but with only the light provided by the lamp, he couldn't see any features under the man's hood besides his mouth.

The moment of silence seemed to drag on forever. Finally, the man spoke. “I would like to make this as easy for both of us as possible, so I will be direct. Our spy informed us that you received

a delivery in your restaurant from a blond-haired young man. From what I understand, this object that was brought to you is the missing fragment of Damiano's Disk, currently in Spade possession. Therefore, I can only assume that our intelligence was correct regarding the possibility that you are a Spade. So tell me, Roshan, are you a member of the Spades?"

"I am not," Roshan replied. "You have the wrong man. I'm simply a humble restaurant owner."

The cloaked man chuckled. "Roshan, Roshan, Roshan... Do you think I'm stupid?" Roshan sat quietly, petrified with fear. "We are well aware of the gateway you somehow managed to construct in the backroom of your restaurant. Did you think we wouldn't hear the explosion as you destroyed it?" The man reached below the desk and pulled out a slab of stone which was once a piece of the gateway. He carefully set it on the desk and slid it to Roshan. "Did you think we wouldn't be able to identify the pieces? Now... I'm going to ask you again. And this time, I suggest that you try to be a little more honest with me. Roshan, are you a Spade?"

Roshan answered, "I am not."

The man slammed his fists on the desk without warning, "Liar!" Roshan began perspiring. Slowly, the man removed his fists from the desk. "We were unable to locate the disk fragment in your restaurant or on your person while you were unconscious. Given that, we can only assume that you handed it off to a fellow Spade in the In Between shortly before our arrival. If you would be so kind as to tell me where I can locate the disk fragment, I might be willing to forgive how uncooperative you've been so far in this investigation."

"I don't know what you're talking about," Roshan responded.

The man sat quietly for a moment. He then slowly got out of his chair and walked around the desk to the doors behind Roshan. The man left the room as the door slammed behind him. Roshan sat quietly, trying to keep his composure. He watched the flame dance inside the lamp, nervously awaiting the red-cloaked man's

return. Finally, after several minutes had passed, Roshan heard the doors open.

The red-cloaked man returned to his chair as two green-cloaked Knowms entered behind him and shut the door. After sitting down, the red-cloaked man spoke. This time, much more sternly. “We’re going to try this again. Where is the disk fragment?”

After a short pause, Roshan answered. “I don’t know what you’re talking about.”

The red-cloaked man’s mouth fidgeted in anger. “Now.”

Immediately, one of the Knowms standing by the doors grabbed Roshan and pulled him out of the chair. Then, both Knowms took turns repeatedly punching Roshan in the stomach while the other held him in place. This went on for several minutes as the red-cloaked man sat quietly and watched. Finally, he spoke. “Stop.” The Knowms ceased their assault instantly, throwing Roshan back into the chair.

After administering the brutal beating, the Knowms stood perfectly still as Roshan sat in agony, gasping for breath. Blood slowly seeped from his lips down his chin. Nothing was said for several minutes. The room was completely silent. Then, the red-cloaked man leaned forward slightly. “Where’s the fragment, Roshan? All you have to do is tell me and it will all be over.” Nothing was said. “Where’s the fragment?” His tone became increasingly aggressive. “Where’s the fragment?” Silence. “Where is the disk fragment?!”

Without warning, the door swung open. “That’s quite enough,” said a voice. “I’ll take it from here.” Roshan’s eyes widened. The door slammed shut as the man entered the room. Roshan could hear his footsteps slowly approaching, echoing as he walked along the stone floor. Bending down and putting his lips inches from Roshan’s left ear, he softly said, “Why must you insist on making this simple investigation so painstakingly tedious?”

Roshan was nearly shaking with fear. “Quinn.” Slowly turning his head to the left, Roshan saw Lord Javan Quinn’s face. His sharp nose. His long, gray hair. His dark-brown eyes, slicing and unforgiving. A malicious grin spread across his face as he slowly backed away from Roshan and gradually paced the area behind him.

“I understand,” Lord Quinn began, “that you feel some sense of obligation to protect your comrades. That is most noble. However, I am unbearably curious to know if your alignment would waiver if you were given the opportunity for a second chance... Think carefully, Roshan. Imagine... happily returning to your exquisite dining establishment in Cymbeline... resuming the extraordinary lifestyle of the entrepreneur. As it was, before you became a Spade.”

Roshan slowly turned around in his chair. The red-cloaked man grinned. Lord Quinn halted his pacing, stopping directly behind the chair that Roshan sat in. He stood there, patiently awaiting the information he sought. Slowly, Roshan raised his hand in a cup-like formation. Looking directly into Lord Quinn’s eyes, he said, “Go to hell. Ignis orbis!”

An orb of fire formed in Roshan’s palm as Lord Quinn smiled and replied, “Umbra disseptum.” Roshan hurled the fireball toward Lord Quinn, but before it made contact, the fiery sphere suddenly disappeared into a black void which vanished immediately after capturing the flame.

Lord Quinn shook his head and softly said, “Unfortunately, it seems that I will need to extract the information I seek at another time in the near future.” He outstretched both of his arms toward Roshan with his fingers spread wide. “Umbra obscurum fulgur!” Dark-purple bolts of lightning shot wildly from Lord Quinn’s palms, striking Roshan with unbelievable force. Roshan convulsed for a short period before losing consciousness and falling to the ground. Lord Quinn turned around and walked toward the room’s exit, pausing just long enough to address the red-cloaked man. “He will live. But he will wish he had not.”

Chapter 6: Learning The Art

Lucas sat quietly on the couch reading The Basics of Light Magic as Iris and Hagan chatted in the kitchen. The first part of the book explained that in order to perform Light magic, one must first possess the ability to use it. However, there was nothing indicating how he should go about verifying this. *Zoe seemed to think that my ability to sense other people's emotions was a sign that I could use Light magic. Wait... didn't she say everyone has the potential to be a mage? Then it shouldn't matter... but why does this book say I need to 'possess the ability to use Light magic?'... Now that I think about it, I also remember Zoe saying that she 'possessed Shadow magic'... Ugh! This is so confusing!*

Lucas flipped to the table of contents. *Here we go... the spells start on page 35. I can just try performing an easy one. Then I'll know for sure.* He flipped through the pages and hunted vigorously for a suitable spell. *It says this is the first one I should practice with... These must be the words I'm supposed to say down here... Well, here goes nothing.* Lucas stood up. He held the book in his left hand and outstretched his right arm. Cupping his right hand, he turned his palm upward and read aloud, "Lumen... orbis." Nothing happened. He tried again, "Lumen orbis." Still nothing. *Maybe I'm supposed to shout it.* "Lumen orbis!" Again, he was unsuccessful.

Iris quickly entered the room. "Lucas! Please do not conjure light orbs inside my house."

"Oh... Sorry," Lucas replied, setting the book on the coffee table.

Iris walked over to him. "Well, this certainly explains your miraculous recovery. The possibility that you possessed the ability to use Light magic never even occurred to me."

"I'm not sure I do," Lucas answered. Iris looked puzzled. He sat back down on the couch. "I have the ability to sense the emotions of other people nearby. I learned that it might be a sign

that I can use Light magic. So when I saw this book, I thought I'd give it a try. But it didn't work..."

Iris seated herself next to him. "Based on the symptoms you've described, I'm absolutely certain that you were born with the Light elemental center."

Lucas raised an eyebrow. "Then what am I doing wrong?"

Iris shrugged. "I cannot tell you. I'm uncertain of which methods you are applying during your attempts of conjuring through your elemental center." Iris could tell that Lucas was completely lost. Getting off the couch, she made her way to the bookshelf. As she dug through it, she said, "I believe you might be getting in a little over your head with that particular book. Perhaps you're simply not ready to begin casting spells." Turning her head to Lucas, she quickly added, "Though casting offensive spells indoors is highly ill-advised."

Iris turned her attention back to the bookshelf as Hagan entered from the kitchen. Taking a swig of whisky from his flask, he asked, "Where did you go, doctor?"

Iris grabbed a book and turned to him. "You are well aware that I am an alchemist and not a doctor, as I—"

"Yeah, I know," Hagan interrupted, rolling his eyes. "It's called humor. You should read about it sometime."

Iris handed Lucas a book entitled, So You Want to be a Mage: A Beginner's Guide to Conjuring through Your Elemental Center.

Lucas took the book and examined it. "Thanks."

Iris smiled and gave a soft nod. "After grasping the basics, you may find it wise to learn a healing spell. It's a special aspect of your elemental center that will prove highly beneficial to yourself and those you care about." Lucas crinkled his brow in interest and opened the book as Iris returned to the kitchen with Hagan.

Lucas studied the book carefully. He learned that each person is born with an elemental center, of which there are four types: Fire and Ice being the most common. Shadow and Light were said to be rarer. It explained that these centers are unchangeable and passed down through bloodlines. Centers from past relatives float outside of the person's true center and while these elements are present, the mage does not have access to them. Fire and Ice centers are typically dominant, while Shadow and Light are usually more recessive. For example, if one's parents are of Ice and Light, then typically the child would be born with the Ice elemental center. While the Light center may unexplainably resurface in a child generations later, the chances of this occurring are extremely low. Thus, Shadow and Light centers are typically found when both parents' centers match. Lucas thought for a moment. *Grandpa has the same sense I do... I think I'm starting to understand.*

Lucas skimmed through a section which listed the different ways each elemental center manifested itself once activated.

Light: Ability to sense the emotions of others. Quickly recovers from sickness and injuries.

Ice: Unaffected by cold weather/climate. If active from birth, manifests as silver hair and/or eye color.

Fire: Heightened physical strength/endurance.

Shadow: Ability to see in total darkness.

At the bottom of the list was written, "Elemental centers are rarely active from birth and, for most people, must be activated manually. For a list of techniques to activate your elemental center, see page 14. For a list of potions to help stimulate the process, see page 22)."

The book also taught Lucas that there are certain spells which do not necessarily require a particular center, known as rituals. Though they often demand a high level of experience to perform, and sometimes require multiple mages, they can be cast by someone of any of the four centers. However, rituals often depend

on whether one has access to certain enchanted accessories and take much more time to cast than typical elemental conjuring magic. While the effects of rituals are powerful and elaborate, they are highly difficult to perform correctly. They also take much practice. The book went on to recommend other books by the same author, entitled The Art of Enchantment and Let's Get Serious: Mastering Rituals respectively, for more information on the two subjects.

Next, Lucas learned that there are various techniques used to conjure through the elemental center. Successful conjuring occurs after one has focused their thoughts on a single point. With full concentration, the mage must envision the spell. After correctly assuming appropriate body positioning required for the spell (if required), they must verbalize the chant associated with it. Once the spell is conjured, the mage uses his or her mind (optionally in combination with physical gestures) to guide their creation to the target.

Lucas continued reading about various methods of focusing and envisioning spells, when he was suddenly interrupted by Hagan loudly proclaiming from the kitchen, "Food's ready, Lucas! Come and get it!"

Lucas placed the book on the coffee table. He then realized that he hadn't had a thing to eat since breakfast. He had been so focused on the book that he didn't even notice the aroma pouring from the kitchen. The thick smell of freshly prepared food reminded him of his grandpa. *He'll be alone all night.* Lucas proceeded to the kitchen as the worry sank in.

Chapter 7: A Friend In Need

Zoe sat down at the long table in the large stone room. Constructed entirely from materials harvested locally in the In Between, the table and its chairs shared the same bleak, colorless look as the rest of the dimension. Fifteen other Spades were seated at the table, patiently waiting for the meeting to begin and quietly talking amongst themselves. After sitting for several minutes, Zoe put her head down on the table, burying it in her arms.

Alex Beauford pulled out the chair to her right. “Mind if I sit here?” he asked with a gentle smile.

Without looking up, Zoe replied with a muffled, “Whatever.”

A young man at the age of twenty, Alex had curly brown hair and silver eyes. He sat down. “What’s wrong? You made it back with the fragment, right?”

“Yeah,” Zoe replied.

“Then what’s wrong?” he asked, bewildered. She didn’t reply. “Come on Zoe, you can tell me.” Looking up briefly, she shot him a glare. Alex raised his eyebrows. “Alright then...”

Several minutes passed before Tarren Haden entered the room. Immediately, Zoe lifted her head off of the table. Tarren was in his early forties and had short, dirty-blond hair and brown eyes. He was dressed in silver body armor with a sword sheathed on his waist. He walked over to the head of the table, not far from where Zoe was seated. The room fell silent.

“My brothers and sisters,” Tarren began as he took his seat. “Thanks to your combined efforts, the disk fragment is safe from the clutches of Javan Quinn once again. Unfortunately, we have lost even more of our colleagues in the process. Many were killed during the raid on our previous headquarters and though our numbers are falling, we must not lose hope.” He paused for a

moment. “Zoe has informed me that Morice was killed by imps as he was delivering the fragment to Roshan. However, he managed to hand it off to a trustworthy passerby shortly before his death, who successfully completed the delivery. Somehow, the Knowms had been tipped off about Roshan’s involvement in our organization, and the restaurant was raided shortly after the fragment arrived. Thinking quickly, Roshan returned the fragment to the trustworthy young man and sent him to the In Between, where he handed it off to Zoe.”

“What happened to Roshan?” one of the Spades asked.

“It’s unclear,” Tarren responded, “but I can only guess that he was arrested. Likely, he was taken to Valdis Prison for interrogation.”

“Who is this trustworthy young man you speak of?” asked another Spade. “Perhaps we should consider inviting him into our organization.”

“His name is Lucas,” Zoe answered. “I don’t know too much about him. He seemed like an okay guy, though I doubt he’s cut out to be a Spade.” She paused. “As for the situation with Roshan, I’d like to volunteer for a rescue mission.”

“What?!” Alex suddenly spat out. “Valdis Prison is impenetrable. It would be a suicide mission!”

Zoe turned to him, “Roshan made a great sacrifice for our cause. We can’t just sit back and let him rot in jail. If it weren’t for him, the Knowms would have the fragment—”

“Roshan did what he did for a reason,” Tarren interrupted. “If a rescue mission is attempted, we’ll simply be sending more Spades to their deaths. We can’t afford such a risk, especially taking into consideration our dwindling numbers.”

Zoe got out of her chair. “Then I guess I’m going alone.”

Alex quickly jumped from his seat and plead, “Zoe, don’t! Our duty as Spades is to protect the fragment. Roshan knew what he was getting himself into from the start. Just let him go.”

“Just let him go?!” Zoe replied furiously.

“Zoe,” Tarren said sternly. “Calm down.”

This only made her angrier. “You’re nothing but a bunch of damn—”

Tarren slammed his fist on the table. “That’s enough, Zoe! I understand that you were very close to Roshan, but you must not let your emotions cloud your judgment. We’ve already lost enough members as it is.” Completely ignoring Tarren, Zoe stormed out of the room.

As Tarren began to follow her, Alex interjected, “I’ll go talk to her.” Tarren nodded.

Zoe stomped down the hall and entered the barracks. Quickly, she searched the area around her bed and collected a sack. Grabbing a black cloak, she stuffed it inside. On her way back into the hallway she was met by Alex.

“Zoe! What’re you doing?”

“What do you think?!” she barked.

As she walked around him, Alex moved to block her path. “What if you get caught? What if they find out who you are and take you back to—”

“Don’t you think I know that already?!” She shoved him out of her way and stormed into the kitchen.

As Zoe added some bread to the sack, Alex walked into the room. “Don’t go,” he pleaded. Zoe said nothing and grabbed an empty bottle from the table, adding it to the contents of the sack.

“What if Roshan is already dead?” Alex argued.

“What if he’s not?!” Zoe screamed. She tied the sack shut. “I’m going. Deal with it.”

“Fine,” Alex replied. “Then I’m going with you.”

Zoe lifted her eyebrows in surprise. She was completely speechless.

Alex began to walk back to the barracks. “Just give me a few minutes to grab my things. I’m not letting you go to that place alone.”

Chapter 8: Learning The Art (Part II)

After they finished dinner, Hagan went home and Iris washed Lucas's clothes. She hung them in the washroom to dry before going upstairs to her bedroom.

Lucas had a very difficult time falling asleep as he lay on the couch that night. He couldn't stop worrying about his grandpa. To make matters worse, the fireplace now contained nothing more than a smoldering pile of glowing ash. Other than its faint light, the room was completely dark and the temperature was falling fast. The thick blanket which had provided him with warmth and comfort earlier now felt as though it were a sheet of ice. *How does Iris sleep here every night? This is insane! I guess it's safe to assume that she's an Ice center. It would explain the weird hair anyway.* Finally, after several hours of shivering, Lucas finally managed to fall asleep.

The next morning he was woken by the smell of porridge, reminding him of his grandpa. Lucas quickly got off the couch and walked into the kitchen. Shivering as he entered the room, he was greeted by Iris. She was sitting at the table in a purple night robe eating with a book open next to her porridge.

“Good morning Lucas. Did you sleep well?”

Lucas shook his head. “Not really. It's a little too cold in here for me.”

Iris got out of her chair. “Oh my! I apologize.” Grabbing some matches, she walked into the living room. “I possess the ability to use Ice magic. As a result, I'm unaware of drops in temperature below a certain point. I didn't intend to inconvenience you.”

Lucas followed her into the room. She was reaching for a log to put in the fireplace when he quickly said, “No, no it's okay. I need to leave soon anyway.”

Iris turned to him with a look of surprise on her face. “You have not fully recovered from your injuries.”

Briefly inspecting the cuts, bruises, and bandages on his body, Lucas said, “I can walk, I’ll be fine. I just need my clothes and sword.”

Iris shook her head. “You’re in no condition to travel outside of the Azure city limit. In the event you’re attacked by monsters, you will likely perish.”

“But I have to try,” Lucas argued. “Grandpa’s all alone and I have our only sword. He has the axe, but if it breaks he’ll be defenseless.” Lucas thought for a moment. *That’s right! I still have the gold I was going to use to get the sword touched up, plus the one hundred Roshan gave me!* “What if I hire someone to escort me back to Cymbeline?” he suggested. “Then I’ll only have to travel a short distance on my own. Will you let me go if I do that?”

Iris lifted a log and threw it into the fireplace. “In theory, I would. However, doing so would be much too expensive.” She turned to him. “Are you even aware of the vast distance you will need to travel in order to reach Cymbeline?”

Lucas walked over to the couch. “Well, I guess it’s going to be far. But I don’t really know exactly how far.” He sat down as Iris walked over to the bookshelf.

Taking an atlas, she placed it on the coffee table and sat beside him. Opening it, she said, “I’m certain that once you are aware, your opinion will alter.” Iris pointed to an area on the far north end of the map. “You’re currently here, in Azure.” She slid her finger a good distance toward the southwest and stopped on another point. “There’s Cymbeline.” Lucas buried his face in his hands.

Iris closed the book. “I sincerely apologize if I’ve caused you disappointment, but hopefully you can understand why I’m concerned for your welfare.” She took the book back to the shelf and finished building the fire.

As she walked back to the kitchen, she stopped and turned to Lucas, who was visibly upset. “Would you like some porridge?” she offered. Lucas softly shook his head. Although she felt sorry for him, Iris was unsure of what else she could possibly do to lift his spirits. She returned to the kitchen to finish her meal.

Lucas sat quietly on the couch, watching the fire crackle. *How am I ever going to get home now? Traveling on foot is going to take way too long. There has to be something I can do...*

When Iris had finished her breakfast, she reentered the living room. “Here’s an idea,” she proposed. “I’m scheduled to make a small batch of potions this morning. However, when my work is complete, I would be more than happy to assist you with the basics of elemental conjuring.”

Lucas turned to her with interest. “I’d like that.”

Iris smiled. “I’m estimating that I will be in the laboratory for approximately two hours. As you wait, I suggest that you continue studying the book I gave you.” She walked out of the room.

After grabbing the book, Lucas returned to the couch and pulled the blanket up to his neck. Trying to find where he had left off, he flipped through the pages of So You Want to be a Mage: A Beginner’s Guide to Conjuring through Your Elemental Center. Once he found the page, he continued reading.

After two good hours of study, Iris returned. “What have you learned so far?”

Lucas put down the book. “That conjuring is pretty complicated.”

Iris chuckled. “Other than that.”

Lucas sat up. “I read some more about techniques to focus and envision spells. Then I read about targeting and spell types. I think I might be ready to do it, but I’m not sure.”

“Would you like to try casting?” Iris asked.

Lucas was perplexed. “I thought you didn’t want me casting inside.”

Making her way upstairs, Iris said, “We can practice in the backyard. I will return momentarily.”

As she was changing, Lucas went to the washroom to collect his clothes. Inspecting them to be sure they had dried overnight, he dressed himself and proceeded back into the living room. While he was waiting for Iris, he searched through the bookshelf. *Which one was it... hmmm... there! That’s the one.* He grabbed The Basics of Light Magic. *Hopefully I can learn how to do some healing spells. I need to fully recover as soon as possible so I can work on finding the best way back to Cymbeline.*

Iris walked down the stairs a few minutes later, dressed in a long, thick light-blue coat with white trim and brown boots. Lucas turned to her. “Wait, I thought that as part of your Ice ability you weren’t affected by cold weather.”

“I am not,” she replied. “I simply enjoy wearing this attire.” Slinging a gray scarf over her shoulder, she asked, “May I offer you any additional clothing?”

Lucas nodded. “A coat and scarf, please.”

Moments later, the pair walked into the backyard. Lucas was now wearing a puffy white coat and scarf with gray gloves. He looked around, surprised at the size of Iris’s property. “Your neighbors are pretty far away for being in a city,” he commented.

Iris was flipping through The Basics of Light Magic as though she were looking for a specific page. She glanced at him. “This particular residential area of Azure is rather spacious. As an advantage of my career choice, I am one of a few residents who can afford to occupy this district. However, you’ll find that it’s quite different further into town.”

“That makes sense,” Lucas replied. “I was wondering why I wasn’t picking up the huge jumble of emotions I normally get when I go through Cymbeline.”

Iris stopped flipping through the book after reaching a certain page and pointed to a specific section of text. “Speaking of which, the first thing you should learn as a practitioner of Light magic is to control your ability to sense the emotions of others. Using the method listed here, you will be able to permit and prohibit your ability at will. It’s important that you acquire this skill first as you may find it hard to conjure while distracted by the emotions of the people around you.”

After reading the section Iris had pointed out, Lucas attempted the technique. It only took him a few tries before the calmness he had been sensing from Iris’s presence disappeared. “I think I did it this time,” he said.

Iris smiled. “Excellent. Now, let’s try conjuring.” She flipped through the book to another page. “We will start with a light orb. Orb spells are very basic and an excellent way to familiarize with the process of conjuring through your elemental center.” Iris outstretched her right arm, cupping her hand and turning her palm upward. “Start by moving your right arm into this position. Though it’s not necessary to outstretch your arm in this manner to conjure an orb, it’s a suggested method for those who are new to the process, as it gives the mage a clear focal point. You may find that physical gestures are helpful in controlling your spells, though the process is mostly mental.”

Lucas outstretched his arm as Iris had. “Alright. I guess it’s time to focus?”

Iris nodded. “Precisely. I will give you a short duration to do so using your preferred method.” Following a brief silence, she continued. “Now you must envision the spell. Your element is Light. Therefore, I suggest starting by visualizing the color yellow. Next, condense the color within your mind into a ball. Then, focus your attention to the center of your right palm. When you believe you’re ready to attempt conjuring, say ‘Lumen orbis.’”

It was silent for nearly a minute. Suddenly, Lucas shouted, “Lumen orbis!” Nothing happened. “Ugh!”

“Keep trying,” Iris encouraged. “Conjuring your first spell can be extremely frustrating. You must be patient. Repeat the process again.”

Lucas outstretched his right arm and cupped his hand. Facing his palm upward, he focused. Using all of his concentration, he visualized the color yellow and began forming it into a ball. Then, he focused as hard as he could on his right palm. “Lumen orbis!” Still, the attempt failed. Lucas groaned. Getting back into position, he tried again for a third time. “Lumen orbis!” Sadly, he was unsuccessful yet again.

Lucas was becoming frustrated. “I just can’t seem to do it, Iris. What am I doing wrong?!”

“Nothing, most likely,” she replied. “You have not failed. This is your first attempt at conjuring in your life. Your power is still ‘waking up,’ so to speak. With practice, you will be able to conjure orbs with hardly any effort at all. Observe. Glacies orbis!” Suddenly, a floating ball of ice surrounded by a glowing blue aura appeared about a foot in front of her face.

Lucas was stunned. *Show off! She makes it look so easy! And she didn’t even move her hands!* Iris quickly looked to her left. The ball instantly shot in the same direction, smashing into a battered old barrel and blowing it to pieces. Lucas scratched his head, “Now how the hell did you do that?!”

Iris chuckled at the remark. “Practice and patience. Do not relinquish hope so easily, Lucas. You have the potential. All you must do is apply yourself.”

Lucas outstretched his right arm and adjusted his hand into position. “Alright, if you say so. But we could be here for a while.”

Chapter 9: Annoying And Nosey

Zoe and Alex spent all night walking through the In Between. Considering that the stars were always out and the lighting remained constant, it was difficult to tell when the days ended and the nights began. Alex was equipped with a sword secured to his back. On his waist was a sack. Strapped to Zoe's back were her scythe and the sack she had stocked before setting out.

The two were on their way to a portal very distant from the Spade headquarters. After some time, the lack of sleep began to catch up with them. "Let's stop to rest for a while," Alex suggested.

Walking slightly ahead of him, Zoe turned her head to respond. "I'm tired too, but we can't afford to lose any time. Every second is valuable." She looked forward and continued to walk.

Alex was disappointed with this answer, but complied. "You're really determined," he said. "Roshan is lucky to have you as a friend." Unsure of how to reply, Zoe said nothing.

"So that guy that brought you the fragment," Alex went on, "what makes you think he's not cut out to be a Spade?"

"It was a gut feeling," Zoe responded. "He was so... oblivious. He didn't even realize he had the ability to use Light magic."

Alex was intrigued. "Then, how did you know?"

"He read my emotions," she replied. "I'm guessing his center has been active from birth. I used a counter-spell to block him and he was completely baffled. Trust me, he's better off just staying in Aria and having nothing to do with the Spades. I can't see how he'd benefit our organization anyway."

After a few moments had passed, Alex spoke again. "There's something I've always wanted to ask you." There was a pause.

Continuing to look straight forward, Zoe responded, “Well, ask me then.”

“Why did you join the Spades?” Alex inquired. “Why did you leave all of that behind?” She didn’t respond to his question, prompting him to quickly add, “Not that I disagree with your choice... It just must’ve been hard to walk away from. I’m wondering what would move you to do that.”

There was another brief silence before Zoe answered, “It’s complicated.”

Alex raised an eyebrow. “That’s it? Come on, can’t you be a little less vague?”

Immediately, Zoe halted and faced him. “I don’t owe you answers to anything.” She continued walking.

“Why do you do that?!” Alex snapped.

“Do what?!” she replied sharply.

“Push people out,” he answered. Again, Zoe was unresponsive. Alex continued, “You never talk about anything other than Spade related business. Roshan is the only one of us who really knows you.”

“So? Why does it matter to you?!” She barked.

Alex walked faster for a few steps to catch up with her. “Because I want to get to know you.” There was another pause. “You’re always so aggressive and guarded,” he went on. “Whenever I try to talk to you at HQ about anything other than the organization, you just give me short answers and go off somewhere by yourself. Why?”

Without warning, a small glowing ball darted in a fury between them and shot off into a nearby forest. “Another soul,” Zoe said. “They’d better get to the Netherworld before it’s too late.” Without addressing Alex’s inquiry, she resumed walking.

“I asked you a question,” Alex asserted. Receiving no answer yet again, he became frustrated. “Ugh, why are you so difficult?!”

Zoe quickly turned around and snapped, “Why are you so annoying and nosey?!”

Suddenly, not far away, they heard the sound of voices.

“I heard something too,” one of the voices said.

“It came from over there,” said another.

Frantically, Alex turned to Zoe. “Knowms!” he whispered. “What should we do?!”

Thinking quickly, she grabbed his arm. “Don’t move a muscle. Got it?” He nodded. Shutting her eyes and taking a few seconds to concentrate, she softly whispered, “Umbra physica evanesces.” Alex was amazed as he and Zoe suddenly vanished, becoming completely invisible.

After a short duration, four Knowms emerged from the forest. “I do not see anyone,” one said, “they must have run off.”

“They were Spades most likely,” another remarked. “Let’s search in that direction.”

Once they had walked off, Zoe allowed several minutes to pass before removing her hand from Alex’s arm, causing them to become visible. Cautiously and quietly, they continued walking.

After the two had traveled well out of the area, Alex spoke up. “That’s a pretty useful trick you pulled back there.”

“It took a lot of practice,” Zoe explained. “It’s an advanced spell. Unfortunately, it only works when standing still. Otherwise, getting Roshan out of Valdis Prison would be nearly effortless.”

“Speaking of which,” said Alex, “we’ve been walking for hours... it’s most likely going to be daytime when we make it to Aria. I know you don’t want to use up any unnecessary time, but I

think we'll have a better chance of succeeding if we wait until nightfall to make our attempt."

Zoe thought for a moment. "That's a good point. I never even thought about that."

"The portal takes us near Belmont Village, right?" Alex inquired. She nodded. Digging into the sack on his waist, Alex pulled out the gold he had brought along and counted it. "We should rest at Belmont Inn. It's going to be hard enough to pull this off as it is. We don't want to be sleep deprived on top of that. I think I have enough gold to get us a room... We'll just have to be sure to keep our heads down while we're in town."

"We should be fine," Zoe responded. "They have no proof we're Spades. And you're right, we need to be at our best. There's no sense in doing this if we can't do it right." Neither of them said anything for a considerable period as they continued their journey. Then, unexpectedly, Zoe spoke. "I'm sorry."

Alex was surprised. She elaborated, "You're not annoying and nosey. I'm glad that you came with me." After a short delay, she added, "Roshan is the only person I've ever really connected with. He was there for me when I needed someone the most. I'm doing this because I know he'd do the same for me."

After a little more traveling, the duo at last reached their destination. They walked toward the swirling kaleidoscopic vortex a short distance ahead of them. "Here it is," said Zoe.

Alex wiped his brow, "Finally."

Once they were within a few feet of the portal, Zoe turned to him. "It'll take us a few hours to reach Valdis Prison from Belmont Village. We need to be sure we don't spend too much time resting, got it?" Alex nodded. Zoe jumped into the vortex and disappeared.

Hastily digging through his sack, Alex pulled out a wilted flower. "Dammit, it died." He threw it to the ground and followed her into the portal.

Chapter 10: Reflections Of The Past

The small boy was happy. Born into a rich family of nobles, he was generous and kind to less fortunate souls. He enjoyed walking the streets and giving large quantities of gold to the local beggars. There was something about the look on their faces when he handed them the wealth. They were surprised, often overcome with joy.

One day, the boy made his way to a rougher side of town. He knew they needed his help the most. Peering down an alley, he noticed two men slouching on the walls. He approached them. Before he could speak, one of the men grabbed the boy. The man placed his hand over the boy's mouth. No one could hear his screams. The other man dug through the boy's belongings, taking the vast amount of gold. After throwing the boy to the ground, the men took off running. Stumbling to his feet as tears ran down his cheeks, the small boy was sad.

Chapter 11: The Journey To Belmont Village

Once they had emerged in Aria, Zoe and Alex made their way toward Belmont Village. They exited the small cave which contained the gateway and found themselves in a forest. After a mere ten minutes of traveling, the two heard a loud buzzing sound as they approached a clearing.

“That can’t be good,” said Alex, unsheathing his sword. Zoe looked around as she armed herself with her scythe, attempting to find the source of the noise.

Without warning, an imp jumped out of a nearby bush and viciously charged her. Reacting swiftly, Zoe dodged the creature’s strike and sliced the foe across its neck. The imp collapsed as blood gushed from its wound.

“Are you hurt?” Alex asked.

“I’m fine,” Zoe replied. “Whatever’s causing that buzzing is what we should really be worried about.”

The noise grew louder as a large shadow appeared on the ground. Looking up, they saw a giant hornet with a body length of a full man. It lunged toward Alex, stinger first. Swiping at the stinger with his sword, he deflected the assault, causing the hornet to briefly spin out of control.

Thinking quickly, Zoe shouted “*Umbra orbis!*” conjuring a shadow orb in her right hand. Aiming toward the massive insect, she hurled the orb. However, within inches of impact, the hornet promptly ascended, causing her to miss. “Dammit!” she shouted, attempting to alter her orb’s trajectory, but to no avail; it exploded against a branch.

The bug pointed its stinger at Zoe and dashed toward her. Jumping to the side, she evaded the attack, causing the hornet to plunge its stinger deep into a tree. As it struggled to escape, Alex

thrust his blade into the insect's thorax, causing it to shudder violently before it went limp. "That was a close one," Alex commented, removing his sword from the dead bug.

Zoe observed the hornet's corpse. "Yeah. Its stinger could have easily killed us in one strike." She turned to Alex. "We need to be on our toes out here. Let's keep the talking to a minimum." Alex nodded in agreement.

The pair continued walking. The forest was beautiful, quiet, and deceptively peaceful in appearance. Flowers were in bloom all around them. The tranquil sound of a distant babbling brook was barely audible. As they advanced, the duo kept their weapons drawn. Carefully, they scanned their surroundings in anticipation of the next onslaught. Neither of them said a single word as they moved.

Suddenly, the silence was interrupted by a rustling in the trees. Immediately, the pair froze. "Did you hear where it came from?" Alex whispered.

Her eyes fixed on the branches overhead, Zoe pointed to the source of the sound. She slowly walked forward, keeping a keen eye on the branches. Alex followed behind her, tightening his grip on the sword. The noise was audible once again as a squirrel leapt from one branch to another. Alex burst into loud, uncontrollable laughter.

Zoe promptly turned to him. "Shh!" He quickly shut his mouth, leaving his lips trembling in an attempt to silence his laughter. Rolling her eyes, Zoe couldn't help smiling at his reaction. They proceeded through the forest.

Suddenly, the two stopped. In the distance, they could see a group of three tall, skinny creatures which resembled stick bugs. Alex cautiously moved closer to Zoe and quietly asked, "What do you think? Should we go around?"

Zoe observed the surrounding area. "It doesn't look like that's an option," she replied softly, "There's too much brush. They'll

most likely hear us. If we approach them head on, we'll at least have combat advantage."

Alex gave a quick nod, "Leave it to me." He slowly sheathed his sword. Carefully raising two fingers to his lips, he whistled loudly. The beasts turned their heads toward Zoe and Alex and made bizarre clicking noises. With great speed, all three dashed toward them.

"What the hell was that?!" Zoe angrily shouted, gripping her scythe.

Alex glanced at her and continued focusing on the charging foes. "Just trust me." Outstretching his arms with his palms facing the rapidly approaching enemies, he spread his fingers. "Glacies gelidus zephyrus!" Two swirling currents of snow-laced wind tunnels shot from his palms, expanding in diameter as they approached the creatures. As the spell swept over the monsters, they slowed considerably, eventually collapsing to the ground as their bodies were completely encased in ice.

Zoe was impressed by the maneuver. "I've never seen that one before."

Alex turned to her. "I try to avoid using it unless I'm outnumbered. It rarely fails but it takes a lot out of me."

"Let's keep moving," Zoe suggested as she resumed walking. "We're going to have to make it to Belmont Village soon if we plan on getting any rest." Looking back at Alex, her eyes suddenly widened. "Look out!" she shouted.

As Alex turned around he was tackled by an imp. Zoe lifted her scythe, but before she was able to assist him, she too was tackled. Caught completely off guard, her weapon came out of her hands when she hit the ground. The beast swiped at her face, breaking the skin beneath her left eye and drawing blood.

While the duo struggled to get the hostile creatures off of them, more imps emerged from the surrounding brush. Alex finally

managed to throw his attacker off of him as two more approached. He hastily jumped to his feet and drew his sword, quickly finishing off all three imps. Glancing at Zoe, he saw that she had also gained control of her situation, mercilessly bashing the imp's head against a nearby tree. Spotting yet another imp approaching her, he raised a finger and shouted, "Glacies stiria telum!" Instantly conjuring a sharp icicle over two feet in length, he pointed his finger toward the foe. The icicle bolted directly to the impending threat, impaling its body on contact.

Alex scanned the area as Zoe finished off her attacker. She threw the dazed imp to the ground. Hovering her hands over the struggling creature she yelled, "Umbra vitam deductorium!" Glowing rays of dark-purple shot from her palms, causing the imp to convulse wildly as the beams met its skin. The wound beneath Zoe's eye slowly vanished as the imp gradually ceased moving. By the time the beast was motionless, her injury had completely healed.

The two took a few seconds to catch their breath. "Those things are vicious when they attack in groups like that," said Alex.

Zoe picked up her scythe, muttering, "Stupid imps."

"I didn't expect we'd encounter so many monsters," Alex remarked. "It seems like there's more and more of them every time I come back to Aria."

Digging through the sack she had prepared, Zoe pulled out a bottle filled with gray water that was collected when the duo had ventured through the In Between. She drank half of it. "Need a drink?" she offered. Alex nodded. She handed him the bottle and started walking again.

Alex followed, finishing the container's contents. "What was that last spell you cast?" he asked, stuffing the empty bottle into his sack.

Zoe glanced back at him. "It's a draining spell. If I'm injured, I can use my assaulter's life force to heal me."

“Nice,” he commented. “You know all kinds of useful tricks.”

“It’s really nothing special,” she replied. “I was just fortunate enough to be born with a Shadow center. The spell itself is only intermediate level.”

Alex shrugged. “Seems pretty cool to me.”

Their journey remained uninterrupted as the edge of the forest was in sight. In the distance, they could see a large field. Alex dug through his sack and removed a piece of bread.

“Belmont Village isn’t too much farther,” he said before taking a bite. “Hopefully we won’t run into any more trouble.”

“That’s doubtful,” Zoe responded pessimistically. They proceeded through the field, making their way over several small hills. Belmont Village was now visible in the distance.

Just then, Alex saw something out of the corner of his eye. Turning his head to the left, he observed a large plant in the distance with gigantic leaves. In the center was a massive trumpet-shaped flower, pointing toward the sky. Several green vine-like roots were visible, stemming from the base of the flower and delving deeply into the ground. “Look at the size of that thing,” he said.

Zoe looked straight forward, ignoring it. “Don’t go near it. It’s another monster.” At that moment, they heard an all too familiar sound quickly approaching from behind. “More hornets!” Zoe shouted as she quickly turned around. Alex turned to see four of the flying insects approaching. Zoe glanced at him. “Think you can pull off that freezing wind thing again?”

Alex sheathed his sword and outstretched both of his hands, facing his palms toward the oncoming swarm and spreading his fingers. “Glacies gelidus zephyrus!” Two icy wind tunnels shot from his palms and swept over the heard of hornets. All four of them quickly fell to the ground, encased in ice.

Alex fell to his knees. Zoe rushed to him. “Alex? You okay?”

“I’m alright,” he responded, “but I think that’s the last I’ll be able to conjure until I get some sleep.”

Zoe helped him to his feet. “Just take it easy until we get to Belmont Village. We don’t have much farther to go.”

“Oh crap, it’s moving!” Alex suddenly shouted. Zoe turned to see the massive flower walking toward them, its vine-like roots now acting as legs.

“Just stay here!” she ordered before running off. Getting as far from Alex as possible, she shouted, “Umbra orbis!” and hurled a shadow orb at the giant plant. It staggered slightly as the dark-purple orb collided with it. Apparently annoyed by the assault, the vicious flower charged toward Zoe.

She dropped her scythe and positioned her arms just below her waist. When the botanical beast drew near, she abruptly exclaimed, “Umbra obscurum crystallinus!” As she raised her arms above her head, a large black crystal jutted from the ground below the flower. The dark rock’s razor-sharp point sliced into the bottom of the plant, ripping it to shreds. The crystal suddenly vanished after impaling its victim.

Picking up her scythe, Zoe motioned to Alex. He ran over to her, inspecting the remains of the monstrous flower as he passed by. He noticed that the crystal had left no mark in the ground below. “You just keep on surprising me with those spells,” he said. Zoe smiled and made a bowing gesture. Alex chuckled.

Turning toward Belmont Village, Zoe spoke. “We’re almost there. I think we could both use some time off our feet.”

Chapter 12: A Troubled Evening

For hours, Lucas tried again and again to conjure a light orb. Despite his tedious repetition of the process, he remained unsuccessful. Slumping his arms, he turned to Iris. “I just can’t do it.”

Iris placed her hand on his shoulder. “Don’t say that, Lucas. As I’ve stated previously, you have the potential. Simply because you’ve been unable to conjure today does not mean you will never accomplish your intention. Many have struggled at first, including myself.” She took a small pocket watch out of her coat and observed the time. It was a little past 4pm. “I’m going to require some time in the laboratory, as I still have work to do. Perhaps you should take the remainder of the day to rest your mind and reenergize. We can resume practicing tomorrow.” With that she turned and walked back to the house. Feeling defeated and exhausted, Lucas followed.

Once they were back inside, Lucas placed the book on the coffee table and collapsed on the couch. Proceeding to the kitchen, Iris stopped and said, “I’m quite hungry. Would you be interested in some stew?”

“That sounds great,” Lucas replied. “I’m starving.” Iris walked into the kitchen. As she prepared the meal, Lucas fell asleep on the couch.

He awoke to the sound of the bowl being placed on the coffee table. He sat up. “Thanks.” Iris nodded, and left the room. As Lucas ate, his mind was flooded again with thoughts of his grandpa. *There’s no telling how many nights he’ll be trapped there alone. And he still doesn’t even have a clue where I am. He must be worried sick. There has to be some way I can get home faster.* He got up. Taking the stew with him, he walked into the kitchen.

Iris was sitting at the table, again with a book open as she slowly ate her stew. She looked up at Lucas and smiled. "Hello. Care to join me?"

"Yeah," Lucas replied as he placed the bowl in front of an empty chair and sat down.

Iris closed the book. "You seem troubled," she said. "Is there anything in particular you wish to discuss? Please don't tell me you're still upset over your difficulties with conjuring."

Lucas shook his head. "No, it's not that." He ate a spoonful of stew, "I'm just worried about Grandpa. He still has no idea where I am and there's no telling how long it's going to take for me to get home."

"I see," Iris replied. "Honestly, I'm quite curious to know exactly how you got here."

Lucas dropped the spoon into the bowl. "I told you already!" Iris was silent. Frustrated, Lucas got out of his chair. "I'm not delusional! I held a piece of Damiano's Disk! I heard the Knowms kick in the door to the restaurant! I went to another dimension! Everything I told you is the truth!" The room was quiet. He quickly apologized. "Sorry... I know it's hard to believe... and I really appreciate everything you've done for me. But it's the truth, I swear." He sat back down. "If you don't believe me, you can check for yourself. There's a portal in a cave near the spot Hagan found me that'll take you to the In Between."

The two ate in awkward silence for a few moments. Finally, Iris spoke. "I didn't intend to offend you, Lucas. I suppose it's not too incredibly far-fetched, especially taking into consideration the mystery surrounding the monster invasion. Your claims are, in theory, a sufficient explanation for the events which have taken place. Regardless, I find it hard to believe. In all of my years attending college, I'd never heard even a mention of inter-dimensional travel. Most theorized the monsters as a product of forbidden magic: possibly the result of a powerful ritual gone awry."

Lucas looked across the table at her. “Then how do you explain the Knowms? Why are they the only ones who can keep the monsters at bay?”

“I cannot explain their presence or ability based solely on what I know,” Iris responded. “Still, I’m certain there is an alternative explanation for all of this.”

“Look, I had a hard time believing it too. But it’s real.” He ate another spoonful of stew. “What if I take you to the In Between myself?”

Iris hesitated. “Your physical condition is still questionable. I don’t believe it would be wise for you to roam the wilderness.”

“But you’ll be with me,” Lucas argued. “Maybe we could get Hagan to come with us, too. Then we’ll both know for sure and we can put this to rest.”

Iris thought for a moment. “Perhaps... but only after you’ve fully recovered.”

Lucas sighed. “Fine.”

They both ate a little more stew. Deciding it was time to change the subject, Iris inquired, “You and your grandfather live alone?” Lucas nodded. After eating another spoonful, Iris continued, “Where do your parents live?” The room was silent once again.

“They’re dead,” Lucas finally said. Iris was shocked. This was not the answer she was expecting to receive. She was speechless. Following another pause, Lucas elaborated. “One night, we were awoken by imps. It seemed like any other night... my dad grabbed the sword, I got the axe. When we got outside, we found three of them. It didn’t take long for us to finish them off... my dad told me to go back inside and said that he would take care of the bodies.” Lucas’s eyes glistened. “Not long after, I heard his screams. I ran outside and saw a swarm of imps ravaging him. They must’ve caught him off guard... I fought them off of him...”

but...” Lucas stopped talking. He tried to hold his composure, but the painful memory became too much. Tears poured down his cheeks.

“I’m sorry, Lucas,” Iris said softly. “We don’t have to discuss this any further.”

Lucas took a moment to wipe his tears before continuing. “We buried him under an oak tree. My mom... she was devastated. It hurt even more seeing her so unhappy...” He stopped talking for a moment.

Feeling horrible for even bringing up the subject, Iris got out of her seat and walked over to a drawer. Pulling out a handkerchief, she handed it to Lucas, apologizing again.

After taking a moment to collect himself, Lucas continued. “It was only two weeks later when my mom started getting sick... I did everything I could... the doctors kept telling me they wouldn’t travel outside of town and that I needed to bring her to them...” Lucas paused yet again, attempting to stifle his tears. “I came home from Cymbeline after running some errands one day... and... she was...” Unable to continue, he got out of his seat. “I’m done eating, I’m going to go lie down.” He left the room, a small amount of stew remaining in his bowl.

Lucas slumped down on the couch, feeling completely drained. Shortly after finishing her stew and cleaning the dishes, Iris emerged from the kitchen. “I will be in the laboratory for the next few hours,” she informed him. “You may join me if you are in need of company.”

Lucas sat up. “No, thanks though. I think I just need some sleep. I didn’t get very much last night.”

“Alright,” Iris replied. She walked to the fireplace and added a few logs, causing the flame to grow immensely. “I’ll keep the fire going tonight. Perhaps you will be more comfortable.” She started to exit the room before stopping and turning back to him.

“I’m sincerely sorry about your parents, Lucas. It was not my intention to cause you emotional distress...”

“Don’t worry about it,” Lucas answered. “I just wish there were some way I could get home faster. If something were to happen to Grandpa, I don’t know what I’d do. I can’t bear to lose him too.”

Chapter 13: Caught In a Web

Zoe and Alex collapsed shortly after entering their room at Belmont Inn. The pair requested a wakeup call at 10pm, leaving them several hours to reach Valdis Prison. The room was small and furnished with nothing but a bed, a nightstand, a dresser, a small sofa, and a coffee table. Zoe slept on the bed while Alex took the sofa. Their slumber was peaceful and uninterrupted.

There was a knock on the door. “Wakeup call! 10pm!”

Immediately, Zoe jumped out of bed and gathered her things. “Wake up Alex,” she said, “it’s time to go.”

Alex’s eyes slowly opened. He stretched his arms and legs, letting out a mighty yawn. “Already?” He got up and started equipping himself for the journey ahead.

They exited the building and headed toward the city limit. As they did, Alex removed a small, black rectangular tin from his pocket and opened it. Inside was a pair of spectacles. “I’ve never seen you wear those before,” Zoe remarked.

Alex put on the glasses. “It’s a little project I was working on a while back when I was studying enchantment. They let me see in the dark; kind of like how you can with your natural Shadow ability.”

“That’ll be useful,” Zoe commented. “At first I was thinking I’d have to do all the fighting myself.” She smiled before looking straight forward. “They look good on you.” Alex was met with surprise at this remark. Before he could open his mouth, she added, “Alright, it’s time to get serious. So zip it and keep your eyes open. Aria’s wilderness can be a real hell-zone at night.”

As the two passed the last farm of Belmont Village, Alex leaned close to Zoe’s ear. “Those Knowms over there are watching us,” he whispered.

“Ignore them and keep walking,” she quietly replied. “They can’t stop us. Leaving town is dangerous, but it isn’t illegal.”

They continued out of the village, crossing an emerald green field with little trouble, save a few imps, and entered a large forested area at the foot of a small mountain. They proceeded cautiously with their weapons drawn, the leaves softly crunching beneath their feet with each step. Crickets chirped, and were accompanied by the distinct sound of an owl resting on a branch nearby, in search of its next meal.

“More imps ahead,” Alex softly whispered. He could see four of them, scurrying behind some distant bushes in preparation for a sneak attack, obviously unaware of his and Zoe’s capability to view them in the night’s veil. The two stopped walking. Alex leaned closer to Zoe. “Should we approach or attack from here?”

“I’ll handle it,” she softly replied. “Stay here. Back me up if it looks like I’m in trouble.” Holding her scythe with her left hand, she quietly conjured a shadow orb with the other. “Umbra orbis.”

Zoe calmly approached the imps. They stayed motionless, waiting for her to pass between them before striking. She was about halfway between Alex and the lurking beasts when she suddenly hurled the orb, landing a perfect strike on the nearest imp’s head. It fell to the ground as the others charged her. Gripping her scythe with both hands, she ran toward the creatures. The imps were apparently perplexed by this action and slowed their pace.

With one broad swipe, Zoe sliced the first imp across his entire torso. It collapsed in agony while she swiftly kicked the second one to the ground. The third imp attempted to bite her other leg, but was promptly dazed as Zoe used the snath of her weapon to jab it between its eyes. Having an advantage over her foes, she quickly finished them off with a few additional swings of her scythe.

Turning back to Alex, she gave him an ‘all clear’ signal. Together, they delved deeper into the dark forest. Unfortunately, they hadn’t made it much farther when Zoe, who was walking

slightly ahead of Alex, suddenly came to a stop as though she'd hit an invisible wall. Alex came to a halt next to her. As soon as Zoe had hit the 'wall,' it became visible. Only it wasn't a wall at all. It was a massive spider web.

"Ew, gross!" Zoe shouted, trying to back away from the web. However, her attempts were unsuccessful as the web continued to hold her in place. "Ah, crap! I can't move! Ugh, and it's in my hair!"

"Just stay calm," said Alex, lifting his sword. Looking up, he could see a large spider-like creature slowly crawling down the web to Zoe. Its bottom-half resembled an arachnid, but its torso and head were similar to an imp's. In addition to eight legs, it also had two skinny arms on its upper-half, both equipped with razor-sharp claws. A pair of fangs jutted from its upper lip as it made its way down the web. Its eyes were a deep glowing red.

Trying not to panic Zoe, Alex didn't mention the oncoming threat and quickly sliced at the web in an attempt to free his companion. However, the moment the blade made contact it became ensnared in the sticky trap as well. He tried with all of his might to remove it, but to no avail. "Crap, crap!!" The panic in his voice was apparent.

Zoe, unable to turn around or look up due to her current predicament, could tell by his tone that something was wrong. "Please don't tell me there's a giant spider getting ready to drink my blood."

Alex let go of the sword. Hastily taking a few steps back, he quickly raised his index finger over his head, "Glacies stiria telum!" a razor-sharp icicle conjured just inches above his finger. Pointing to the spider, the frozen projectile penetrated its upper chest area. The strange creature let out a scream and squirmed wildly.

Zoe's eyes widened as she heard the noise. Using her arms in a desperate attempt to escape the web's grasp, they both became stuck as well. "Dammit! Ugh, I hate spiders!"

Alex bolted to collect a branch on the ground nearby. Using it, he swiped the arachnid off of its web as it continued to squirm in distress. “Glacies orbis!” He threw an ice orb at the spider which let out another shrill cry. “Glacies orbis!” He threw another as the creature slowed its twitching. He watched it carefully, to ensure its demise.

“Is it dead?” Zoe asked.

“Yeah,” Alex replied, “I think that did it.”

Zoe tried again to escape the web’s grasp. “Great. Now how the hell am I supposed to get out of this thing?”

Alex thought for a moment. “Hold still, I’ve got an idea.” He placed both of his hands on the hilt of the sword, still stuck to the web. Closing his eyes, he focused.

“Well?!” Zoe shouted impatiently.

“Just give me a minute,” Alex replied. After concentrating for a brief period, he exclaimed, “Glacies gladius fascino!” His sword’s blade glowed light-blue as the surrounding web slowly froze. With one swift kick, he shattered it to pieces. “Yes! It worked!”

Now freed, Zoe inspected herself for remnants of the web. She turned around to see Alex holding the glowing sword. “An enchantment, huh?”

He nodded. “I channeled my center’s energy into the blade and used it to freeze the web.” The sword ceased glowing, “It drains me pretty heavily, so it’s another one of those tricks I have to avoid in most cases.”

“That’s pretty smart,” she remarked. “You’ve got talent.” Alex couldn’t help but smile upon receiving the compliment as Zoe turned her attention to the spider’s corpse. “If you weren’t here, that might not have ended so well.” She looked back at Alex. “I’ll handle the next few monsters. You should save the rest of your magic for when we get closer.”

Continuing their trek, the duo encountered numerous beasts before eventually reaching the forest's edge. They now found themselves at the base of the small mountain they'd seen earlier. "Valdis Prison is near the peak," said Zoe. "I hope you're up for a little rock climbing." The pair put away their weapons and made sure their belongings were secure. Approaching the mountain, they slowly made their way up the steep incline.

Chapter 14: The Climb

Zoe and Alex gradually proceeded up the mountainside. Though it was steep, they were able to walk the first quarter of their journey to the peak. After reaching a relatively flat area, they ran into their first major issue. The impending climb appeared to be much steeper, nearly wall-like.

“I should’ve brought some rope,” Alex remarked.

“We’ll make it,” Zoe assured him. “We just have to be very careful and take our time.” Digging through her sack, she pulled out the bottle which was replenished with fresh water collected during their venture through the forest. She took a small drink and handed it to Alex. “Only drink what’s necessary; we’re going to need most of it when we reach the top.”

Alex rejected the bottle. “I’m alright for now.”

“Okay, then let’s get started.” Zoe returned the bottle to the sack and carefully secured it to her back.

The duo gradually made their climb side by side, using jagged rocks to hoist themselves closer and closer to their goal. The ascent was uneventful until Alex suddenly felt a strong jab on the back of his head, nearly causing him to lose his grip. “Ah!” he yelped, swatting the air behind him with his free hand. Zoe turned her head to see a bird-like creature with four wings and a jagged black beak. The bird pecked Alex again.

“Hold still!” Zoe shouted. “Umbra orbis!” She threw a shadow orb at the pesky avian using her free hand. The bird merely dodged the attack, quickly delivering a harsh peck to Zoe’s forehead. “Ow!”

Instantly, the bird screeched as Alex swung his arm, bashing it against a rock as a flyswatter would smash an insect. The fowl

beast tumbled down the mountainside. “Got it,” Alex said smiling. “You okay, Zoe? He got you pretty good.”

“I’m fine,” she answered, rubbing her forehead. “How about you?”

Alex felt the back of his head. Viewing his fingers, he saw a few small red splotches. “I’m alright,” he replied. “That thing hits hard. Luckily I’ve got a thick skull.”

Zoe smiled. “That makes two of us.” The pair chuckled.

Finally, after a long, tedious climb, the duo reached another flat area. They were both drenched in sweat, aching from the arduous journey as they took a moment to rest. “We’ve got to be getting close,” said Alex, catching his breath as he sat down.

Zoe sat down beside him. She pulled the bottle of water out of her sack. “We are. Unfortunately, we’ve still got to climb that.” She pointed to a tall, vertical wall of stone not far from where they rested.

“I can’t wait,” Alex remarked sarcastically, burying his face in his hands. Zoe took a drink and handed the bottle to Alex. He drank until the bottle was half empty and handed it back to her. “So what’s the plan now?”

Zoe put the bottle back into the sack. “More climbing,” she responded. “The good news is that we’re over halfway there.”

Alex looked up toward the peak of the mountain. “How the heck do they get prisoners to this place anyway?!”

Zoe shrugged. “Beats me.” She dug through her sack and pulled out the remainder of the bread she had packed. Tearing off a piece for Alex, she handed it to him.

“Thanks,” he said as he eagerly took the food, eating it in nearly one bite.

“Someone’s hungry,” Zoe remarked, taking a bite for herself.

Alex nodded as he chewed. Moments later he asked, “What if we’re seen?”

“Then we’re probably going to get killed or locked up,” Zoe bluntly replied.

Alex was clearly distressed. “I thought maybe you had some clever escape plan.”

Zoe shook her head. “My plan is to not be seen. If we are, we’re outnumbered and outmatched. I doubt we’ll get far.”

Alex slumped his head back, taking a moment to observe the towering peak before them once again. He looked back at Zoe, who was standing up. “So this is it, huh?” he asked, rising to his feet. “Once we get up there, it’s all or nothing.”

“Pretty much,” she replied.

The area was quiet, save the sound of the wind whistling around the cliff’s jagged edges. “Well,” Alex finally said, “I guess this might be my only chance.” Taking her cheeks in his hands, he pressed his lips against hers. Her eyes widened, completely caught off guard, but slowly closed as she wrapped her arms around his neck, returning the display of affection. They kissed each other again and again, each one more intense than the last, then, “Ow!”

He quickly pulled away. Looking up, he saw three of the bird-like creatures they had encountered during their climb. “You’ve got to be freaking kidding me!!” Alex shouted, rubbing the tender spot atop his head.

Zoe scrambled to grab her scythe lying on the ground nearby but was harshly pecked on her back as she did.

“Glacies orbis!” Alex yelled, hurling an ice orb at one of the birds, though it easily dodged the projectile, promptly swooping down to peck at him.

Zoe wildly swung her scythe as her attacker gracefully evaded each swipe. “Dammit, they’re too fast!” she shouted.

“Ah!!” She was pecked again, this time just above her right ear. She swung her scythe in the direction of the latest offense but was hastily attacked by the other bird.

Alex found that it was incredibly difficult to aim his ice orbs while dealing with the incessant pecking. Following a few failed attempts, he picked up his sword. “Any ideas?!” he shouted, taking a swing at the irksome airborne foe.

“I’m BUSY!” Zoe replied, angrily swiping repeatedly at the two birds as they took turns attacking her.

Gripping his sword, Alex almost struck his aggressor, missing by nearly an inch. It took advantage of his failed attempt, pecking him again with its jagged beak.

Finally, Zoe managed to hit one of the birds, sending it tumbling to the ground. She quickly took a swing at the other feathered beast, but was not as fortunate.

“Glacies stiria telum!” Alex shouted, conjuring an icicle missile which put an end to another bird. All that remained was one.

Zoe swiped her scythe again and again but couldn’t manage to knock the evasive avian out of the air.

Alex conjured an ice orb. Patiently, he stood still and carefully focused on the bird as it continued to dodge Zoe’s aggressive strikes. At last he saw his chance, hurling the ice orb at the unsuspecting foe. The bird fell to the ground.

Zoe, visibly exhausted and frustrated by the encounter, took a moment to catch her breath. Alex, also drained by the battle, scanned the surrounding area to be sure there were no more pesky birds in close proximity. “Well, I’ve definitely reached my conjuring limit, but I think we’re good.” he reported, sheathing his sword. Still breathing heavily, Zoe gave a thumbs up.

“Who’s down there?!” They heard suddenly from high up.

“Dammit, they heard us!” Alex whispered loudly. He dashed to Zoe. “Quick, make us invisible!”

Zoe shook her head. “I can’t. I’m too tired.”

Alex looked up. He could see someone looking down off the edge of the cliff. He looked back at Zoe. “They’ve seen us.”

“Not necessarily,” she quietly replied. “It’s nighttime. Unless they possess Shadow magic, I doubt they can see anything down here. Just be still and keep quiet.”

The pair looked up to see another person approach the cliff. Both of the mysterious figures looked down at the area below, then turned to each other. They stayed near the cliff for several minutes before walking away. Alex looked at Zoe. “That was close,” he remarked.

“Yeah,” she replied. Following a pause, Alex leaned in toward Zoe’s lips, but she quickly turned and collected her sack still lying on the ground. She secured it and her scythe to her back. “We’ll have to climb from the other side,” she said.

Alex picked up his sack and tied it to his waist. “Are you sure it’s a good idea to go now? Maybe we should rest a bit more.”

Zoe rolled her eyes. “Relax, lover boy. I’ll make out with you when we get back to the base. We’ve got a job to do.” Zoe scanned the cliff face, in search of another route to the peak.

“But you said you were exhausted; well, so am I!” Alex argued as he followed. “I don’t think we’re ready to climb this thing.”

“We don’t have a choice,” she replied. “I came here to rescue Roshan and that’s what I’m going to do. You’re the one who decided to come with me. You can stay down here if you want to, but there’s going to be no chance of busting him out of that place if the sun comes up. There’s no time to lose.”

Alex looked back at the scattered corpses of the winged monsters. “Stupid birds,” he muttered to himself.

The duo continued walking along the outcrop until they reached a sharp drop. “Great...” Zoe remarked. “Looks like there’s no way around... and we can’t climb up this side – they’ll be expecting it now that they’ve heard us.” She turned around and retraced her steps. Again, Alex followed.

“Now what?” he asked.

“We’ll have to check over there,” she responded, pointing to the far side. After passing by the area in which they encountered the birds, they suddenly saw a group of four men dressed in body armor emerge from around the distant corner of the large cliff. The man in front was holding a lantern. Zoe and Alex froze.

“Someone’s coming!” Alex whispered.

“Looks like guards,” Zoe replied. “Just stay calm.” She frantically searched the surrounding area as the guards approached. Suddenly, Zoe was struck with an idea. She hastily turned to Alex. “Let’s climb back down a bit and wait for them to pass.” Alex nodded.

They quickly but quietly proceeded back to the edge and clambered their way down the mountainside. However, the two soon discovered that climbing down the steep slope was much more difficult than the climb up. Though it was less physically demanding, keeping their balance proved to be a challenge. The difficulties were amplified by the duo’s exhaustion.

After making it only a short way down, they both heard footsteps approaching them from above. Panicking, Alex lost his grip and tumbled down the cliff face, the sharp rocks showing no mercy as he plummeted. “Alex!!” Zoe screamed, terrified.

Suddenly, she was hit by the light of the guard’s lantern not far above. “Don’t move!” he ordered.

Chapter 15: Reflections Of The Past (Part II)

The preteen boy was sad. Since the incident which had taken place years before, he had become afraid to wander far from his home. While this kept him safe from harm, he became lonely. One day, feeling he was in desperate need of social interaction, his parents forced him to attend a ball that was held by one of their neighbors. Reluctantly, he went.

He did not speak to many guests for the first hour or so, simply watching from the side as the happy attendees danced with their partners. That's when he saw her. She was around his age, sitting alone, watching from the sidelines as well. Though he was greatly nervous, he eventually gathered the courage to approach her. She introduced herself as Vera. After some light conversation, the two agreed that ballroom dancing wasn't their cup of tea. They spent the rest of the party talking and laughing. The preteen boy found friendship.

Chapter 16: Learning The Art (Part III)

The front door shut as Lucas's eyes opened. He sat up. It was morning.

“Oh, I apologize if I awoke you,” said Iris. “I’ve just returned from delivering a batch of potions. Did you rest well?”

Lucas stretched. “Yeah... I needed it.”

“I’ve caught up on my work for the time being,” Iris said. “After breakfast, would you possibly be interested in giving conjuring another try?”

Lucas yawned. “Sure.” *If I can finally get the hang of this conjuring stuff, I’ll be able to learn one of those healing spells. Then I can work on getting home.*

She smiled. “Excellent.”

As Iris walked toward the kitchen, Lucas quickly turned to her. “Iris.”

“Yes?” she replied, stopping and turning back toward him.

“Do you have some parchment and a pen I can use? I want to write a letter to Grandpa, just in case I’m stuck here for a while... so he knows what’s going on. It’ll probably make it home before I do.”

She smiled. “Certainly. One moment please.” She went upstairs, returning moments later with a pen, some ink, an envelope, and a piece of parchment. She placed the items on the coffee table.

“Thanks,” said Lucas. Iris nodded and went into the kitchen to prepare breakfast.

While she was gone, Lucas began writing the letter, summarizing all of the events which had occurred since his

departure from the house. Given Iris's reaction to his story, he included that he realized it would be hard to believe but assured that he would be heading homeward as soon as possible to explain in further detail. He told his grandpa not to worry, and that he was currently learning magic techniques which would aid him on his journey back to the Cymbeline area. When he was finished, Lucas folded the parchment and slipped it inside of the envelope. After addressing it to his home, he proceeded into the kitchen to acquire the return address from Iris. She provided him with the requested information and took the letter, informing him that she would deliver it to the post office later that day.

Once they had eaten breakfast and dressed themselves, the pair proceeded to the backyard to begin their practice session. Lucas was wearing in the same clothing he had borrowed the previous day. Iris wore a white cloak, carrying The Basics of Light Magic in her right hand.

“Are you ready to begin?” she asked.

Lucas outstretched his arm and turned his palm upward. He cupped his hand. “Let's do it.”

Iris smiled. “That's the attitude!”

Closing his eyes, Lucas focused his mind and envisioned the orb formulating in his hand. Shifting his attention to his palm, his eyes snapped open as he shouted, “Lumen orbis!” There was silence. Nothing happened. “Ugh!” he grunted.

“Try again,” Iris quickly interjected.

Lucas gave a single nod. “Alright, here it goes.” He repeated the process, this time taking several minutes to tune out all of his surroundings, trying with all his might to focus on nothing but the spell. “Lumen orbis!” Again he was met with failure. He quickly turned to Iris. “I'm going to do this today. No matter how long it takes, I will conjure this orb.”

Two hours passed.

“Lumen orbis!!” Silence. “Dammit!!”

“Perhaps you should consider taking a brea—”

“No!!” Lucas forcefully proclaimed. “I’m going to do th—”

“Lucas!” Iris shouted sternly. “You’re currently in no mindset to conjure your first spell! It’s overwhelmingly apparent to me that you’re frustrated. While this emotional response is understandable, I feel that it is distracting you. I highly recommend that you take a break.”

Lucas looked down at his palm, still visibly discontent with his progress. He looked back at Iris. “Alright. But only a short one.”

“Very well,” Iris replied. “Perhaps this would be a suitable opportunity to deliver your letter to the post office. Please follow me.”

After collecting Lucas’s letter, they walked together toward downtown Azure. Iris looked over at Lucas. “I must admit, your determination to learn the art of elemental conjuring is inspiring to say the least. But you must not become so frustrated by failure. Successful conjuring is going to require great focus and a balanced mind.”

“But you make it look so easy,” Lucas disputed. “You didn’t even take time to focus when I saw you conjure yesterday.”

“Yes, because I’m experienced,” she responded. “With practice, you will be able to do the same. Eventually, conjuring orbs and other simple spells will become second nature. However, you’re still in the process of developing your ability. Conjuring your first spell is an arduous routine. You must learn to accept your failed attempts as essential steps toward reaching your potential. Viewing your lack of success as an obstacle will only hamper your progress.”

Lucas took a few moments to allow Iris’s words to sink in. *She’s right... I’m getting way too caught up in doing it quickly*

instead of doing it right. Maybe I won't be able to conjure today, but that's okay. Stressing about it isn't going to help anything... Grandpa will know that I'm okay as soon as he gets the letter. I need to accept that there's no way I'm getting home unless I'm patient and take the time to do this correctly. Even if Iris decides I'm well enough to travel, I doubt I'll last the lengthy journey ahead of me without learning a few spells.

The two walked a little while longer and reached downtown Azure. Though it wasn't nearly as crowded as Cymbeline, the population was much denser than the area around Iris's house. Lucas observed the frost glazed windows of the dozens of brick buildings. Nearby, several workers hastily shoveled snow out of the road. On the opposite side of the street, Lucas saw a Knowm standing perfectly still in front of a barbershop. That's when it hit him. For the first time in his life, Lucas was walking through a town without experiencing the crippling spiral of emotional confusion. *If anything, I'm glad I learned to control that.*

Once they had delivered the letter to the post office, Lucas and Iris returned to the house. They soon found themselves in the backyard, once again.

"Lumen orbis!" Lucas exclaimed. Nothing. This time, however, he did not become frustrated. Taking a few deep breaths, he tried again. "Lumen orbis!" and again, "Lumen orbis!" and again. "Lumen orbis!"

Iris looked up at him, the book open in her hands. "Perhaps you should try a different spell?"

Lucas was puzzled by the suggestion. "Why? Is there an easier one?"

"Not necessarily easier," she explained, "just different. Orbs are generally the starting point for most new mages. However, it's not required to cast orbs first. I simply thought you might need a change of pace."

Lucas shook his head. "No. I'll just keep trying the orb."

“Very well,” Iris responded. “Proceed.” Resuming his position, Lucas tried yet again to conjure a light orb.

Chapter 17: Waiting

“She’s in that one, on the left,” the guard told his comrade. They approached the cell and peered inside. Behind the bars, Zoe sat, resting against the back wall, still covered in injuries acquired from the various monster encounters she and Alex had faced along the way. Her clothing had small rips and tears from the incessant pecking of the bird-like creatures. She stared blankly at the guards as they looked at her.

“We have no idea who she is or how she got up here,” the guard explained. “She won’t answer any of our questions or even give us a name. We found a scythe and a sack containing a few items, including a black cloak on her person. We’re suspecting that she was going to attempt a prison break.”

“Was she alone?” the other guard asked.

“We’re not sure,” the first replied. “We didn’t find anyone else when we searched the area, but she kept screaming ‘Alex’ when we tried to restrain her. We’re guessing Alex was her partner. He must have escaped. We won’t know for sure until she decides to open her mouth. The orders are to not give her any food or water until she talks.” The guard looked at Zoe. “Are you going to tell us something now? We’re not letting you go until you give us your name and a reason why you’re here.”

Zoe sat motionless and said nothing. The other guard spoke. “You look like you’re in pretty rough shape. Just tell us what we need to know and we’ll get you cleaned up.” Still, she remained silent.

The first guard turned away. “She’s not going to talk. Nothing seems to work.” He walked down the cellblock.

The other guard soon followed. “I heard Lord Quinn is coming by later this evening. He wants to speak to the guy who conspired to assassinate him again.”

The first guard chuckled. “Ol’ Javan likes taking matters into his own hands, huh?”

“Guess so.”

A bead of sweat ran down Zoe’s face. *He’s coming...* she thought to herself. *It sounds like he told them that Roshan was conspiring to kill him...* She looked down at her scuffed boots. *Where are you Alex? I know you’ll be here any minute to get us both out of here. You’re alive, I know it...*

Zoe stared at her knuckles, bruised from where they had met the thick armor worn by the guards. After the light had hit her, she immediately tried to scurry down the mountainside. However, the guards quickly pursued her, dragging her back to the outcrop. She punched, kicked, and screamed, trying with all her might to escape their grasp but was inevitably put in handcuffs. They walked her around the corner of the mountain, from where they had originally emerged. Entering a small cave, they took her to a wooden platform. One of the guards moved a nearby lever, releasing a pocket of steam to hiss into the air. Slowly, a chain pulley near the platform began moving, gradually elevating them to another cave near the peak. During the ride, they asked her again and again for her name. It was at that point that she made the decision to remain silent, regardless of what awaited her in the coming days.

Alex is coming, she kept telling herself. *I just need to hold on... he’ll be here soon.* Completely devoid of sleep, her head tilted downward; her eyes slowly closed. Suddenly, the image filled her mind. Alex, tumbling down the mountainside, smashing against the sharp rocks as he fell. Her eyes quickly opened again. *He’s alive. He’ll be here any minute.* She continued to sit in silence.

It wasn’t long before she heard the sound of a door opening somewhere at the end of the hall, followed by footsteps. They slowly walked down the cellblock, gradually approaching her cell. Finally the man came into view. Zoe’s eyes widened. She quickly turned her head to the side, desperately hoping her hair would block her face. The footsteps belonged to Lord Quinn. He proceeded down the hall without stopping. Zoe continued to hide

her face until she heard him reach the doors on the opposite side of the cell block. *He didn't see me...* She exhaled a sigh of relief. *Come on Alex, where are you?*

Chapter 18: Azure Under Fire

“Lumen orbis!” Lucas had spent hours trying with all he had to conjure a light orb.

“Are you ready for another break?” Iris inquired.

He shook his head. “Not yet. I’m going to try a few more times.” Lucas got back into position and repeated all of the necessary steps. “Lumen orbis!” Unsurprisingly, he did not manage to conjure yet again. “Hold on, I think I’m getting close.” He tried once more. “Lumen orbis!”

When nothing happened, Iris calmly asserted, “I believe a brief period of rest would be a wise decision.”

“Okay,” Lucas replied. “Just let me try one more time.” Iris nodded. Lucas outstretched his arm and faced his palm upward. *I have to do this. Grandpa needs me.* Taking a moment to focus, he envisioned the orb being formed as he had during all of the previous attempts. Shifting his attention to his palm, he shouted, “Lumen orbis!”

Much to the surprise of Iris and himself, a small flash of light sparked to life in the palm of his hand for a fraction of a second before quickly disappearing. A wide grin consumed Lucas’s face as he turned to Iris. “Did you see that?!”

Iris smiled. “Excellent progress!”

Lucas got back into position, “Alright, here it goes. I’m going to do it this time. I can feel it.” As Lucas focused, he was abruptly interrupted by a loud explosion in the distance. “What the hell was that?!”

“I’m uncertain,” Iris replied, bewildered. “The noise seems to have originated from the direction of downtown Azure. I hope no one was hurt.”

Lucas ran around the house to reach the road. “Let’s go check it out. Whatever it was, it sounded big.”

Iris started to follow him when they heard the noise again. She began to feel concerned. “Lucas, I’m feeling apprehensive about this. It might be best for us to remain indoors at this time.”

Lucas looked back at her as he continued to walk. “Come on, let’s just get a quick look.”

She sighed. “Very well... but we need to proceed with caution.” As the words left her mouth, Lucas had already increased his walking pace to a light run. “Lucas!” she shouted. “Slow down! Running is going to jeopardize your recovery!”

Lucas slowed himself slightly, but was still a good distance ahead of Iris. She briefly increased her pace in order to catch up to him. “We have no idea what we’re about to witness,” she warned. “I strongly advise that we keep our distance. At least until we are certain of the events occurring.”

Lucas nodded. “Alright.”

As the pair approached downtown Azure, they were shocked to see that two buildings had been totally destroyed. The townspeople were running around in a frenzy. Iris gasped. “Wh-what happened?!”

Using his emotional sense, Lucas picked up an overwhelming mass of fear. Greatly discomfited by the feeling, he hastily deactivated his ability. Suddenly, a giant fireball zoomed from somewhere among the chaos in the streets, blowing a third building to pieces. Flames engulfed what remained of the structure.

“We need to get out of here, now!” Iris shouted. She turned to Lucas only to find that he was gone. Panicked, she frantically searched for him. “Lucas? Lucas? Lucas!!” Finally she saw him, already making his way into the frightened crowd for a closer look. She ran after him. “No!”

As Lucas snaked his way through the terrified masses, he saw a large man standing in the middle of the road. He appeared to be around 6'5", with a muscular physique and long red hair. He was wearing a brown hooded cloak, with what appeared to be a saber sheathed on his waist. Around him were four men, quite well built, who were dressed in similar cloaks. As Lucas's eyes scanned the area around the men, he noticed several dead bodies. Most of the casualties were Knowms.

The large man lifted both of his hands above his head and shouted, "Ignis ingentem vastator!" A massive fireball formed in the air. "Where's the disk fragment?!" he demanded.

Lucas gasped. *Disk fragment?! Oh no...*

The man searched the chaos, as though he expected someone among the crowd to answer him. When no answer came, he flung his arms toward a nearby building, causing the enormous fireball to dart into the structure, totally annihilating it on impact.

Without putting any thought into what he was about to do, Lucas outstretched his arm, turned his palm upward, and focused. After a brief pause, he moved his attention to his palm. "Lumen orbis!" There was a bright flash in his open hand as a small orb of light took shape. *I did it! Finally! Alright... that big guy in the middle looks like their leader. If I can hit him before he-*

"Lucas!!" Iris angrily shouted. "What are you doing?!"

He glanced at her. "Saving your town. Those guys over there seem to be the ones causing this."

"Lucas, listen to me," Iris quickly warned. "It's great that you've finally managed to conjure, but throwing that orb is going to accomplish nothing but your demise!"

"But I have a good shot at that big guy from here!" Lucas protested. "He won't even see it coming." Iris grabbed Lucas's arm and pulled him back toward the direction of her neighborhood.

“Iris!” he shouted, resisting her restraint while the light orb continued to glow in his free hand. “Just let me try!”

“No!” she shouted. “You’ve never even thrown an orb once in your life! You are not prepared for combat! Especially against multiple mages! On top of the fact that you have yet to fully recover from your existing injuries! Even if you manage to hit one of them, the others will surely retaliate. Throwing that orb is suicide.”

“But we have to do something!” Lucas argued as Iris continued to pull him farther from where he originally stood. He glanced back at the large man, then back to Iris. “You’re pretty good with magic, why don’t we both take them on?”

Iris’s expression was intense, unlike what he had seen in the previous days. “Lucas, you need to accept that there is nothing we can do about this situation.”

Lucas finally managed to pull his arm from her grasp and dashed as fast as he could to where he had stood before. “Lucas, no!” Iris screamed.

He stopped and quickly turned back toward her. “It’s only a matter of time before they make their way to your house! We need to do something now!”

Lucas resumed running until he reached what he considered to be an appropriate vantage point. The crowd had mostly dispersed by now, giving him a clear shot at the men. He carefully aimed, his sight set directly on the large man, who was now lifting his arms above his head, apparently preparing to conjure yet another gigantic fireball. *Now’s my chance. Here goes nothing!* Lucas pulled his arm back and hurled the orb. It quickly darted through the air, completely missing all five of the men and exploding into a lamppost with a bright flash. *Dang it!*

The five men turned their heads toward the now bent lamppost. “What the hell?” one of them said.

Another one of them pointed to Lucas. “It was him!”

Uh-oh! Lucas outstretched his arm and focused as the large man, clearly enraged, approached him. *Dammit, I can't focus right now! Iris was right, I should have just run! What was I thinking?!* Lucas perspired as his hand fumbled along his waist. *I don't even have my sword!!*

“Ignis orbis!” the large man barked, quickly forming a fire orb in his right hand as he approached. Lucas wanted to run, but was far too petrified to even think straight.

“Glacies stiria telum!” Iris shouted.

As the large man turned his head to her, Lucas saw a sharp icicle bury itself between the brute's eyes. Blood poured down his face. “Ahhhh!!” he screamed, twitching as he fell to the ground. Immediately, the remaining four men conjured fire orbs.

Iris bolted in front of Lucas and spread her fingers wide, crossing her arms near her chest with her palms facing outward. The moment the men launched their fiery projectiles, she quickly exclaimed, “Glacies scuto!” waving her arms hastily to form a large circle. As the fireballs approached, they were met with a thick wall of ice which seemed to materialize almost instantly. Though each fire orb left a hole in the subzero shield, they were quickly extinguished as they met the barrier.

Iris flicked her wrist and the icy wall vanished. Outstretching both of her arms toward the enemies, she shouted, “Glacies gelidus zephyrus!” Two icy wind tunnels shot from her palms, consuming all four men. They slowly fell to the ground as ice encased their entire bodies. It only took a few seconds before they froze completely. As Iris turned to Lucas to scold him, she noticed a look of total shock on his face. The second she opened her mouth, the entire area was flooded with the sound of applause and cheering. Onlookers ran toward her, each one trying to be the first to thank their town's heroine.

Chapter 19: Hard Times At Valdis Prison

Zoe was unable to rest despite her exhaustion. Every time her eyes closed, she was brought back to that dreadful moment. She sat in silence for hours.

Suddenly, she heard a door close at the end of the hall, followed by the sound of footsteps echoing as they walked along the stone floor. The noise ceased a good distance from her cell. Though they were not within her line of sight, she could tell that the footsteps belonged to two people. She heard the jingling of keys followed by the distinct sound of a cell door being opened.

After a moment she heard the door close. The footsteps continued toward her end of the cellblock, now accompanied by an extra pair of feet. They came into view: two Knowms. Between them, Roshan. Though she desperately wanted to speak to him, she refrained, knowing it would only cause more trouble for both of them. Though she was unable to get a very good look at him during the brief period he was in sight, she could tell that he was experiencing a lot of pain simply by the deliberate manner of his walk: as though each step were more excruciating than the last.

The doors on the opposite side of the cellblock slammed shut as the Knowms took Roshan to, what Zoe assumed, the room in which Lord Quinn awaited. *They're about to interrogate him. I can't wait any longer; I need to find some way to get out of here.* Zoe inspected the small cell. *If there even is a way out of here...* She slouched down against the back wall and rested her hands on her stomach as it growled. *Who am I kidding? I'm too tired and hungry. I'd be surprised if I could even conjure an orb right now.*

Zoe remained quiet as the thoughts swirled through her mind. For reasons which were unclear to her, she had refused to acknowledge the possibility that Alex had lost his life when falling from the cliff side the night before. Though the idea of this bleak circumstance continuously found its way into her consciousness, she had been quickly turning her focus away from it each time it

emerged. However, she was now beginning to submit to the likeliness that Alex did not survive the rugged plunge down the mountain. Her heart sank. She gradually lost hope. *It's all my fault...*

She quickly wiped away her tears. *No. That's not going to help anything.*

Zoe's heart jumped as a horrific, agonizing scream emanated from the confines of the room Roshan had recently been led to. She quietly gasped in horror at the sound. Then she heard it again, followed by Lord Quinn's voice, though it was too muffled and distant to tell exactly what he was saying. Again, there was another cry of pain. As the noise hit her ears, she used her remaining strength to hoist herself off of the floor and onto her feet. Something in her snapped, and her face became stone.

She angrily gripped the bars. "Leave him alone!!" she screamed.

Two nearby prison guards hastily approached the cell, "She's talking!"

"That guy in there must be the one she was coming to break out."

Zoe backed away from the bars. In that moment, she realized the mistake she had just made.

The guards peered into her cell. "So are you ready to tell us your name?"

Zoe said nothing.

"Come on, if you don't tell us anything we're going to assume our suspicions are correct."

"Are you part of that assassins' guild?" the other guard asked. "Is that why you're not telling us anything?"

Zoe's heart rate increased. She was desperately trying to come up with a way to get out of the situation, but was simultaneously coming to the realization that she was trapped. The only way for her to survive would be to tell them. "I came here to rescue Roshan Portner," she finally said.

The guards were stunned by this sudden confession. "There, see?" one of them said. "It's easier when you just work with us. But an attempted prison break carries a hefty sentence. You're going to be in here for a while. In the meantime, we'll get you some food and a change of clothes. Sound good?"

Zoe didn't reply. Her mind was focused on the distant sound of Roshan's torment in the room down the hall.

"All we need now is your name," the other guard told her.

Again, there was no response as she tried to hear what was being said in the interrogation room.

"Don't clam up on us now," the first guard said sternly. "If you don't give us a name, we're not getting you anything. You'll starve long before the sentence is up."

Zoe looked at him. Hesitating at first, she at last confessed. "My name is Zoe Quinn. Please, tell my father to stop what he's doing. I need to talk to him."

Chapter 20: Reflections Of The Past (Part III)

The teenage boy found friendship. In the years following that night at the ball, he spent much of his time with Vera. Eventually, they were seeing each other nearly every day. As they got older and experienced more together, they grew closer. Soon, their relationship evolved beyond that of simple friendship.

The teenage boy was finally happy again. He no longer feared going out into the city streets. In fact, he and Vera would often take long walks together. She admired his generosity as he stopped to give something to each of the beggars they encountered along the way. He simply didn't care for the money; it brought him nothing. Vera had become more valuable to him than any amount of material wealth. The teenage boy discovered love.

Chapter 21: The Sting Of Betrayal

The guards walked beside Zoe, leading her down the cellblock, holding her by her arms to prevent her from running. They reached a pair of doors guarded by two Knowms. From the confines of the room ahead, she could clearly hear the horrific sounds of Roshan's torment.

"Halt," one of the Knowms ordered. "If you wish to conduct an interrogation, you will have to use the other room. This room is currently occupied."

"I'm aware," the guard on Zoe's left replied, "but we're not here to conduct an interrogation. It turns out that this girl is Lord Quinn's adopted daughter. The one who went missing."

"In that case," the Knowm answered, "hand her over to us. We will take her inside." The guards complied, briefly explaining how she had been discovered the night before.

Zoe was extremely nervous. She hadn't spoken to her adoptive father in years; there was no telling how he would react to what she had done since she ran away. *I need to stay calm. This isn't going to be easy, but it looks like my only chance of saving Roshan's life.* The Knowms took her inside.

As she entered the room, she saw Roshan sitting in a chair at a desk, facing away from her toward a man in a red cloak seated on the opposite side. The room was dimly lit by a single lamp resting on the desk near the mysterious cloaked figure. Standing on both sides of the door were two more Knowms. Then Zoe saw him not far to her left: Lord Javan Quinn. Everyone in the room but the highly disoriented Roshan turned and faced her as she walked through the door, the two Knowms releasing their grip on her arms. They closed the door behind her.

Lord Quinn's eyes widened and the entire room fell silent. "Zoe," he gasped. "What are you doing here?" Hearing this,

Roshan gradually turned to see her. Blood slowly trickled from his lips down his chin, his left eye blackened from the brutal beatings he'd endured. Zoe was horrified at the sight but quickly offered him a soft smile, as if to tell him he would be alright.

The smile vanished as quickly as it had appeared when she turned to face Lord Quinn. His eyes stared into hers, paralyzing her with his cutting gaze. Unable to find the appropriate words with which to reply to his inquiry, she stood speechless.

“She was discovered last night attempting to infiltrate the prison,” one of the Knowms explained. “She initially refused to provide the guards with adequate information; however, she at last revealed her name and intention to free the prisoner, Roshan Portner, moments ago.”

“I see,” Lord Quinn muttered. He chewed his bottom lip for a few seconds before sharply commanding, “Knowms! Leave at once.”

“Yes sir!” the Knowms replied in unison, filing out of the room. Lord Quinn slowly approached Zoe, never taking his eyes off of hers for even a second. Roshan and the man in the red cloak watched in silence, both of them remaining completely motionless.

Lord Quinn stood over Zoe, wearing full body armor, lacking only a helmet, with a scarlet cape drooping from his shoulders. A mighty sword was sheathed by his side, the hilt encrusted with diamonds, rubies, and emeralds. In spite of her determination to mask her fear, she trembled slightly as she looked up at him.

“Is the information I have just received accurate?” he calmly asked.

“Yes,” Zoe answered. “This man is my friend. Let him go. I don't appreciate what you're doing to him.”

Lord Quinn smiled. “Interesting... you don't ‘appreciate’ what I'm doing. Would you care to know what I do not ‘appreciate?’” There was a painful silence before Lord Quinn suddenly screamed,

“Traitors!” sending chills down the spines of everyone in the room. He turned his back to Zoe and took a few steps. “If this man is indeed your friend, I can only assume that you’ve been associating with the Spades.”

“I am a Spade,” Zoe replied. “Let him go. Take me instead.”

Lord Quinn stood for a moment, absorbing the words. He turned back to her. “All this time, I had believed that something absolutely dreadful had happened to you. That perhaps you had fallen into the unforgiving hands of one of my enemies. Now I learn the truth. You’re nothing more than a backstabbing traitor. I do not have the words to properly express my disgust.”

“Traitor, huh?!” Zoe suddenly retaliated in a fit of rage. “Kind of like how you’ve betrayed everyone in Aria for your stupid power trip?! I found out what you were doing and I ran away. I don’t want to be part of it.”

“If you do not wish to be part of it,” he replied, “then why did you join the Spades, hm?”

“Because you’re insane!” she retaliated. “You don’t even care about all the innocent people you’re running over, just so you can satisfy your fat ego! You’re not even my real father! I have no obligation to side with you! I owe you nothing!”

“Shut your mouth,” he ordered, seething.

Zoe snapped. “Fuck you!!”

“Language!” Lord Quinn barked.

“Shut up!” Zoe screamed. “Why should I even listen to you?! You don’t care about me! All you care about is that fucking disk!!!” She lowered her arms. “Let’s see you snake your way out of this one! Umbra sentis ampelos!” Blinded by anger, Zoe had forgotten that she was past her conjuring limit and much too drained to perform the spell. Nothing happened as she threw her arms into the air, leaving her completely defenseless. *No, no!! Dammit, how could I be so stupid?!*

Lord Quinn softly shook his head in disapproval, the fury still apparent in his eyes. “This will not do,” he muttered. Pointing at her with his right index finger, he shouted, “*Umbra immobilis mutus!*” Feeling a brief shock, Zoe found that she was unable to move or speak.

Lord Quinn approached her as he had before, the tranquility returning to his presence. He looked into her eyes. “If you wish to be my enemy, then I will treat you as such.” He turned to the man in the red cloak. “Move the prisoner here. I want her to see this.”

“Of course, sir,” the man replied, getting up from his seat and walking around the desk. Grabbing Roshan’s chair, he dragged him across the floor into Zoe’s line of sight.

First looking down at Roshan, then back to Zoe, Lord Quinn smiled. “Are you prepared to see how I deal with my enemies?” Zoe’s heart was racing. She knew what he was about to do, but was completely helpless to say or do anything about it. In her thoughts she was screaming wildly, trying with every fiber of her being to move. Despite her efforts, she remained completely still and silent, with no choice but to watch what was about to take place.

Roshan gasped as Lord Quinn unsheathed his sword. Leaning down to eye level with the fear-stricken Roshan, he quietly warned, “Resistance will merely result in a slower, and far more agonizing, death.” After slowly backing away, Lord Quinn swung his sword in a showboating fashion. “Prepare yourself.”

Roshan looked at Zoe, “You did all you could,” he said, “and for that I’m truly thankf—” Lord Quinn thrust the blade deep into Roshan’s stomach as he screamed in anguish. It was a hideous sight to behold as blood poured from the gaping wound. Swiftly removing the sword, Lord Quinn stabbed him again in his heart, this time twisting the blade slightly, once it was buried inside his skin.

As Roshan let out his final bloodcurdling scream, Lord Quinn removed the sword. He slowly walked back to where Zoe stood,

leaning down to whisper in her ear, “Perhaps you should take some time to reconsider your alignment. Umbra somnus!” Zoe suddenly lost consciousness and collapsed. Catching her with his free arm, Lord Quinn gently laid her on the stone floor.

“Pardon my criticism sir,” the man in the red cloak said, “but are you sure it was wise to kill our prisoner? He was our best chance at locating the disk fragment.”

“There was no sense in wasting any more of our time with that fool,” Lord Quinn replied. He looked down at Zoe, “Her betrayal was a blessing in disguise. Thanks to her actions, I now find myself with a far more substantial source of information.”

Chapter 22: A Plan Of Action

“That was incredible!” Lucas excitedly commented as Iris shook the hands of the thankful citizens of Azure.

“We can’t thank you enough for what you’ve done!” one man told her.

“I must admit, I never intended to fight,” Iris humbly replied. “I was only defending my friend.” She turned to Lucas, the grateful crowd continuing to shower her with praise. “I still do not approve of the action you took,” she asserted. “However... I suppose the outcome negates my opinion on the matter. That being said, I would advise that you work on your aim and conjuring speed before rushing into any more battles.”

Before Lucas could reply they heard a familiar voice approaching from the western road. “What happened?!” The two turned their heads to see Hagan quickly making his way through the crowd toward them.

“We’re not entirely sure ourselves,” Iris told him. “Lucas and I heard the explosions while we were practicing conjuring. We arrived to find five mysterious men terrorizing the city. Despite my insistence to the contrary, Lucas attempted to attack the group, leaving me no choice but to fight. It appears today was my lucky day, as I somehow managed to defeat all of them without taking any damage myself.”

“Damn,” Hagan remarked. He observed the corpses and ruined buildings in the surrounding area. “Any idea who they were or why they were doing this?”

“Unfortunately not,” Iris responded.

“Actually,” Lucas interjected, “I heard the big guy screaming, ‘Where’s the disk fragment’ before he threw that last fireball.”

Hagan was perplexed. “Disk fragment?”

Lucas nodded as Iris quickly interrupted, "Pardon my suspicion, but I believe this may be another manifestation of your delusion."

"No, he really said it!" Lucas replied with obvious frustration. "Ask any of these people!"

Hagan scratched his head. "Wait, wait... back up a bit. What's this disk fragment?"

Focused on proving his story, Lucas turned to a nearby man. "Excuse me, sir," he began, "Did you hear what that large man was yelling as he rampaged through town?"

The man nodded. "Yeah... something about a disk. I was just coming out of the barbershop when I saw him and his cronies beating up a Knowm. That's when the big guy started throwing those huge fireballs at buildings and killing anyone who got in his way."

"Thanks," said Lucas, quickly turning back to Iris who was clearly surprised by what the man had to say. "Believe me now?" Iris was speechless.

Still quite confused with the situation, Hagan blurted out, "Are you gonna let me in on this or what?!"

Iris thought for a moment. "Let's return to my house and discuss this further." She looked at Hagan. "Lucas can provide details along the way."

As the three walked back to Iris's house, Lucas told Hagan about his encounter with the old man on the outskirts of Cymbeline. He carefully explained all of the events which occurred afterward, eventually leading up to when he awoke on Iris's couch. Hagan seemed just as baffled by the story as Iris had when she initially heard it. Yet he appeared to be a bit more open-minded about it, likely from hearing what the man in downtown Azure had said.

They soon arrived at Iris's house. As they each took a seat at the kitchen table, Iris spoke. "From what I've gathered, we're to assume that today's attack on Azure was related to this disk fragment." Lucas gave a nod.

"Wait," Hagan interrupted, "didn't that guy say that they were beating up a Known? I thought the Knowms were the ones who were trying to find the disk... so what's the deal with the guys that were in town today?"

Lucas shrugged. "Maybe they were part of some third group we're not aware of."

"It's possible," said Iris. "However, that explanation is based solely on speculation."

Hagan took out his flask and removed the lid. "Well, do you have a better theory, science queen?"

There was a pause. "No... not particularly." Iris replied sheepishly.

Hagan took a swig. "So what's the plan, Lucas?"

"I'm not really sure," Lucas responded. "I don't know if there's anything we can do."

"Well we have to do something," Hagan told him. "From what we saw today, things are about to start heating up. It sounds like an awful lot of people want to get their hands on both of those fragments. We know this much, so we can't just kick back and let the world fall apart in front of our faces. Someone's going to end up with that 'Damiano's Disk' thing eventually, and if what Lucas said is true, whoever gets this source of unstoppable power is going to be calling the shots from now on. Do you want it to be Lord Quinn or some shadowy guild?"

"Are you implying that we hunt the fragments for ourselves?" Iris inquired, raising an eyebrow.

Hagan shrugged. “All I’m saying is that if we had that power, we’d be able to toast all of the remaining monsters and restore Aria to the way it was before all of this crazy crap started happening.”

“That’s a good point,” Lucas answered. “But how are we going to do that? Lord Quinn has way too many people on his side and I doubt I’ll ever run across the Spades again. Plus, Zoe said that the Spades were only protecting the fragment from the Knowms; she didn’t say anything about them trying to get the power from the temple.”

“Of course she didn’t,” Hagan argued. “You wouldn’t have handed it over if she would have told you they want it for the same reason as the Knowms, now would you?”

Lucas’s expression went blank. *He’s right... I never thought about it that way.*

After taking another swig, Hagan went on. “I’m willing to bet whoever’s on the top rung in the Spades would do the same thing Lord Quinn’s planning to do if they had both of those fragments. I mean, who wouldn’t want a shot at ruling the universe? Even if that girl you spoke to thinks they’re the good guys, I doubt whoever’s in charge is much different than Quinn.”

“Pardon me,” Iris interrupted, “but I simply don’t have the time to participate in this suggested endeavor. I’m certain a phenomenal number of injuries have occurred from the attack downtown. My presence as an alchemist is greatly needed.”

“You’re not the only one in town,” Hagan argued. “Besides, we know that the whole thing has something to do with Damiano’s Disk. Do you really want to risk letting something like that happen again?”

The room was quiet for a short period as they each went over the situation in their heads. Breaking the silence, Iris spoke. “Very well. I suppose I can’t merely ignore it.”

“So you’re on board?” Hagan requested. She responded with a single nod. Hagan smiled. “Good. Now all we need is a plan of action.”

Iris thought for a moment. “Lucas, you had mentioned previously that you wished for us to revisit the gateway located in the cave near the area in which Hagan found you. Perhaps we could start by exploring this ‘In Between.’ I’m quite curious to know what it’s like in another dimension.”

“There’s an idea,” Hagan remarked. “I say we go for it.”

Lucas looked toward the window. *I don’t know about this. I need to get home to Grandpa as soon as possible. But on the other hand, this could be my only chance at stopping these monsters for good.*

It was then that his grandfather’s words echoed in his head: “I’m a grown man. I don’t need protecting.”

Lucas got up from the table. “Alright, let’s do it. I’ll need you to show me where you found me, Hagan. I’ll try to find the cave from there.”

“Hold on,” Iris interrupted. “We’re not ready to leave quite yet. I suggest that we wait until tomorrow morning.”

“Tomorrow morning?!” Hagan exclaimed. “Why?!”

“It’s highly probable that we will encounter monsters along the way,” Iris explained. “Lucas requires further training before he is ready for combat. With his remaining injuries, he will need to be fully capable of defending himself in the event that we are somehow separated. This will also allow time for me to pack some essential items.”

Hagan rolled his eyes. “Please, I go out there all the time by myself with nothing but a flask and my trusty bow. We’ll be fine.”

“Perhaps in the forest,” Iris replied, “but there’s no way for us to know the dangers which lurk in the In Between. We will need to

be fully rested and prepared for anything we may encounter. Traveling to another dimension is not a decision to be taken lightly.”

Hagan put the lid back on his flask. “Yeah, I guess...” He looked at Lucas. “If that’s the plan, you’d better get practicing.”

Chapter 23: The Invasion/To The In Between

The three made plans to meet at the western border of Azure at 8am the following morning for their journey to the In Between. Shortly afterward, Hagan went home while Lucas spent the rest of the day training in the backyard with the aid of Iris. He threw orb after orb, rigorously honing his aim and conjuring speed. Once he had become well-adjusted to the process, Iris decided that he was finally ready to learn a healing spell.

Using The Basics of Light Magic, Lucas found that he was able to accomplish this task with much less effort, successfully healing his remaining injuries.

“I did it!” he excitedly proclaimed. “I should have learned this one first. That was way easier than casting the orb.”

“It only seems that way,” Iris explained. “Learning how to conjure is one of the most difficult steps in using magic. Now that you’re familiar with the basic process, you’ll find that successfully performing beginner spells requires considerably less effort. Once you’ve mastered the fundamentals of your element, you’ll be ready to advance to the intermediate level.”

Lucas was perplexed. “Intermediate level?”

“Yes,” said Iris. “It’s the next tier of elemental conjuring. However, learning intermediate spells will be a nearly impossible endeavor until you’ve mastered the beginner level. I highly suggest taking the time to learn as many spells from this book as possible before attempting intermediate conjuring. Honestly, you’ve been learning exceptionally quickly. I doubt you’ll have much tr—”

“Look out!” Lucas shouted.

Iris turned to see an imp peering at them from the corner of her house. She gasped, quickly conjuring an ice orb. “Glacies

orbis!” The moment it materialized, the imp darted out of their view.

“That can’t be good...” said Lucas.

The ice orb Iris had conjured quickly vanished. She took a few steps toward her house, inspecting around the corner to be sure the creature had gone. “How is this possible?” she wondered bewilderedly.

Lucas followed closely behind her. “I saw a lot of dead Knowms when we were in town earlier,” he said. “Maybe they’ve all been killed.”

Iris’s face turned pale. “Then Azure is completely defenseless.” Hurriedly making her way to the door, she glanced back at Lucas. “I’m afraid we’ll have to conclude our session. We need to go indoors now.”

Once they were back inside, they sat down on the couch in the living room. Lucas placed the book on the coffee table. “What are we going to do?”

“I don’t know,” Iris replied. “Without any protection, Azure will be entirely overrun by monsters in a matter of days, or even hours. Our city is already in shambles; this development could very well put Azure into a state of total chaos.”

Neither of them said a word for a short duration. Lucas quietly used his ability. Iris was deeply afraid, though she appeared to be rather calm on the surface. *She’s hiding her fear. Probably trying to keep me from freaking out. I guess she forgot that I’m used to living in these conditions... But she definitely has every right to be afraid. Her life is about to change drastically. It’s a shame.*

Breaking the silence, Lucas spoke. “I guess we have no choice now.” She looked at him, her forehead crinkled. “About the disk,” he went on. “Hagan was right, it could be our only chance at getting rid of these monsters and returning Aria back to normal.

We know Lord Quinn will only make things worse if he's the one to complete it, and we still don't know the full story on the Spades. As we've learned today, there could be a bunch of other groups and people going after it that we don't even know about. If this source of unstoppable power that Damiano's Disk is supposed to unlock falls into the wrong hands, things are going to get much uglier for Aria. The only way to be sure its power isn't abused is to obtain it ourselves."

"In theory, yes," Iris responded. "Realistically, however, it seems to be quite an impossible task. Though I'm willing to employ the endeavor... I fear that we're getting in over our heads."

"All we can do is try," Lucas told her. "We know things aren't going to get any better if we don't."

After thinking things over, Iris stood up. "Well, considering that our training session has met an early end, let's begin assembling necessities for our expedition tomorrow morning." She walked toward the stairs. "I'll fetch my old backpack from college. We can use it to store food and any other supplies we may need."

The pair got to work, gathering several essentials for their journey the following morning. As night fell, they periodically heard the sounds of various creatures making their way into town. Several times that night, Lucas had to repeat the process he had become all too well adjusted to at his own home when the pair were awoken by bizarre noises emanating from just outside the house. Neither of them slept well.

When morning had arrived, they got dressed and headed out. Lucas wore the clothes he had arrived in, freshly washed from the night before, with the addition of the scarf and gloves Iris had given him. The rip on his pants was now neatly sewn. He carried the backpack stocked with food and various other items with his sword secured and sheathed on his waist. Iris was dressed in a light-blue bliaut with a satchel slung over her shoulder containing various potions.

They did not walk far before encountering two imps, though they quickly defeated the enemies without trouble. Walking a little farther, they saw Hagan waiting for them in the distance at the Azure city limit. He was wearing a thick dark-green coat with black pants, equipped with nothing but a bow and a quiver of arrows on his back and a flask on his waist. On the ground beside him was a strange-looking corpse. "Looks like Hagan's already had an encounter of his own," Lucas pointed out.

As they approached Hagan, he called out to them, "Damn monsters! The Knowms were wiped out yesterday and now the blasted things are crawling all over town!"

"We're aware," Iris replied. "Lucas and I discussed the matter further, and have concluded that collecting both fragments of Damiano's Disk will be essential in restoring peace to Aria."

"Then we agree," Hagan responded. "Well, let's go get us a disk."

Iris briefly examined Hagan. "Is that all you're bringing?"

He nodded. "It's all I need!" Iris shook her head in disapproval, but said nothing.

Lucas looked down at the odd corpse. "What the heck is that thing?"

Hagan shrugged. "Ugly." Lucas chuckled at the remark, causing a grin to appear on Hagan's face. He looked at Iris. "See? Humor. He gets it."

She rolled her eyes. "Don't you find humor to be a bit inappropriate at this time?"

Hagan glanced at Lucas, raising an eyebrow, then looked back at Iris. "Is there an appropriate time with you? You should let me know, because I sure as hell wasn't aware." She shook her head, a look of frustration on her face. Hagan turned to the snow blanketed forest in the distance. "Well, are we ready to do this or

what? We've got a good amount of walking to do before we get to the spot where I found Lucas."

The trio walked toward the forest. "So, what's the plan after we get to the In Between?" Lucas inquired.

"I suggest that we explore," Iris replied. "You said that the Spades operated from the In Between, correct? Perhaps we will run into another one of their members, or better yet, we may discover their base. Though, admittedly, I find the chances of the latter to be highly improbable, considering that the Knowms have been unable to locate it themselves despite their knowledge of the dimension."

Hagan looked over at Lucas. "How about this... If we run into any Spades, you tell them you helped them out with the disk fragment a few days ago and we're all looking to join them after what you learned. Then we can find their base in no time."

"Hypothetically," Iris commented. "I feel that they will be a bit more protective of their base than simply allowing us to visit due to our interest in their organization. I'm almost certain many others have attempted to do the same."

"Maybe," said Hagan, "but Lucas actually knows two of them by name. Plus, they told him stuff most people don't know. It should give us a leg up over the majority."

"What about the fragment the Knowms are holding onto?" Lucas asked.

"I guess we'll just have to cross that bridge when we get there," Hagan answered. "If we get lucky and are able to go undercover with the Spades, we might learn something useful."

"But what if we don't find any Spades?" Lucas pointed out. "Zoe told me that the In Between is huge. The chances of us running into them have got to be pretty low."

"We'll figure something out," Hagan assured him.

“This is merely a starting point,” Iris added. “Before we have any feasible chance of acquiring both fragments, we will need as much knowledge as we can possibly obtain. I have gathered that the In Between plays a key role in the recent events occurring in Aria. Exploring the dimension is a good way to commence our mission. Regardless of whether we meet any Spades or not, we are sure to learn something along the way.”

Hagan quickly ducked as a thick shard of ice zoomed over his head.

“What was that?!” Lucas exclaimed.

Hagan turned his head and pointed to the distance. “Ice ladies!”

Lucas and Iris looked to see three rather tall creatures hastily approaching them. They looked like human females, only they were made entirely of ice. The frozen ladies kicked their feet as though they were ice-skating, propelling them through the snow at great speed. One of them drew back its arm. “Watch out!” Hagan yelled as the ice woman flung her arm forward, sending another sharp shard zooming in their direction. Lucas dove to the side, barely dodging the projectile.

“Ignis sterno!” Hagan bellowed, thrusting his arms toward the charging enemies. As he did, a broad array of flames burst from his open palms, engulfing the oncoming threat. All three ice ladies quickly melted as the fire consumed them. “Those things piss me off,” he grumbled as he resumed walking.

“I fear how their presence will affect Azure,” Iris mentioned as Lucas got to his feet, brushing the snow off of his shirt and pant legs.

“They aren’t even the worst ones,” Hagan replied. “You should’ve seen the thing that attacked Lucas.”

The three continued walking and soon reached the forest. “We still got a ways to go before we get to the spot,” Hagan

informed as they entered the wooded area. “Be sure to keep your eyes peeled, this place is crawling wit—”

“Aaahh!!” Iris shrieked as she was hoisted into the air. Looking up, Lucas and Hagan saw one of the tall blue hominoid creatures with piercing yellow eyes resting on a tree branch high above them. One of the six slimy tentacles attached to its back were wrapped around Iris’s arms and stomach. Her feet kicked wildly as she screamed, desperately trying to spread her arms apart to loosen the creature’s grip.

“It’s one of the things that attacked me!” Lucas yelled, drawing his sword.

“Ignis orbis!” Hagan conjured a fire orb as the creature threw Iris into him, knocking him to the ground and sending Iris skidding across the snow for several feet. As Hagan hit the ground, the orb disappeared.

Lucas gasped. He looked up at the creature. *Looks like it’s up to me. I hope this goes better than the last time I ran into one of these.* He outstretched his free arm, facing his palm upward and shouted, “Lumen orbis!” A light orb formed in his palm. He aimed carefully, trying his best to remember everything Iris had taught him. The moment he was about to throw the orb, he was suddenly slapped across the face by one of the tentacles. He stumbled backward, only to be tripped by another of the monster’s strange appendages. He fell to the ground, the impact causing his orb to disappear.

As the heroes stumbled to their feet, the beast began hastily climbing down the tree trunk. Hagan reached for his bow. “Get it before it reaches the ground!” he ordered as he grabbed an arrow from his quiver. Iris and Lucas got to their feet as Hagan fired the arrow. It plunged into the tree trunk, hitting just above the beast’s head. “Damn!” Hagan grumbled, reaching for another arrow.

The monster had nearly reached the end of its descent when Iris conjured an icicle missile. “Glacies stiria telum!” At last reaching the ground, the creature ran toward them at great speed. It

ducked to avoid Hagan's second arrow as Iris sent her icy projectile hurling through the air. The icicle sliced into the creature's stomach, causing it to let out an eerie high-pitched cry of pain. Despite this, it continued to advance toward them.

"It's gonna take more than that," Hagan exclaimed as he aimed a third arrow. "These things are tough as hell!" Releasing the arrow, it plunged into the monster's left shoulder. Again, it shrieked in misery but did not slow its pace.

Iris quickly stepped backward as the monster approached. "Our attacks do not appear to hamper its progress!"

"No shit!!" Hagan barked as he loaded a fourth arrow.

"Lumen orbis!" Lucas conjured another light orb as the beast leaped into the air, landing inches in front of Hagan. He fell to the ground, dropping his bow as it began viciously smashing him repeatedly with all six of its bizarre appendages. Lucas hurled the light orb, smashing the creature in its back.

"Glacies stiria telum!" Before it could turn around, Iris impaled it with another icicle missile, causing the monster to stumble.

"Ignis orbis!!" Taking advantage of this, Hagan spiked a fire orb directly into the creature's face. It staggered aimlessly and fell to the ground, continuing to screech loudly. Lucas dashed toward the east, finishing it off with a thrust of his blade.

Hagan got to his feet. He looked at Iris. "See? Ice ladies don't look so bad now, do they?"

Lucas pulled his sword from the monster's corpse. "Is everyone alright?"

"I'm fine," Iris responded. "Hagan seems to have suffered some minor injuries." She opened her satchel. "Fortunately, it seems that none of the bottles were damaged when I was thrown. Allow me a moment to find an appropriate potion."

Hagan shook his head. “Nah, I’m fine. Let’s just keep moving.”

“Are you certain?” Iris asked.

“Wait,” Lucas interrupted, “I learned a healing spell last night. I can try it out if you want. It worked well on me.”

“I’ll be alright,” Hagan replied as he removed the lid from his flask. “I’ve got all the ‘potion’ I need right here.”

They advanced farther into the forest. Within minutes, they were confronted by another group of ice ladies. “Ignis sterno!” As before, the subzero dames proved to be no match for Hagan’s fire abilities. “Too easy,” he boasted as the icy foes melted.

“We’re encountering far more monsters than I had expected,” Iris commented.

Hagan took a drink from his flask. “I’ve been seeing more of them lately. I guess the Knowms are kicking it up a notch to discourage the competition.”

After much traveling and several encounters with imps, ice ladies, and another vicious blue hominoid, the group finally reached their destination. Lucas and Iris had acquired a few minor injuries during the fights, but Lucas’s newfound healing ability quickly restored them to health. Hagan, however, despite the fact that he now had several cuts and additional bruises, did not feel that he needed the assistance.

“Here we are,” Hagan announced. “This is where I found you, Lucas. Now it’s up to you to find that cave.” Lucas nodded and searched the area, looking for recognizable landmarks.

“Hagan,” said Iris, “are you absolutely certain you do not require healing?”

“Yes,” he replied in a slightly annoyed tone. “I’m fine.”

Iris raised an eyebrow. “The blood seeping from your neck tells a different story.” She dug through her satchel. “I insist that you drink a Medela Potion.”

“I’m pretty sure it’s this way,” Lucas announced, pointing with his index finger.

“No time,” Hagan told Iris as he walked over to Lucas. “Alright, lead the way, Lucas.” Iris closed her satchel, noticeably troubled by Hagan’s refusal.

The trio walked a little farther to find themselves at the mouth of a cave. “I think this is the one,” Lucas said as he removed the backpack. He opened it up and searched its contents.

“What’re you looking for?” Hagan queried.

Lucas pulled out a lantern. “This. It’s pretty dark in there. Now I’ve just got to find the matches...”

“I’ve got it,” said Hagan. “Give it here.” Lucas handed him the lantern. Holding it with one hand, Hagan took his index finger and placed it near the tip of the wick. “Ignis parva flamma.” Instantly, the wick was lit. “That ought to do it.” After closing the backpack and slinging it across his back, Lucas took the lantern. The trio entered the cave.

Chapter 24: Through The Threshold

Lucas, Iris, and Hagan crept through the icy cave's main passage. Waving the lantern from side to side, Lucas observed the corridor. He looked down at the tiny sharp stalagmites scattered throughout the area. *It's a wonder I didn't trip and fall onto those things when I went through here the other day.*

"How far in is this thing, anyway?" Hagan asked.

"I'm not really sure," Lucas replied. "It felt like I was walking forever the first time I was here... but then again, I didn't have a lantern."

The trio walked for several minutes before reaching a vast room. In its center was the swirling multicolored vortex from which Lucas had emerged. Surrounding the portal was a stone frame nearly identical to the one Lucas had observed in Roshan's Café. "This is it," he informed his comrades. Iris and Hagan were instantly captivated by the spectacle.

"What a fascinating anomaly!" Iris noted.

"Yeah, that's something else alright," Hagan affirmed. He turned to Lucas. "So, how does it work?"

"We just have to step inside," Lucas replied. "The trip through the gateway is a little scary, but it doesn't last too long."

Hagan was intrigued. "Scary?"

Lucas nodded. "It's hard to explain, but you'll see what I mean." They stood in front of the portal for a short duration, gazing at its chromatic display. Lucas took a step closer to it. "I guess I'll go first."

"We're right behind you," Hagan assured him. Lucas put out the lantern and returned it to the backpack. Slingsing it over his shoulders, he took a few seconds to prepare himself before

jumping into the portal. Once he had disappeared, Hagan turned to Iris. “Ladies first.”

She examined the gateway. “Very well. I’m uncertain of what to expect... which admittedly makes me nervous.”

Hagan rolled his eyes. “You’ll be fine; just do it.” After a brief period of hesitation, Iris entered the vortex. She was quickly followed by Hagan.

* * * *

Iris screamed, flailing wildly as she was pulled down the kaleidoscopic tunnel. Hagan, while startled, was not quite as shaken by the journey. Observing her visible state of panic in the distance ahead of him, he chuckled to himself. It took several seconds before they reached the opposite end of the portal.

Lucas stood by the vortex, awaiting the arrival of his companions. Iris emerged first. Her eyes were clenched shut and her lips trembled, her face somewhat obscured by her messy hair. Hagan showed up next, laughing hysterically the moment he arrived. “I’ve never seen you flip out like that!”

“That was not funny,” Iris snapped. “I found that journey to be unbearably—” there was a pause as her eyes opened. “This... is the In Between?” Lucas nodded. Iris ran her hands through her hair, attempting to tame it as she viewed the colorless landscape around them. “Incredible...”

Hagan plucked a blade of grass. Holding it inches from his face, he closely examined the plant’s thin white outline, the remainder solid black. “Weird...”

Lucas smirked. “Wait until you see the water.”

“It seems to be nighttime here,” Iris pointed out, observing the starry sky above.

“No, it’s always like that,” Lucas explained. “What’s even stranger is that it doesn’t get darker or brighter wherever you go.”

“Interesting...” Iris responded, a puzzled look on her face.

“Don’t try to make sense of it,” Lucas mentioned, “it’ll only give you a headache.”

“Well, I suppose we should begin exploring,” Iris suggested, taking her first few steps away from the vortex. “In which direction should we venture?”

Lucas looked into the distance. “Well... I don’t really know. I doubt I’ll be able to find my way back to where I first showed up. I just followed Zoe the whole way here.”

Hagan turned his attention to the massive mountains bordering the field. “There’s a valley between those mountains over there. Let’s see where it takes us.”

As they walked, Iris glanced back at the portal. “It’s imperative that we remember which direction we came from. We cannot afford to get lost.”

Lowering his flask from his lips, Hagan shoved the container in Iris’s direction. “You need a drink.”

“I most certainly do not,” she replied. “Nor do you for that matter. We are exploring an entirely new dimension. You need to stay focused, Hagan.”

With a sigh, Hagan put the lid back on his flask. “You’re just like my mother.”

They traveled through the valley, marveling at the peculiar scenery as they moved. “You said this place is some kind of afterworld, right Lucas?” Hagan inquired.

“Not exactly,” Lucas replied. “Zoe said it was a middle ground between the Netherworld and our dimension. Honestly, I’m not sure I totally understand it myself. “

All three of them jumped as a small glowing ball zoomed past them. They quickly turned around, but saw no one. “Who threw that?!” Hagan yelled. There was no reply.

“Strange...” Iris said softly, scanning the surrounding area for some sort of clue as to what they had just witnessed.

“Maybe that was a soul,” Lucas presumed.

Hagan resumed walking. “It could’ve been anything,” he said. “Just keep your eyes open.”

Eventually the group reached the end of the valley and found themselves at the edge of a broad river. The gray water rushed loudly as Lucas browsed the bank, trying to find a suitable crossing point. “Looks like a dead end,” he finally admitted.

“That’s unfortunate,” said Iris. “Oh well, I suppose we’ll have to investigate another area.”

“What?!” Hagan interrupted. “It’s just water! Let’s swim across.”

Iris shook her head. “It’s too risky. Not only does the river appear to have a very strong current, but we’re unsure as to what kind of creatures may inhabit its water.”

“I doubt there’s anything in there,” Hagan answered. “I haven’t seen any monsters the entire time we’ve been here... And Lucas said he didn’t see anything the last time either.”

“Perhaps it’s only coincidence,” Iris asserted. “We cannot afford to take such a risk based solely on speculation.”

“Alright,” Hagan finally responded, his disappointment apparent. “Let’s head back then.”

The three turned toward the valley and began walking back to the field they had arrived in. Hagan sighed. “It’s starting to look like we’re not gonna learn very much from this place.”

“Not necessarily,” Iris replied, “there is much we have yet to survey.”

“Look!” Lucas exclaimed, pointing to the distance at three small glowing objects approaching rapidly.

“Ignis orbis!” Hagan shouted, conjuring a fire orb.

“What are you doing?!” Iris cried.

Hagan glanced at her. “Relax, I’m just getting ready in case they’re hostile.” The tiny luminous spheres quickly increased altitude and shot off into the sky, disappearing within seconds. Hagan’s orb vanished. “I guess they don’t like us.”

“They appeared to be identical to the entity we observed earlier,” Iris noted. “Perhaps Lucas’s assumption was correct. It’s highly likely that they are souls, especially taking into consideration what we know about this dimension.”

Hagan looked over at Lucas. “Didn’t you say the Knowms somehow make them into monsters?”

Lucas nodded. “That’s how I understood it.”

Without warning, the entire area surrounding the trio began to turn white. Hagan’s eyes widened. “Alright, now what’s happening?”

Lucas’s head darted around the quickly whitening landscape. “I don’t know! This definitely didn’t happen the last time I was here!”

As the scenery became solid white, Iris started to tremble. “It seems that we’re being transferred into some sort of void!”

Hagan grabbed his bow. “Get ready, I’ve got a bad feeling.”

Chapter 25: Reflections Of The Past (Part IV)

The young man was in love. It was the night of his birthday. Hand in hand with Vera, the pair was on their way home from the opening night of a spectacular play. While he enjoyed the show, it was the furthest thing from his mind in that moment. This night was going to be the night he asked her to marry him.

The weather appeared to be in hard contrast with the young man's upbeat attitude as rain rushed from the gray skies above. Unfortunately, neither of them had brought an umbrella and still had a good distance left to walk. They quickly ran to a small overhang on a nearby building to wait out the storm.

The city streets quickly became vacant as the rain thickened. The two stood under the shelter for quite some time, though neither of them were bothered by this predicament. As they kissed, he decided it would be a good time to at last reveal his true feelings. He reached into his pocket for the ring but was unexpectedly shoved to the ground.

Clueless as to what had just taken place, the young man struggled to get onto his feet only to have his head viciously stomped into the cobblestone. Her screams of terror cut through him as he desperately tried to fight his delirious state. Turning his head, he saw two men dragging her into a nearby alley. One of the men glanced back at him, noticing he'd survived the assault.

The young man got to his feet and charged the attackers. As the first man covered her mouth and dragged her farther down the dark passageway, the second confronted the young man and swiftly gave him a harsh beating. The young man fell to the ground once more. He was losing consciousness quickly as he was stomped again and again. The final sounds he heard were her muffled, terrified screams as the first man barbarously ripped her clothing. With a devastating blow to the young man's head, he lost consciousness. That night would be the last time he saw her. Love was dead.

Chapter 26: The Lost Soul

The trio now found themselves surrounded by white. It was everywhere: below their feet, over their heads, and as far as the eye could see.

Hagan grabbed an arrow from his quiver. Following his lead, Lucas unsheathed his sword. *Zoe never said anything about a void. This is so strange... I can't tell where the ground ends and the rest begins!*

Iris frantically scanned the area. "Who or what is responsible for this?!" Her voice echoed as she spoke. After her words trailed off, there was silence.

"Show yourself!" Hagan exclaimed, his words ringing similarly to Iris's.

"Maybe we've stepped into some kind of trap?" Lucas suggested.

"Perhaps," Iris replied. "I would propose that we investigate this bizarre new area if I weren't so fearful of making any sudden movements."

"Ear me?" All three of them jolted as the mysterious voice spoke.

"Ear me?" Hagan repeated, puzzled.

It spoke again. "Ca... ou hea... e?"

Lucas scanned the void, attempting to locate the source of the noise. "Who are you?" he called out.

A few seconds passed before it returned once more. "Can you hear me?" it said, far more audibly than before.

"Yes," Lucas replied. "Who are you? Where are you?!"

“I am where you are,” it said. The trio was puzzled by this strange response.

“I don’t understand,” Iris replied. “What exactly do you mean?”

“You’re inside me,” it answered.

Hagan’s eyes widened. “Creepy.”

“So... you’re the void?” Lucas asked.

“I’m not a void,” the voice informed, “I’m a soul.”

There was another period of brief silence as the group contemplated this unexpected development. Hagan cleared his throat. “Let me get this straight. You’re a soul and we’re inside of you.”

“That’s correct,” it replied.

Iris stared into the blankness which surrounded them. “I would like to request an explanation as to why exactly you’ve chosen to place us ‘inside of you.’”

“Because I wanted to talk to you,” it responded. “The first living person I encountered was unresponsive when I tried to speak to them. That’s when I figured out that I could draw them inside of me by expanding myself. It proved to be the only way I could talk to them. I saw you, and decided to try again.”

“Let us go, we don’t have time for this!” Hagan barked.

“Why are you here?” it asked, ignoring Hagan’s demand.

Hesitating at first, Iris replied, “We’re on an expedition to gain knowledge of this dimension and its correlation with Damiano’s Disk. Perhaps you would be willing to assist us?”

“So you aren’t Spades?” it queried.

“Hold on,” Lucas interrupted, “you know about the Spades?”

“Yes,” it responded. “I’ve spoken to one of them before... They told me that I need to cross over to the Netherworld, but they didn’t seem to understand that I can’t.”

Lucas raised an eyebrow. “Why not?”

There was a pause before the voice replied. “I found myself in a rough patch in my life... I decided that I had had enough and... well, I hung myself. It was a horrible experience... but when the pain and fear had subsided, I started to see a bright light at the end of a tunnel... they always tell you, ‘go toward the light.’ But I was afraid... I didn’t know where it would take me or what would happen... so I thought, ‘what if I don’t go toward the light?’ So, I didn’t. The light slowly faded away... and that’s when I found myself here. I wandered for what seemed like an eternity. While I met other souls along the way, they were all just as confused about this place as I was. I learned that I could change my size and shape here... which is fun at first, I’ll admit. But the novelty faded. I soon felt as though I were missing out on something greater.”

The voice was silent for a few seconds. Then, it went on. “Eventually, I spotted a living person. I tried to communicate with them, but they were confused and unresponsive. I followed them around for a while, and soon figured out that I could speak to them in the same way we’re talking right now. When I finally managed to have my first conversation with them, I learned that they were a member of a group called the Spades. They told me all about their group, their purpose, and a man called ‘Lord Quinn.’ They said that they had arrived in this place, called the ‘In Between,’ through a portal from Aria. They went on to warn me of the green-cloaked men who wander this dimension called ‘Knowms.’ Apparently, these Knowms use forbidden magic to hunt and transform us souls into beasts, then enslave us to do their bidding back in Aria. I was told that I would only be safe from this fate if I crossed over to the Netherworld... but I think my chance has passed. I’m guessing it was at the end of the tunnel. I didn’t go... so now I’m stuck here. I can’t ‘just cross over.’ I have no idea where to go in order to get there. I’ve tried everything. I’ve even tried to go through some of

the portals I've seen Spades go in and out of... but they don't seem to work for me."

"I'm sorry to hear that," said Lucas as he sheathed his sword. *Sounds like this soul has been through a lot. I wonder how it feels...* He activated his ability. It was almost too much for him to bear as an intense feeling of despair and loneliness consumed him. He hastily deactivated his power. *The story seems to be genuine from what I can tell. I've never felt anything like that... so alone. So lost... yet it doesn't seem to show in the way this soul is speaking to us. The tone is so 'matter of fact.' It's almost as though they've accepted this as their permanent fate. This soul must have been trapped here for a long time to feel so hopeless.*

"Just how long have you been here?" Lucas asked.

"I'm not sure," it answered. "Time means nothing here. I can't tell how many days, weeks, months or years have passed. All I can tell you is that the year of my death was 2088... And there certainly weren't any 'Knowms,' 'Lord Quinn,' or monsters in the Aria I lived in."

"You've been deceased for hundreds of years," Iris informed. "The current year is 2591."

"2591?!" the voice gasped. "It's been that long already?!"

"I'm afraid so," Iris answered. "I'm certain there must be some method you can use to cross into the Netherworld. Perhaps one day you shall discover it... While I wish that my friends and I were able to assist you, our knowledge of this dimension and the Netherworld is very limited at best."

"No worries," the voice said. "I didn't expect you'd be able to help me anyway. No one seems to know the answer. But then again... everyone who does know has already crossed. I guess I'm just trapped here until I figure it out."

"That's too bad," Hagan commented as he put away his bow and returned the arrow to his quiver. "Look, we've really got to get

going. If you don't have anything to tell us about Damiano's Disk, let us out of here."

"The Spade I spoke to told me a little bit about that," it replied. "But first I want to know why you're chasing this thing."

"We want to use it to reverse what's happened to Aria," Lucas responded. "It's a mess back home. There are monsters everywhere. We know that the power it unlocks can be used to do some really destructive things, but we feel that the only way to stop it from being misused is to get it ourselves. We're not going to wait around for Lord Quinn to get his hands on it. He's responsible for the monster invasion, so we already know that whatever he has planned isn't going to be good."

"I see," said the voice. "In that case, I'll tell you what I know. The Spade I spoke to said this disk is the reason their group exists. Supposedly, this 'Lord Quinn' sent a group of men to the In Between to find the two pieces of Damiano's Disk. When they finally found the first half, one of them ran off with it and formed the Spades. From what I understand, Quinn's men eventually found the other half and are now at some sort of war with the Spades to get the first one back. I don't know many details outside of that. I'm assuming that these men are the 'Knowms' I was warned about."

"Interesting," Iris remarked. She turned to Lucas. "It appears that the Spades were initiated by one of Lord Quinn's former allies. It's now evident why their members are so knowledgeable of Quinn's inner workings." Iris looked back toward the void. "Thank you for the information. I'm certain it will prove to be highly beneficial in our pursuit."

"I wish you all the best of luck," said the voice.

Slowly, the landscape which had surrounded the trio prior to entering the white void reappeared. They looked up to see a small glowing ball quickly rise into the air and take off toward the horizon.

“That was strange,” Hagan declared.

“Indeed,” Iris agreed. “Fortunately, we’ve acquired useful information from the encounter.”

Lucas gazed into the distance, where the soul had flown out of visible range. *I hope they find their way out of here before any Knowms get ahold of them.*

“I guess I was right about the Spades,” Hagan asserted. “The guy who ran off with the fragment and started the group had probably figured out that Quinn was just going to use him. I’m guessing he was going to try to complete it himself before the Knowms found the other one.”

“It’s possible,” Iris replied. “However, it’s also possible that he truly intended to do nothing more than keep it out of Quinn’s grasp.”

“I guess,” said Hagan, “but I doubt it.”

Iris noticed Lucas staring off into the distance. “Lucas? Are you alright?”

He turned around. “Yeah. I was just thinking about what it must be like to be stuck here. I hope that soul finds their way to the Netherworld somehow.”

“I’m certain they will eventually,” Iris assured him.

Hagan started walking. “Let’s keep moving. I want to see what else we can find here.”

As the group hiked back toward the field, Iris pondered what the soul had told them. “I find it intriguing that the disk fragments were originally located here in the In Between. I was under the assumption that they were discovered in Aria.”

“Me too,” Lucas responded. “Zoe said that the temple was on Nazareno Island. I wonder why the fragments were here.”

Hagan shrugged. “There’s no telling. All I know is that this whole thing just keeps getting more and more complicated.”

Chapter 27: An Explosive Confrontation

The group continued back through the valley, headed in the direction of the field from which they had originally emerged. “Do you think my letter to Grandpa is still going to make it?” Lucas asked.

“It’s possible,” Iris replied. “I’m uncertain whether or not the post office was destroyed during the attack on Azure.”

“Even if it wasn’t,” Hagan added, “your letter might be a little late. Once the knights show up to pick up the mail and see the damage, they’ll probably want to stop to investigate the area. The good news is that they might be able to hold off the monsters and call for more Knowms to clean the place up a bit.”

“Of course!” Iris said cheerfully. “The knights! I had forgotten that they would be arriving to deliver and collect the mail!”

Hagan smiled. “See? Everything will be fine.” His grin quickly faded. “It’s just too bad that we’re forced to rely on those Knowms for ‘protection’ when they’re the ones behind this crap in the first place.”

Lucas looked up at the starry sky as they proceeded. *I hope you’re alright, Grandpa... you must be worried sick by now. Hopefully my letter makes it to you. We’re going to put an end to this madness, one way or another. No more fighting to survive day after day. I promise you that.*

“Hey, look over there,” Hagan said. He suddenly stopped walking, and turned his head toward the mountainside to the group’s left. Lucas and Iris turned to see a cave.

“Shall we investigate?” Iris suggested. Before she had even opened her mouth to speak, Hagan had already begun walking

toward the discovery. She glanced at Lucas. "I presume that's a 'yes.'" They followed him into the cave.

The inside of the cavern was just as adequately lit as the rest of the dimension. Upon entering, they observed a broad and long passage ahead of them, decorated with colorless stalactites and stalagmites. "This thing's pretty big," Hagan commented.

"I wonder just how deep it goes," Lucas added.

Hagan continued forward. "Let's find out."

They walked farther into the cave. After traveling for a good while and making their way through several twists and turns, Iris spoke. "While I find this cave to be rather fascinating, I'm beginning to believe that we're not going to find anything relevant to our expedition's aim."

They stopped walking. "I think you're right," Lucas agreed, removing the backpack from his shoulders. "Let's take a few minutes to rest here before we turn around. I don't know about you guys, but I'm pretty hungry."

"I could use a snack myself," said Hagan as he sat against the stone wall. Iris seated herself beside him while Lucas rummaged through the contents of the backpack, removing some bread and a glass bottle containing water. Tearing the loaf into pieces, he distributed it to his colleagues and rested alongside them. Hagan took a bite. "So Lucas, I know you can't remember exactly where you showed up in the In Between, but if we went back to the portal, do you think you'd be able to at least point out the general direction you and what's-her-name came from?"

"Maybe," Lucas answered. "I can try to remember, anyway."

"I was thinking about it," Hagan elaborated, "and we might want to check over there next. If the Spades had a portal in that area, it might be near their base."

“Excellent suggestion,” Iris noted. “Our likelihood of encountering their members or otherwise gaining useful information will increase greatly.”

Hagan grabbed his flask, sarcastically remarking, “Yeah, that’s the idea.”

As Lucas started to take a drink of water from the bottle, he was suddenly distracted by the sound of footsteps echoing from farther down the cave’s passage. “Do you hear that?!” he whispered in a panic.

Iris and Hagan froze. Listening carefully, they too heard what sounded like the footsteps of multiple people walking toward them. The noise was accompanied by distant, incomprehensible voices.

“I hear it,” Hagan replied softly.

“As do I,” Iris whispered.

Lucas got to his feet, “What should we do?”

“Relax,” said Hagan, “let’s stay put. They’re probably Spades. This is just what we need.”

“It’s also feasible that they’re not,” Iris rebutted. She stood up and said, “I suggest that we prepare ourselves for the worst.”

She handed the half-eaten piece of bread to Lucas, who hastily returned it and his remaining food to the backpack. As he placed the bottle inside, he looked at Hagan and extended his other hand. “Give me the bread so I can put it away.” Hagan shook his head and hurriedly scarfed down what remained. He got to his feet and gripped his bow while Lucas closed the backpack, quickly slinging it over his shoulders and unsheathing his sword.

The three stood in silence, facing toward the distant winding passage. The footsteps were far more audible now, and the voices had grown much louder.

“Sounds like they’re right around the corner,” Hagan noted softly. “That’s a lot of footsteps.”

Lucas tightened his grip on the sword. They could now understand the mysterious group approaching.

“We have a ways to go before reaching our destination,” a deep male voice said.

“Should we wait until nightfall?” another masculine voice asked.

“We’ll make that decision after we arrive back in Aria,” the first voice responded.

A third stranger spoke. “It would probably be best to get into town as soon as possible. Kuraikaji said that he wanted—”

As the men emerged from around the corner, they immediately halted. There were six of them, all dressed in brown cloaks, similar to the men who had attacked Azure the day before. “Spades!” one of them barked. “Ignis orbis!” Without hesitation, all six men conjured fire orbs.

Iris quickly stepped forward, positioning herself between Lucas and Hagan. With her palms facing outward, she crossed her arms in front of her chest.

“Lumen orbis!” Lucas conjured a light orb in his free hand while Hagan prepared an arrow.

Much to the trio’s surprise, however, the men did not throw their orbs. One of the strangers took a step toward them. “I would like to avoid conflict if at all possible. As you can see, we have you outnumbered. I can only assume that you’d prefer the same.”

Lucas recognized that the deep voice the trio had heard previously belonged to this man. *That must be their leader. These guys are dressed just like the group that attacked Azure.*

“I wouldn’t be so sure,” Hagan boasted. Iris’s eyes quickly darted in his direction, casting a cutting look, then back at the men.

The deep-voiced man chuckled, slowly taking a few more steps forward. “Don’t be so cocky. I’d suggest you listen to our offer before making any threats.” He paused.

A bead of sweat ran down Iris’s face as she stood motionless with her arms crossed, anticipating the moment the men would launch their fiery spheres. Hagan’s eyes were fixed on his target, planning to release his arrow as soon as the moment was right. Lucas attempted to keep perfectly still despite his fear, causing him to tremble slightly.

The man went on. “My name is Fino. We are members of the Cobras, an elite force under the command of Kuraikaji Kasabian. Considering that you are not dressed in green cloaks, I already know that you must be members of the Spades. According to our information, your organization currently holds one of the coveted fragments of Damiano’s Disk. I will now present you with two options, and I recommend that you choose wisely. The first, you lead us to your base and disclose the fragment’s location to us. You will then be allowed an opportunity to join our guild and assist us in securing the remaining fragment possessed by the Knowms. Or, you may select option two, in which you refuse to do so and we kill you now.”

“We’re not Spades!” Hagan blurted.

Fino’s eyebrows lowered. “I somehow doubt that.”

“Well, we’re not,” Hagan replied. “So go ahead and do your worst.”

“Very well,” Fino responded, turning back toward his associates. “Fire at will.” Instantaneously, the five other men hurled their orbs at the trio.

Iris promptly moved her arms to form a large circle, shouting, “Glacies scuto!” A thick wall of ice formed just in time to protect

the group from the onslaught of flaming projectiles. Orb-sized holes formed in the frozen shield as a result of each fireball's impact, simultaneously melting the ice as the flames were extinguished. With a flick of her wrist, the wall vanished. "Now!" she shouted.

Hagan released his arrow, aimed directly at Fino. Swiftly sidestepping, Fino dodged the attack as Lucas threw his orb. Iris outstretched both of her arms toward the enemies as Lucas's orb smashed into one of the men, knocking him to the ground.

Fino, still holding the fire orb he had conjured when the encounter began, hastily launched the fireball toward Iris as four of his allies conjured another round of fiery spheres. Iris ducked to dodge the fire orb and quickly repositioned herself.

Lucas attempted to conjure another light orb. "Lumen orbis!" but much to his surprise, nothing happened. *What did I do wrong?! I didn't do anything differently!*

Hagan took another shot, burying an arrow into one of Fino's comrades.

"Glacies gelidus zephyrus!" Iris shouted, conjuring two icy wind tunnels which moved quickly toward the enemies.

Noticing the oncoming threat, Fino immediately countered by yelling, "Ignis sphaera scuto!" surrounding himself in a barrier of fire as Iris's attack swept over his allies. Their orbs vanished as they became encased in ice, falling to the ground. Fino, unaffected due to his fiery defensive spell, raised his hands above his head. "Ignis inmanis sphaera!" A small fireball formed above him, which quickly expanded to three feet in diameter.

Meanwhile, Lucas tried again to conjure a light orb. "Lumen orbis!" but with no success. *What's going on?! Why isn't it working?!*

Iris became frustrated. "I'm unable to harm him while he's enclosed in the flame barrier!"

“I’ve got it,” Hagan replied, launching an arrow at Fino, who simultaneously threw his massive fireball at the group.

“Look out!” Lucas shouted, running away from the fast-approaching threat. As the arrow plunged into Fino’s chest, Iris and Hagan dove out of the way of the giant flaming globe. Despite their efforts, the fireball smashed against the ground, causing a loud and extensive explosion. Iris and Hagan were thrown against the cave walls and knocked unconscious. Lucas was thrown several feet and smashed against the ground, greatly injured by the impact and searing flames as a deep rumble resonated throughout the passage.

Fino fell to his knees in agony, his fiery barrier disappearing instantaneously. Clenching the blood-drenched arrow, he managed to utter, “D-damn... S-Spades...!” He then slowly collapsed to his side. As he lay motionless on the cave floor, Lucas synchronously slipped into unconsciousness.

Chapter 28: Home, Bitter Home

Zoe's eyes slowly opened. Disoriented, she stared at the ceiling for several minutes, desperately trying to remember what had happened. During this contemplation, it hit her.

“What the hell?!” she gasped, sitting up. Much to her surprise, she observed that she was now at home in her own bed. Her room was quite spacious, dimly lit by a single wall lamp near her door. Her feet met the thick velvet carpet as she sprung out of bed, bolting to the window. Opening the curtains, her eyes squinted tightly as the sunlight flooded the room. Nearly blinded by the sun's luminosity, she quickly shut the curtains, rubbing her eyes as they readjusted. *How long have I been out?*

It was then that the images flooded her mind. Alex, smashing against the sharp rocks, helplessly tumbling down the mountainside to his death. Roshan, offering final words of comfort just before the blade sliced into him. Her fists clenched as she stormed into the hallway.

Slamming the door behind her, she marched down the long corridor. After hastily climbing the stairs to the mansion's third floor, she approached the double doors leading to her adoptive father's room. Angrily gripping the doorknobs, she threw both doors open at once.

Lord Quinn was seated at a small table on the far side of the large room, slowly sipping a cup of tea as she entered. He stared at her as she stomped over to him, her displeasure apparent by her intense gaze. Still dressed in the same tattered clothing she had been wearing in the prison, her hands and feet were noticeably dirty.

“Zoe,” Lord Quinn began with a smile, “you're awake. Excellent.” Zoe halted as she reached the table. They stared at each other. “Care to join me for some tea?” he offered, breaking the silence. Zoe's mouth twitched as her eyebrows lowered. She

wanted to scream at him, but was somehow unable to find the appropriate words. He continued to smile softly.

“I suppose not. Very well.” He paused as he took a sip of tea. “I had Passford burn vitam leaves at your bedside earlier this morning. The effects were, apparently, successful.”

“You killed my friend,” Zoe finally muttered.

Lord Quinn’s smile suddenly vanished. “Your ‘friend’ was a criminal.”

“No he wasn’t!!” she yelled.

“Watch your temper,” he sternly replied. “Remember what happened last time?”

Zoe bit her lip.

“I could have quite easily deserted you to your fate as a prisoner,” Lord Quinn went on. “Instead, I chose to persuade the guards to turn the other way and allow you to return home. I expect a noticeable improvement in your etiquette and loyalty from this moment forth. Understood?”

Zoe was silent, continuing to stare directly into his eyes.

“Are we clear?” he asked. The room was quiet. “Answer me,” he growled.

She rolled her eyes and walked back toward the door. “I’m leaving.”

“You most certainly are not,” Lord Quinn quickly responded.

She stopped and turned back to him. “You’re not my father. I’m not a child. I don’t have to stay here, and I won’t. I’m leaving.”

Lord Quinn sat his tea down on the table. “Won’t wandering Aria’s wilderness be exceptionally difficult without the ability to use magic?” Zoe was quiet, puzzled by the remark. He grinned,

gesturing with his hand toward a large mirror. “I presume you have yet to view your reflection.”

Zoe quickly approached the mirror. Her eyes widened as she noticed a small black ‘X’ on the center of her forehead. She hastily turned back to him. “You jinxed me.”

“I do apologize,” he answered, “but you left me no choice. Despite your failure to do so, you still attempted to assault me.” Zoe trembled with rage as Lord Quinn picked up his teacup. “Oh, and by the way... the servants have been informed of your ‘deteriorating mental state’ since you were kidnapped and brainwashed by that dreadful Spade guild. Therefore, I recommend that you keep your mouth shut about the entire incident.”

“You bastard!” she barked with watery eyes.

“Temper,” he reminded her, taking another sip. “I’m going to be attending a meeting with King Ashraf later this afternoon. In my absence, I expect that you will behave yourself and remain indoors. In the event that you choose to betray my trust, it would be most wise to note that the guards have already been briefed on the situation and will most certainly restrain your efforts.” He finished the contents of the teacup and sat it back on the table. “Now, if you would be so kind, please wash yourself and change out of that ridiculous outfit. You’re filthy, and your odor is absolutely repugnant.”

Gnashing her teeth, Zoe stormed toward the door. Lord Quinn got out of his chair. “Oh, and Zoe.” She stopped in her tracks, still facing the door. He pushed in his chair and walked around the table. “If you do not wish to be involved in my endeavors, I advise that you stay out of my way and keep your mouth shut. Understood?” Without saying a word, Zoe left the room.

After cleaning herself, Zoe proceeded back to her room dressed in a gray bathrobe. *I have to find some way to get out of here.* Entering her room, she caught a glimpse of herself in her dresser’s mirror. The black ‘X’ on her forehead seemed to glare back at her from its reflection. *Ughh... even if I can escape, I won’t*

be able to make it back to the base without magic or at least a weapon.

She opened her closet. Shocked by what she saw, she let out a loud shriek. The contents of her walk-in closet consisted only of various styles of pink dresses. Quickly shutting the door, she stomped back to her adoptive father's room.

Lord Quinn turned to his room's doors as they burst open. "What did you do to my clothes?!" Zoe seethed as she emerged.

He smiled. "I took the liberty of upgrading your wardrobe."

"I hate pink!" she snapped.

"Interesting," Lord Quinn said calmly, turning toward a nearby window. "I'm not very fond of traitors, myself. Perhaps we will both learn to live with the hand we've been dealt, hm?"

Zoe became enraged by the comment. "What the hell is your problem?!"

"Language," he remarked.

Ignoring him, she continued. "If you despise me so much, then why are you keeping me here? Why did you adopt me in the first place?" Without turning from the window, Lord Quinn shook his head in disapproval. Zoe went on. "What you're doing to Aria is wrong. You've killed more people than you probably even know. Not that you care." Still, Lord Quinn did not respond. His silence irritated her further. "Don't you have anything to say?!" The room was quiet. "Why won't you answer me?!"

Lord Quinn looked at her. "If I didn't care about you," he finally said, "you certainly wouldn't be alive."

Zoe was completely infuriated. "You don't kill me and I'm supposed to feel loved?! You murdered my closest friend!!" Tears were trickling down her cheeks as Lord Quinn unsympathetically returned his attention to the window. "UGH!! You don't care about

anyone but yourself!!” She stomped toward the door. “I hate you!!” Lord Quinn said nothing as Zoe left the room.

“Brat,” he muttered to himself.

As she reached the second floor and stormed down the hallway toward her room, she was met by Passford, one of the many servants on the mansion’s staff. “Miss Zoe!” he said cheerfully, “You’re awake. How are you feeling?”

“Awful,” she softly answered.

“Well, your wounds have recovered quite swiftly,” Passford commented. “Perhaps lunch will lift your spirits? Once you have dressed yourself appropriately, you may proceed to the dining room. Chef Jero has prepared an exquisite dish for your dining pleasure.”

“I guess I am a little hungry...” Zoe admitted.

Passford smiled. “It’s wonderful to have you back, Miss Zoe. I’m terribly sorry you had to go through such a horrific experience with that Spade guild. I can’t imagine how frightened you must have been.”

“I wasn’t kidnapped!” Zoe snapped, startling Passford and causing him to stumble backward. “I ran away! I don’t want to be here!!”

“Oh my,” Passford said, trembling. “You really believe that, don’t you?”

“I wasn’t brainwashed!!” Zoe screamed.

His eyes bulging from fright, Passford hurried down the hallway without another word.

“I’m not crazy!!” she shouted. “He’s the crazy one!! UGH!”

Once she had returned to her room and reluctantly put on one of the many pink dresses which flooded her closet, Zoe viewed herself in the mirror. “Just kill me now,” she grumbled. Picking up

a brush from the dresser, she aggressively fixed her hair. *If I can just get rid of this jinx, I shouldn't have any trouble getting back to HQ. I think I read about these stupid things in one of my books...*

As she stood there in silence, her thoughts gradually drifted back to the horrific scenes from the days before. Her eyes glistening, she clenched her jaw. *No. I can't think about that. I have to stay strong.*

Chapter 29: Detour

Lucas slowly got to his feet. *Ugghh... my head... That's the second time I've been knocked out in the same week. I need to be more careful.* He was quickly reminded of what had taken place the moment he saw Iris and Hagan lying motionless on the cave floor.

“Iris! Hagan!”

He darted over to his fallen allies. *Oh no!* He grabbed Iris's arm and shook her. “Iris! Wake up!” She didn't move or reply. He ran to Hagan and did the same. “Hagan! Hagan! Get up!” There was no response. *I've got to do something! I could try my healing spell... if I can manage to do it. For some reason, I was unable to conjure while we were fighting Fino.*

Lucas placed his hand on Hagan's body. *I hope this works.* Closing his eyes, he took a moment to concentrate. “Lumen sana.” A glow surrounded Hagan's body, and soon enough the burn marks on his skin slowly disappeared. It wasn't much longer before his eyes opened. Lucas took his hand off of Hagan. “Hagan! It worked!”

Hagan sat up. “Huh? What worked?”

“We were all knocked out by that explosion,” Lucas explained. “I woke up and saw you and Iris lying unconscious. I used the healing spell I learned yesterday to revive you. I'm going to heal Iris next.”

Hagan got to his feet and inspected the bodies scattered throughout the cave's passage. “Damn, that was a hell of a battle, huh?”

“Yeah,” Lucas replied, picking his sword up off the ground and sheathing it. “Sorry I wasn't much help. For some reason, I

was unable to conjure light orbs after that first one. Maybe Iris will be able to explain after I revive her.”

“You might have just drained yourself,” Hagan informed as Lucas made his way over to Iris’s body.

“Drained myself?” Lucas queried.

Hagan proceeded to elaborate. “You can only conjure so much before your magic stops working. When that happens, you can’t do a damn thing until you get some sleep. Being knocked out must’ve done the trick, oddly enough.”

“Oh, that’s right,” said Lucas, placing his hand on Iris. “I think I saw something about a conjuring limit in one of the books I studied.” He closed his eyes. “Lumen sana!”

“Orbs don’t take much out of you,” Hagan went on, collecting his bow. “Spells like the one you’re doing now are what’ll drain you faster. The amount of conjuring you can do is low at first but the more you push your limit, the more you can cast without rest. If you ever plan to try the intermediate level stuff, you’ll have to crank your limit up a bit just to handle one spell.”

“Makes sense,” Lucas responded as Iris’s burns slowly vanished.

Hagan glanced at Fino’s body, his arrow still buried deep inside. He grinned, pointing his finger at the corpse, “Got you, you bastard.”

“Huh?” Lucas replied, his attention mostly focused on Iris.

“I was talking to Fino,” Hagan explained.

Iris’s eyes snapped open. Lucas smiled. “Hey.”

“Hello,” she replied with a dumbfounded look. “Am I alive?”

Lucas chuckled. “Of course. I just used my magic to revive you. We were all knocked out by that fireball’s explosion. Luckily, I woke up on my own and was able to heal you guys.”

Hagan walked over and looked down at Iris. He smiled. “Morning.”

Iris sat up. “Thank you, Lucas... perhaps you should consider using the spell to heal your own injuries, as you appear to have taken damage yourself.”

Lucas nodded and closed his eyes to concentrate. “Lumen sana!” He began to glow as Iris got to her feet.

She briefly scanned the area. “Did you happen to see where my satchel went, Hagan?”

“Behind you,” Hagan replied, pointing.

Iris collected the bag and quickly opened it. “Oh no!”

“What is it?” asked Lucas as he finished healing.

“The impact has destroyed my potions,” Iris said as she displayed the contents of the satchel to her companions. The bag was soaking wet and filled with broken glass.

“That sucks,” Hagan commented. “At least we have Lucas.”

“I suppose,” Iris responded. She looked at Lucas. “Considering the circumstances, you’ll have to refrain from using your magic to do anything other than the healing spell.”

“What about the backpack?” Hagan queried as Iris dumped the broken glass out of her soaking satchel.

Lucas’s eyes widened. “I forgot to check.” He quickly removed the backpack and examined the status of its cargo. “We got lucky,” he reported. “Everything seems to be in good shape.” He slung it over his shoulders.

“Good,” Hagan replied. “So, now what?”

Glancing farther down the corridor toward the entrance, Lucas gasped. “Bad news, guys. It looks like that explosion caused

a cave-in.” Iris and Hagan ran over to see that the entire passage was blocked by a wall of crumbled colorless rocks.

“We’re trapped!” said Iris.

“Great,” Hagan remarked, “this is just what we need.”

Lucas walked back toward where Fino had emerged. “Well, those guys came from over here. Maybe there’s another opening?”

The trio walked farther down the corridor. Lucas looked at Iris. “Is it just me, or did those Cobra guys look a lot like the men who attacked Azure?”

Iris nodded. “I thought the same. I’m interested to know more about this Kuraikaji character and his motivations.”

“I wonder what they were doing in Azure, anyway,” Lucas added. “If Lord Quinn is in charge of the Knowms, wouldn’t he have the fragment at his place?”

“You’d think,” Hagan said. “But Quinn seems like a pretty smart guy. He probably has it hidden somewhere secret. It sounded to me like those Cobras were on their way to carry out another attack on a different town when they ran into us. Kuraikaji must be sending them all over Aria to find it.”

“We can only speculate without further investigation,” Iris replied, “though your hypothesis is very plausible.”

“Thanks for the seal of approval,” Hagan muttered.

After walking a good distance, the group found themselves in front of a portal just before a dead end. “A gateway,” said Lucas. “So that’s where they came from.”

“This should take us right to them,” Hagan noted.

Lucas turned to him. “You think we should go inside?”

“Considering that the main passage is blocked,” Iris answered, “I don’t think we have any other option.”

“Pretty solid logic,” said Hagan. “Let’s do it.”

Lucas approached the portal. “I guess I’ll go first again.”

“You mustn’t,” Iris argued. “We have no way of knowing exactly where we will emerge in Aria. Now that we no longer possess healing potions, your magic is essential to our survival. I’ll go first.”

Lucas stepped aside. “Alright. We’ll be right behind you.”

Hagan looked at Iris and grinned. “Ready? I know how much you enjoyed the last one.”

Iris sighed. “I suppose I’m as ready as I’ll ever be.” She jumped into the vortex. Hagan and Lucas followed closely behind.

* * * *

The group found themselves in yet another cave, lit only by the luminosity of the colorful vortex. The air was dry, and the temperature was sweltering. Lucas removed his scarf and gloves as Iris fanned herself with her hand. “Quite a dramatic shift in climate,” she said.

“What’s with all of these portals being in caves?!” Hagan pointed out, taking off his coat to reveal a white shirt.

Lucas put the scarf and gloves in the backpack and extended his hand to Hagan. “I can put your coat in here,” he offered.

Hagan handed Lucas the coat. “Take it.”

After putting it in the backpack, Lucas took out the lantern and lit it. “I don’t know where we are, but it mustn’t be anywhere near Azure.” He slung the backpack over his shoulders and proceeded down the cave’s passage. The group followed.

“This heat is unbearable,” Iris griped.

“Well, get used to it,” Hagan responded. “We could be stuck here for a while.”

Without warning, the cave was flooded with the sound of hundreds of flapping wings as a colony of bats flew overhead. Iris shrieked in terror, quickly dropping to her knees and covering her head with her arms.

Hagan rolled his eyes. “Relax, they’re just bats.”

“I despise rodents!” she snapped, quivering in fear.

After the last of the bats had flown off, the trio proceeded through the cave, eventually reaching its mouth. As they emerged, they found themselves in the middle of a vast desert.

“Oh no...” Iris groaned.

Hagan observed the surrounding landscape. “Well if we weren’t lost before, we definitely are now.”

Putting out the lantern, Lucas returned it to the backpack. “We need to keep moving. Our rations are pretty limited. There has to be a town or something nearby.”

They walked through the desert for quite some time, sweating profusely from the immense heat. As evening approached and the sun began setting, Iris started to worry. “I’m beginning to think we’re not going to find civilization. Perhaps we should consider heading back?”

“It’s too late,” Hagan replied. “Besides, if we do that we’ll just be stuck in that cave. We’re no worse off here.”

Lucas stopped walking. “Alright, let’s take a water break.” Digging through the backpack, he removed the bottle of water. After taking a small drink, he handed it to Iris. “Only drink a small amount, we have to make it last as long as possible.”

As Iris raised the bottle to her lips, Hagan suddenly grabbed an arrow. “Keep still Lucas,” he said, aiming it in his direction. Lucas froze as Iris turned to see a scorpion the size of a large dog approaching rapidly. Hagan released the arrow, killing the creature with little effort.

Lucas turned around and viewed the lifeless beast. “That would’ve hurt,” he said, turning back to Hagan. “I owe you one.”

Hagan put away his bow. “Just keep an eye out. I can’t always be there to save you.”

Chapter 30: Reflections Of The Past (Part V)

Love was dead. *I should have been able to stop them. Why couldn't I stop them? It was all my fault.* For years he spiraled through a deep depression. Though he dreaded the thought, he knew he had to let go. Vera was gone forever, and nothing could change what had happened. Trying his best to move forward, he focused solely on his work as a newly appointed king's adviser and began studying magic obsessively in his free time.

Having access to the castle, he often found himself searching the royal library for books to help him further his magical abilities. While spell books were available in other libraries across Aria, here he had access to rare and sometimes forbidden publications. He was especially intrigued the day he stumbled across one particular book, entitled The Forbidden Art of Necromancy (For Scholastic Use Only!). This lit a spark of hope inside of him. He wouldn't have to let go if he could bring her back. Checking to see if anyone was watching, he carefully tucked the book into his cloth bag and exited the library.

Chapter 31: The Stickup

Hagan's arrow plunged into the giant scorpion while Lucas shoved his blade between the eyes of an assaulting imp. "I think that's all of them," Hagan informed, trudging to collect his arrow from the scorpion's lifeless corpse lying a good distance away next to a large rock.

Lucas sheathed his sword. "I've seen these imps everywhere. They don't seem to care much about climate." He turned to Iris. "How are you feeling?"

"Decent," she replied.

"Need some more water?" Lucas offered.

Iris shook her head. "I would prefer to wait until it's absolutely necessary."

As Hagan pulled the arrow out of the monstrous cadaver, a tall and muscular young man with messy red hair quietly slipped out from behind the rock nearby. Much to his surprise, Hagan was suddenly grabbed from behind. Before he could react, a knife was held to his throat. "Ya say a word or move an inch and you're gonna get it, pal," a voice behind him warned. Lucas and Iris turned to see the stranger holding Hagan at knifepoint. Iris gasped.

"Let him go!" Lucas shouted, unsheathing his sword.

The young man faced Lucas, turning Hagan with him, the knife still poised to deliver a lethal slice. The stranger was dressed in a dark-red, short-sleeved vest opened to expose a dirty gray shirt. Yellow cloth was tied around his neck and waist, accompanied by brown tattered pants. On his hands were brown gloves. He was barefoot. "No!" he yelled. "Gimme all your stuff."

The area was dead silent as the two stared each other down. *I could try to hit him with an orb, but there's a good chance I'll miss and Hagan will be done for. But if I give this guy our stuff, we're*

going to die out here anyway. Even if we reach a town, the backpack has all of our gold. We won't be able to buy food or anything else.

“I don't have all day!” the stranger said. “Gimme your stuff or baldy gets it!”

Hesitating for a moment, Lucas sheathed his sword and slowly removed the backpack from his shoulders.

“Lucas, don't!” Iris sharply whispered. “We will be unable to survive witho—”

“Just trust me.” Lucas interrupted with a wink. He gradually approached the stranger, carrying the backpack in his hand.

“You too, lady!” the red haired young man barked as Lucas froze. “Gimme that... purse thing.”

“It's empty,” she responded.

“Pfft, yeah right,” the stranger remarked. “You're carryin' an empty bag through a desert. I believe that. Ya think I buy your crap?! Gimme the bag!!” Turning back toward Iris, Lucas motioned for her to hand him the satchel. Hesitantly, she gave him the bag. He took it from her and approached the stranger.

Meanwhile, Hagan boiled in silent rage. *Damn thieving bastard! Snuck up on me... As soon as this jerk lets go of me I'm going to chase him down and beat him into a pile of mush!*

Lucas handed the backpack and satchel to the hostile man. “Here. Now let him go.” The stranger quickly snatched the bags and bolted, simultaneously releasing Hagan in one lightning-quick move. “Lumen orbis!” Lucas shouted, conjuring a light orb. Seeing that Lucas had control of the situation, Hagan stepped aside as Lucas hurled his orb.

The luminous sphere nailed the fleeing crook in the back, causing him to fall to the ground with a heavy thud. The knife, backpack, and satchel flew out of his hands, landing in the sand not

far from where he fell. Before the thief could get to his feet, he was met with surprise as he felt a sharp metal tip lightly graze his back. “Don’t move,” Lucas warned, nudging the criminal’s back with his sword.

The thief froze, “Alright, alright... ow!”

“Hagan,” Lucas yelled, “come get our stuff.”

“Just kill the bastard!” Hagan shouted.

“Get the stuff,” Lucas repeated sternly. “I’ll take care of him.”

“You’re not gonna kill me?” the thief asked, letting out a groan of pain.

“I never said that,” Lucas rebutted coldly, causing the red-haired young man’s eyes to widen. Surprised by Lucas’s demeanor, Hagan obeyed, collecting the crook’s knife along with the backpack and satchel. Cautiously, Iris made her way over to get a closer look at what was taking place.

“My friends and I are stranded out here,” Lucas began. “You’re going to take us to the nearest town. If you try anything funny, I won’t be so merciful the next time. Got it?”

“Yes sir – you’re the boss!” the thief replied with a nervous laugh.

Lucas quickly scanned the crook’s emotions. *He’s terrified... It’s hard to tell if he’s being truthful, but the worst he could do at this point is run away.* Lucas took his sword off of the young man’s back. “Good.”

Hagan stared bitterly at the crook as he slowly got to his feet. “If you call me ‘baldy’ again,” Hagan warned, “I’ll shove a fire orb so far up your ass you’ll be puking ashes for weeks.”

“That’s enough Hagan,” said Lucas. “I think he’s learned his lesson.”

“Doubt it,” Hagan scoffed, his eyes cutting into the thief. “I’ll play nice for now, but I’ve got my eye on you.”

“Is everyone alright?” Iris asked.

“Yeah,” Hagan replied, handing Iris her satchel.

“My back’s a little sore,” the thief commented as he dusted off his pants.

“No one asked you!” Hagan barked, tucking the crook’s blade under his belt. “Thanks for the knife, by the way.”

Lucas sheathed his sword and collected the backpack from Hagan. Once it was secured to his back, he turned back to the red-haired young man. “What’s your name?” Lucas inquired.

“Aiden Kerbs,” the thief replied. He extended his hand to Lucas, who was puzzled by the action. Aiden glanced at the faces of the trio, each dumbfounded. “What? I’m a nice guy.”

“You attempted to rob us,” Iris said sternly.

Aiden shrugged. “I do what I gotta do to survive. It’s tough out here.”

“Just take us to the nearest town and shut up,” Hagan ordered.

Aiden raised his eyebrows. “Alright then.”

Iris glanced at the setting sun in the distance. “We must make haste. Nightfall is approaching rapidly.”

“Then, haste we shall make,” Aiden replied, imitating Iris’s voice. She was visibly bewildered by the impression, but chose not to comment. Aiden marched forward. “There’s a town a little farther this way called Secar. It’s pretty much the only city here in Hravart Desert.”

“Secar... is that where you’re from?” Lucas asked as the trio followed behind.

“I was born there,” Aiden responded, “but I got the boot after I pissed off Kuraikaji.”

“Kuraikaji?!” the trio gasped in unison.

Aiden raised an eyebrow. “Guess you’re familiar with the ol’ Kajimyster, eh?”

“Yeah, we’ve heard of him alright,” Hagan replied.

“What can you tell us about him?” Lucas queried.

“Whaddya wanna know?” Aiden asked.

“Everything,” Lucas responded.

“Well...” Aiden began, “Kuraikaji is in charge of the Cobras, a thieves’ guild ya might say. I was one of ‘em myself at one time. Joined when I was fifteen. Back then, we spent mosta our days out in the desert robbin’ anyone unfortunate enough to pass through. But things changed when the monsters started showin’ up.

“Kuraikaji loves two things: gold and power. Secar’s defenses were weakened while the knights tried to defend the town, and he saw it as an opportunity. We all rode into Secar, killin’ knights and monsters. Soon, the place was ours and Kuraikaji became unofficial king of the desert. He promised to keep the town safe as long as the people accepted him as their ruler. Seemed like a good deal, and the folks bought it up. Then the Knowms showed up. They were a group of guys in green cloaks who said they were assigned by King Ashraf to run things. Basically, they told Kuraikaji to get lost. As ya probably guessed, he wasn’t too happy about it, and the Knowms were slaughtered. Since then, he’s been in charge without any resistance. Monsters still slip into town here and there, but most people are way too scared to travel through the desert to go somewhere else.

“So now he’s got ‘em trapped under his rule, whether they like it or not. The knights don’t even bother to come around anymore. Guess the royal crown kinda gave up on the place after losin’ so many men to the Cobras. It makes Kuraikaji all-powerful.

If ya want anything in his town, ya gotta get it through him. The Cobras ride to other towns, go undercover, and steal all the gold and food they can get. Then they bring it back to Secar where ‘King Kuraikaji’ dispenses the goods. Problem bein’, he keeps mosta the loot for himself.”

“How did you get kicked out?” Lucas inquired.

“I got sick of his crap,” Aiden replied. “We did all the work and he got all the goods. I made the mistake of tellin’ him to stop bein’ so greedy. Next thing I know, I was runnin’ for my life. I’ve lived out here ever since, sneakin’ into town at night to get what I need. I usually don’t get many victims out here, but when I saw you guys I just went for it.”

“Hold on,” Hagan interjected. “What were the Cobras doing attacking Azure if they only visit other towns to thieve?”

Aiden appeared to be confused by his question. “Attackin’ Azure? Look, buddy... I ain’t been in with the Cobras for a while now. There’s no tellin’ what kinda crazy crap Kuraikaji is up to these days. I’ve never even been to Azure!”

“Interesting...” Iris commented. “It’s possible that Kuraikaji has only recently learned of Damiano’s Disk.”

“Dami-whatnow?!” Aiden blurted. “What the hell are ya talkin’ about?!”

“We’re not here to answer your questions,” Hagan snapped. “Just take us to Secar.”

Suddenly, Lucas unsheathed his sword. “More trouble!”

Hagan reached for his bow and quickly loaded an arrow as a brown snake-like creature covered in spines quickly approached from the distance. “Keep still, I’ve got this one,” he said, carefully aiming. He released the arrow, but was surprised to see the foe promptly slither out of the projectile’s path. “Damn, guess not.”

“Glacies stiria telum!” Iris conjured an icicle missile and quickly sent it speeding toward the enemy. The snake moved to dodge, but wasn’t quick enough. It hissed as the icicle pierced its skin.

Meanwhile, Hagan shot another arrow. It buried into the creature’s head, causing it to convulse wildly. “There, I think that did it,” Hagan noted. “I’ll go get my arrows when it stops moving. Nice shot, Iris.”

“He’s getting away!!” Lucas shouted frantically as he ran to catch Aiden, who had taken the opportunity to escape the trio’s captivity.

“Just let him go!” Hagan yelled. “We already know Secar’s this way!”

Lucas stopped running as Aiden continued farther into the desert. *Damn! I should’ve watched him more carefully.* He turned back and rejoined Hagan and Iris. “Sorry, guys. I turned away from him and he took off.”

“No big deal,” said Hagan. “We don’t need him anyway. Let’s take a quick water break and keep moving.”

“Indeed,” Iris added. “Once the sun sets, we’ll be blind to oncoming threats. It’s a risk we cannot afford to take.”

Chapter 32: The Reading

Zoe spent hours scouring through every book on magic she possessed, desperately seeking information on removing jinxes. *Nothing in here either.* Disappointed, she shut the book and sprawled on her bed. *Ugh, this is so frustrating! I know I read about jinxes in one of these books... Which one was it?*

Zoe was startled by a knock on her door. “What do you want?” she groaned, sitting up.

“May I enter?” a voice asked.

Recognizing it as Passford, she replied, “Yeah.”

The door creaked open as Passford entered the room. He took a few steps toward her, “Miss Zoe, your father has requested you—”

“My who?” Zoe interrupted coldly.

Passford paused, caught off guard by her response. “Your father... Lord Quinn.”

“His name’s Javan,” Zoe snapped. “That’s all he is to me. Javan.”

“That’s quite disrespectful,” Passford commented with a straight face.

Without a moment of hesitation, Zoe quickly rebutted, “Jinxing your daughter and convincing everyone that she’s batshit insane isn’t very noble either.”

Turning back toward the door without acknowledging her cutting remarks, Passford went on. “Lord Quinn has requested your presence in the meeting room immediately.” Glancing back at her as he reached for the doorknob, he added, “You should probably show a little more respect for the man who saved you

from a life of poverty, young lady. I understand that you have been brainwashed, but it's no excu—"

"I wasn't brainwashed!!" Zoe bellowed, jumping to her feet. Alarmed by the unexpected mood swing, Passford hastily proceeded into the hallway, hurriedly shutting the door behind him.

"Uggghhh!!!" Zoe exclaimed, stomping her way over to the door. "Stupid jinx! Stupid Javan!...Stupid pink!!!"

Continuing through the hallway and down the stairs, she marched to the double doors of the meeting room. Inside was a large, rectangular table equipped with several chairs. Farthest from the door, at the head of the table, was a much larger chair in which Lord Quinn sat. The room was well lit by two massive chandeliers. All of the window curtains were closed.

Zoe threw the doors open, yelling, "What now?!" as she entered.

"Temper..." Lord Quinn sternly reminded her.

Zoe was surprised to see that her adoptive father was accompanied by two people she had never seen before. Seated on Lord Quinn's left was an older woman, dressed in a dark-red dress with a black shawl. She had green eyes and long curly graying brunette hair. On her head was a black pointed hat with a large circular brim, decorated with what Zoe considered to be a rather ugly flower. To the mysterious woman's left, sat a young man around Zoe's age, if not a little younger. He had long, blond hair and hypnotizing blue eyes, dressed in a tattered white shirt and brown vest. An emerald was tied around his neck. The jewel was quite beautiful in contrast to the shabby string it was attached to. An obnoxious grin consumed his face as he watched Zoe slowly walk along the opposite side of the table, approaching the chair on Lord Quinn's right. Turning her attention away from the stranger's bizarre fixation, Zoe looked at Lord Quinn and sarcastically asked, "Did you have fun lying to the king today?"

He remained silent, completely unresponsive to the barbed assertion. As she sat down, Zoe stared at the woman sitting across from her, who softly smiled. “Zoe,” said Lord Quinn, “allow me to introduce you to Veronica Aveley of Kieran Forest.”

The mysterious woman across the table bowed her head as she was introduced. “The pleasure is all mine.”

“Seated by her side,” Lord Quinn continued, “is her son, Laverick Aveley.”

“Hi!” Laverick blurted, the large grin still plastered to his face.

Zoe found his presence to be unbearably awkward, and quickly turned her attention back to Lord Quinn. “Why did you call me here?” she inquired sharply.

“Don’t be rude,” Lord Quinn replied. “Introduce yourself.”

Turning back to Veronica and Laverick, Zoe quickly spat out, “I’m Zoe.”

“Hi Zoe!!” Laverick responded excitedly.

“Excellent,” Lord Quinn remarked. “Now that all formalities have been addressed, I would like to offer a proposal.” He turned to Zoe. “I’m well aware that as a member of the Spades, you’re knowledgeable of the disk fragment’s current—”

“Is that what this is about?!” Zoe snapped, quickly rising to her feet.

“Calm yourself,” Lord Quinn warned.

“No!!” Zoe shouted. “I told you, I don’t want to—”

“*Umbra immobilis mutus!*” Lord Quinn interjected, pointing his finger at Zoe as she felt a stinging jolt surge through her body. Much like the condition she had experienced in Valdis Prison, she was once again unable to move or speak. “I had every intention of offering you a chance for cooperation,” Lord Quinn explained.

“However, it’s overwhelmingly obvious that you’re uninterested. A minor setback at most.”

“My goodness, is she always this temperamental?” Veronica inquired.

“Unfortunately, yes.” Lord Quinn answered with a sigh, lifting a small glass of wine off the table. After taking a sip, he continued. “I suppose now would be a good time to execute your ability, Veronica.”

Raising her eyebrows and wagging her index finger, Veronica smiled. “Aren’t you forgetting something?”

“The gold, the gold!” Laverick shouted. “We don’t work for free!”

“That’s right, Son,” said Veronica. “Good boy!” Laverick smiled broadly, feeling accomplished from gaining his mother’s praise.

Lord Quinn sat the glass back on the table. “I assure you wholeheartedly that you will be appropriately compensated for your efforts. Though I must insist on first receiving that which I am paying for.”

“He’s trying to cheat us, Ma!” Laverick exclaimed.

“I’m most certainly not,” Lord Quinn calmly responded. “This is simply how I conduct my business. If you find yourself uninterested in our prior arrangement due to these circumstances, you may leave now.”

“Let’s get outta here, Ma,” Laverick asserted. “I don’t trust this guy.”

Noticing the look of uncertainty on Veronica’s face, Lord Quinn added, “Remember, there is far more than gold in store for you. By assisting me in obtaining the missing fragment, you and your son shall be rewarded with high ranking titles and privileges under my reign.”

“If what you say is true,” Veronica replied after a brief pause, “then you shouldn’t be opposed to allowing me to verify your claim.”

“Of course not,” Lord Quinn responded. “Proceed at will.”

Placing her index fingers on her temples, Veronica shut her eyes and concentrated. Suddenly, she made a wincing facial expression, as though she had experienced a sharp pain. She opened her eyes and lowered her hands. “You’ve had quite a troubled past, haven’t you?”

“My past is not open for discussion,” Lord Quinn answered coldly.

Laverick tilted his head to the side. “Is he lying, Ma?”

“I’m not sure, Son,” Veronica replied. “I can’t seem to endure his emotional output long enough to establish a connection. It’s a very unpleasant sensation, to say the least...”

“I don’t have time to waste,” Lord Quinn asserted. “If you wish to verify, read me now. If you are willing to trust me, do so. If you are unconvinced, leave at this time. I advise that you make your decision hastily. I’m growing impatient.”

Veronica hesitated slightly. “Fine, I’ll trust your word. But I warn you, do not deceive me. I will get what I was promised, one way or another.”

Lord Quinn smiled, lifting the wine glass. “You will not be disappointed.”

“Very well,” said Veronica, “I’m going to have to insist that you leave the room during this particular process. Your presence will be far too distracting.”

Lord Quinn got out of his chair. “Of course.” Cutting his eyes at Zoe’s motionless face as he walked toward the door, he went on. “I will be in the hallway. Take as long as you deem necessary. Inform me once you have finished.”

After Lord Quinn had left, Laverick spoke up. “I dunno, Ma, I’ve got a real bad—”

“Silence, Laverick!” Veronica barked sharply. “I know what I’m doing.” Raising her index fingers to her temples, she closed her eyes and concentrated. She focused all of her energy on Zoe, who remained frozen in the same position she was in during her argument with Lord Quinn.

My goodness, so much anger, Veronica thought before saying, “Lumen cogitatus lectito” aloud. In her head, she could hear Zoe wildly screaming for her to get out of her thoughts. Navigating through Zoe’s consciousness, Veronica attempted to uncover memories related to the Spades and the disk fragment.

At last, a vision flashed through Veronica’s mind. She was in a colorless area, in which all of the surrounding trees and plant life were solid black with bright white outlines. Standing in front of her was a young man with blond hair and green eyes, dressed in a brown long-sleeved shirt with dark-gray pants and a black belt. “Well, from what I understand,” he said, “I’m supposed to give you this.” The young man removed a flat, golden object from his pocket.

Next, she saw her hands snatch the object out of the young man’s grasp. “What the hell are you doing with the disk fragment?!” she heard herself say. She looked down, examining the fragment in her hands before stuffing it into a bag secured to her waist.

“Stop reading me, you old hag!!” Zoe’s voice thundered, causing Veronica to be booted from the memory. She opened her eyes.

“Did ya learn anything?” Laverick asked impatiently.

“I’m off to a decent start,” Veronica informed. “Unfortunately, she’s aware of what I’m trying to do. It could take a considerable amount of time to learn everything we need to know.”

Laverick smiled widely. “We’re gonna be rich and famous, right Ma?!”

Veronica chuckled. “Of course, darling. Now, settle down. Mommy has a lot of work to do.” Laverick nodded quickly, placing his hand over his mouth. Turning her attention back to Zoe and returning her index fingers to her temples, Veronica closed her eyes once again and focused.

Chapter 33: A Savior In White

“That must be Secar up ahead,” said Lucas as the trio trudged through the desert. The sun was no longer visible and nighttime was approaching rapidly. This made the well-lit buildings and street lamps in the distance easily discernible from the surrounding area. Though exhausted from the rigorous journey and numerous monster encounters, the group pressed on toward the city.

“Good,” Hagan replied, wiping the sweat from his brow. “At least we got something useful out of that idiot. Do we have enough gold to get a room for the night and restock on goods?”

Lucas nodded. “Yeah, I don’t think it’ll be a problem.”

“While I’m highly anticipating a good night’s rest,” Iris asserted, “I feel that we should use extreme caution during our stay in Secar. Though it will be a great opportunity to gain valuable information relating to both Damiano’s Disk and the recent attack on Azure, I speculate that our presence will be rejected.”

“Right,” Hagan agreed. “We’ve got to be ready for anything. The Cobras don’t exactly seem like the friendliest bunch.”

Iris was correct in her assumption, as the trio was met with immediate resistance when they neared the town’s border. Two large men dressed in armor approached them, equipped with razor-sharp spears and sabers sheathed by their sides. “Halt!” One of them shouted. Lucas, Iris, and Hagan froze in their tracks. “State your business,” the man ordered.

“We’re stranded out here and looking for a place to rest,” Lucas explained. “We’re tired, thirsty, and hungry.”

“Then sleep in the desert and eat sand,” the second man snapped, causing his companion to chuckle.

“You think this is funny, huh?!” Hagan lashed, reaching for his bow.

Hastily reacting, Iris grabbed his arm. “Hagan!” She shot him an intense look. Despite his rage, Hagan realized that he and his friends were in no shape for combat. Biting his lip, he lowered his arm.

“Yeah, I do,” the second man said smugly. “I think it’s hilarious. Now turn back. You’re not welcome here.”

“Unless...” the first man added, “you’re willing to ‘convince’ us to look the other way.”

The second man glanced at his comrade and smiled. He looked back at the trio. “How much gold you got?”

Seeing that there was no other option, Lucas removed the backpack from his shoulders and set it on the ground. Kneeling down, he dug through it in search of the gold.

“What’re you doing?!” Hagan exclaimed. “We can’t trust these guys! How do we know they’re not gonna just take the gold and leave us to die?!”

“It doesn’t matter,” Lucas answered, “we won’t survive out here anyway.”

The men smiled, knowing they had the trio trapped. “Looks like you’re in quite a pickle.”

Iris leaned down beside Lucas. “Our gold is essential for purchasing necessary rations and lodging. Surrendering our funds in order to gain access to Secar will be pointless.”

“That’s a smart girlfriend you’ve got there,” the first man said. “Tell you what, give her to us for the night and we’ll let you in.”

Iris’s eyes widened. “Give them the damn gold.”

“What’s going on?” A third man dressed in a brown hooded cloak asked as he approached from the town carrying a lantern.

The two men turned around to face him. “We were just telling these outsiders that they are not welcome here.”

“Just let us in!” Hagan interrupted. “All we want is a place to rest. Then we’ll be on our way.”

The man in the brown cloak came closer to the trio, walking between the two armored men. He looked at Hagan, then Iris, then Lucas, each of them remaining still the entire time, staring back at the stranger. “What are you looking for in that bag?” the man asked, shining his light on Lucas.

Both of the armored men became nervous. “We had just asked him what he had in there,” one of the men quickly explained before Lucas had a chance to answer.

“He’s lying!” Hagan interjected. “They were asking for a bribe. Lucas was looking for our gold.”

The man in the brown cloak faced the armored men. “Is this true?”

“We weren’t going to let them in,” one of the armored men quickly argued. “We just wanted to see what we could get out of them.”

“See, Lucas?” Hagan remarked. “I told you.”

The cloaked man turned his attention to the trio once again. “Turn back now. This is the only warning I will give you.”

“We can’t,” Iris responded. “We’re stranded.”

“That’s not my problem,” the cloaked man harshly rebutted.

“Come on guys,” Hagan said as he walked back toward the desert, “let’s go. This is just a waste of time.”

Seeing that there was no way they were going to be allowed passage into the town, Lucas collected the backpack and followed. Iris walked behind him. “Hold on,” Lucas shouted, catching up to Hagan, “let me get the lantern. We’re going to need it.” Hagan

nodded, a look of frustration on his face from the current predicament.

“Do we have an adequate amount of rations remaining?” Iris queried.

Removing the lantern from the backpack, Lucas replied, “Our water is low. Our last bottle is only half full. We don’t have much food left either.”

“Great!” Hagan barked sarcastically.

Lucas lit the lantern. “So now what?” he asked, slinging the backpack over his shoulders as the trio continued walking.

“I suppose we should begin searching for an appropriate area to rest for the night,” Iris responded.

“This sucks,” Hagan griped. “We’re stranded, almost out of food and water, and we don’t even know which direction goes home.”

“We have to stay positive,” Lucas replied.

Hagan was irritated by the response. “I’m being realistic!” he shouted. “We’re going to die out here! This place is crawling with monsters and we’re all way too exhausted to fight! Sorry if it’s a little hard for me to stay ‘positive!’”

They continued walking in silence. The stars were coming out, providing a little extra light for the trio in their trek. Still, Lucas waved the lantern carefully as they proceeded, scanning for any sign of trouble. *My legs are killing me. Ugh, I’m starting to wish I never even knew about this stupid disk frag—*

Regardless of his efforts to keep a lookout for oncoming threats, Lucas was completely surprised when he was tackled to the ground by an imp. The unexpected assault threw the lantern out of his hands, luckily remaining lit when it hit the sand. Hagan reached for his bow but was promptly attacked by two more of the creatures.

Her reaction time slowed from exhaustion, Iris met the same fate as a fourth imp lunged at her, knocking her to the ground. Lucas fumbled for his sword as the imp chomped into his skin. “Ahh!” he yelled, removing the sword from its sheath and stabbing the vicious attacker.

Remembering the knife he had obtained from Aiden, Hagan sliced the neck of the first imp while the second continued to claw at him. Managing to shove the other foe with his free hand, he got to his feet.

Iris, inexperienced with physical combat, and knowing that she was far too drained to conjure, tried with all of her might to throw the aggressor off of her. While she was able to push it away from her, it returned incessantly, only becoming more and more irritated. In a panic, she slapped the imp across its face. This proved to be surprisingly effective. The creature was temporarily dazed by the strike, giving Iris an opportunity to kick the imp away as she fled.

Noticing Iris’s struggle, Lucas hastily finished off her aggressor with a thrust of his blade as Hagan delivered a lethal stab to the final imp. Unfortunately, none of them had a chance to say a word before Hagan was unexpectedly stabbed in his back. He let out a cry of pain as Lucas and Iris turned to see one of the monstrous scorpions pulling its stinger out of him. Hagan collapsed in agony, dropping the knife and prompting Lucas to charge the beast. Thrusting its tail at him, Lucas barely dodged in time. Iris shrieked, helpless to assist in the struggle.

Lucas took a swipe at the scorpion, but it merely blocked his blade using one of its massive pincers. Taking advantage of this, it lunged its stinger at Lucas’s face, who quickly darted his head to the right to avoid it. Lucas stumbled backward. *That was close!*

As Lucas prepared for his next attempt to defeat the beast, a figure wearing a white hooded cloak emerged with lightning speed from the shadows. Armed with a black katana, the lone figure hacked the scorpion to pieces with little effort. Lucas and Iris both took a few steps back, a look of shock on their faces. The figure

looked at them. Its face was completely covered with the exception of its eyes, which were blue.

Hagan struggled to get to his feet but was still in great pain from the scorpion's attack. "Who ar- agh!!" he fell back down.

Iris ran to his aid. "You need to stay calm. Allow me to inspect your wound."

Meanwhile, Lucas stared at the mysterious person in the white cloak. "Thank you," he said. "Who are you?"

"What are you doing out here?" the figure replied coldly. To the trio's surprise, the voice was clearly feminine.

"We're stranded," Lucas replied. "We were going to spend the night in Secar but they won't let us in."

"Agggh!" Hagan let out another cry of pain. "Don't do that!"

"Sorry," Iris replied. She looked back at Lucas. "I'm afraid Hagan's injury is more severe than I had initially speculated. It's also possible that he's been poisoned."

The woman in the white cloak approached his body. Iris looked at her but was unsure of what to say. After a brief pause, the woman spoke. "He doesn't have much time. I've seen this before. Most don't survive more than a few hours after the initial sting."

"Well my day - agh! - just keeps getting better!!" Hagan shouted.

The woman in white sheathed the katana on her back and walked into the desert. "Carry him and follow me. I can help him if you'd like." Her tone was apathetic, despite the generous assistance she had offered the group.

Iris looked at Lucas, as though she were leaving it up to him to decide if they should trust the stranger. He gave a nod and looked back to the woman, who continued walking. "Thank you,"

he said, sheathing his sword. “Just give us a minute to get him.” She stopped walking as Lucas quickly collected the lantern, still lying on the ground.

The woman in white turned back around. “Hurry up, before I change my mind.”

Lucas was unsure of what to do with the lantern, considering that he and Iris would need both of their hands free to carry Hagan. He approached the woman and handed it to her. “Could you hold this please?”

“I have no need for that toy,” she replied coldly. “I can see clearly without it.”

“I need my hands free to carry Hagan,” he argued.

“Then have her carry it,” she replied, pointing to Iris.

“I’ll need her help carrying Hagan,” Lucas responded, a bit frustrated by the woman’s refusal.

She grunted, snatching the lantern from his hand. “Cry baby,” she muttered. “Now hurry up. I don’t have to do this, you know.”

Lucas and Iris followed the cloaked woman, carrying Hagan with them. There was no conversation along the way, as Lucas and Iris had to use every ounce of physical and mental strength left to tote their teammate. Hagan himself was experiencing a surging pain throughout his body, which seemed to grow more severe as they trudged on. A winged creature swooped from the sky toward the group at one point, but was quickly taken out by the woman in white before Lucas or Iris could react. “We’re almost there,” she said as she returned the katana to the sheath on her back. “Just keep following me.”

Lucas eyed the corpse as they walked by it. A bird-like beast with four wings lay motionless in the sand, a cut delivered with deadly precision across its body. *I’m glad she’s on our side.* He looked back up at her. *At least, I think she is.* He tried to read her emotions, but was overcome with Hagan’s feelings, causing him to

stumble and nearly drop his ally. He deactivated his power. “Sorry.”

“Are you alright?” Iris asked.

Lucas nodded. “Just keep going.”

At last, the group reached a small isolated shack. The woman in white opened the door and went inside, leaving it ajar behind her for Lucas and Iris. Once they had entered, the cloaked woman set the lantern on a small table and walked over to a drawer. As she searched its contents, she glanced back at the trio.

“Set him face down over there.” She pointed to a corner of the one-room shack in which a shabby looking blanket and pillow lay. Lucas and Iris obeyed, carefully placing their disoriented friend onto the blanket.

Lucas shut the door and took off the backpack, setting it on the ground. He looked around the room, dimly lit only by the light of the lantern. “Is this where you live?” he asked while Iris, completely drained, collapsed into a wooden chair.

“Yes,” the cloaked woman replied, removing a vial of light-blue liquid from the drawer. She approached Hagan’s body. “I discovered it years ago, completely abandoned.”

Lucas took the half-full bottle of water out of the backpack and handed it to Iris, seeing that she was in far more desperate need of hydration than he was. Meanwhile, the woman removed Hagan’s bow and quiver. Then, she took out a dagger and began cutting his shirt off. “Wha... my shirt,” Hagan asserted, his voice muffled by the pillow.

“Do you value your shirt over your life?” the woman asked, removing the vial’s cap. “Now get ready, this is going to hurt.”

After Iris had taken a drink of water, she handed the bottle to Lucas. “Remedium Potion,” she commented, eyeing the vial in the woman’s hand.

The woman glanced at her before turning her focus back to Hagan. “You know your stuff,” she noted as Lucas quenched his thirst, leaving just enough water for Hagan.

“I’m an alchemist,” Iris informed the woman in white, who was now pouring a small amount of the liquid onto Hagan’s wound.

“Aaaaaahhh!!!” he screamed.

“Suck it up,” the woman ordered calmly. She replaced the cap on the vial and returned it to the drawer. “He will just need a good night’s rest. It’s going to hurt for a while, but it’s nothing a big guy like him can’t handle.”

“We cannot begin to express our thanks for your assistance,” Iris said as Lucas gave the bottle of water to Hagan.

“Yeah, I owe you big time,” Hagan added as he slowly turned on his side to take a drink.

“No thanks necessary,” the woman responded, making her way toward the door. “I have some business to take care of. I’ll be back later. You may sleep here tonight, but I want you out in the morning. If any monsters try to break in while I’m gone you’ll be on your own.” She opened the door and glanced back at them. “By the way... if you want to get into Secar, you have to wait until late at night. Kuraikaji’s nightshift patrol are a bunch of slackers.” She proceeded outside.

“Wait!” said Lucas. “Can we at least get your name?”

“No,” she responded bluntly, exiting the shack and shutting the door behind her.

“Interesting turn of events,” Iris noted.

“Seriously,” Lucas replied. “How are you feeling, Hagan?”

“Like crap,” Hagan grumbled. “Let’s just get some sleep. We can worry about what’s next in the morning.”

Lucas gave a nod. “Oh, by the way. I put the knife you got from Aiden in the backpack.” Without turning his head to him, Hagan gave Lucas a thumbs up.

Turning his focus to the shack’s window, Lucas stared out into the night. *I should have read her while she was in here. Oh well, she saved us and gave us somewhere to sleep. She can’t be too bad. Still, I wonder who she is and what she’s doing way out here...*

Chapter 34: Identity Theft

Taking a small purple crystal out of the bag on her waist, she placed it into a groove on the colorless mountainside. It glowed brightly as the rock shifted, creating an opening. Removing the crystal and placing it back inside of her bag, she proceeded into the passage. She could hear the rock returning to its original formation behind her as she walked down the hallway. A man in his early forties dressed in armor emerged from around the corner. He had short, dirty-blond hair and brown eyes.

“Zoe!” the man greeted. “You’ve returned. Do you have the fragment?” Reaching back into the bag on her waist, she removed the fragment and handed it to him.

Suddenly the image before her eyes morphed to look like Zoe. “Stay out of my head!!” she shouted.

Veronica’s eyes opened. Picking up a pen lying in front of her on the table, she jotted down the latest development on a lengthy piece of parchment. Once she was finished, she turned to Laverick and smiled. “Bingo.” A massive toothy grin consumed Laverick’s face as Veronica got out of her seat. “Stay put,” she ordered. “I’m going to get Lord Quinn. Watch her carefully; I don’t know how long the effects of his holding spell will last.”

Laverick nodded several times. “You got it, Ma!”

The door closed behind Veronica and Laverick immediately jumped to his feet, running around the table and stopping in front of Zoe’s motionless body. She stood like a statue, the look of anger on her face, her mouth still positioned to form words for her argument with Lord Quinn. “Hi Zoe!” Laverick said. “I know ya can’t talk right now but that’s okay. I’m Laverick. Ma and I are gonna be rich and famous thanks to you!”

Zoe was infuriated. *Shut up, moron.*

Laverick took a few steps toward her, swinging his arms in a carefree fashion as he spoke. “I know you’re a little mad right now but that’s okay, I’ll make it up to you. I’ll let you marry me and we can live haaaaapily ever after!”

I’d rather die, you stupid man-child!! Zoe’s inability to verbalize her thoughts only made her angrier.

Luckily, at that moment, Veronica reentered the room with Lord Quinn, causing Laverick to scurry back to his seat. Though Zoe was greatly nervous about what was to come, she was relieved to have Laverick out of her sight.

“It seems that the Spade base is protected by an enchanted door,” Veronica explained as she and Lord Quinn made their way back to their chairs. “I saw her activate it using a purple crystal which she kept in a sack. While I will have no trouble directing Laverick to the base’s location telepathically, the door could prove to be a major issue without that crystal.”

Lord Quinn smiled. “There is no need to worry. When she was caught sneaking into Valdis Prison, the guards confiscated her belongings, including a sack containing, among other things, a small purple crystal. It’s currently in the basement with the rest of her possessions.” He sat down at the end of the table as Veronica seated herself on the chair to his left. He glanced at Zoe, then back to Veronica. “What a fortunate turn of events. When I had initially come to you, that old man Roshan was still in my captivity. From what I now understand, he was operating from his restaurant at the time and may have been unaware of the exact location of the most recent Spade base. It seems to have all worked out for the best.” He paused for a moment, looking back at Zoe and smiling. Returning his attention to Veronica, he went on. “But let’s not get ahead of ourselves. First, I would like to request a demonstration.” Lord Quinn looked at Laverick. “Show me what you’re capable of.”

Excitedly, Laverick jumped out of his chair and bolted back to the other side of the table where Zoe stood. He came to a halt

directly in front of her, as his face suddenly turned to stone. With bulging eyes, he studied her.

This made Zoe incredibly uncomfortable. *What the hell is this creep doing?! Hey! Stop that! Is he checking me out?! Ew! Get away from me, weirdo!*

“The emerald took years to perfect,” Veronica explained. “It’s the product of countless rituals, performed to perfect detail. I originally created it as a gift for my son’s birthday. I always told him he could be anything he wanted to be.” She watched as Laverick carefully eyed Zoe. Turning her head back toward Lord Quinn, she added, “I believe you will be most pleased with what you are about to witness.”

The smile returned to Laverick’s face as he turned back to his mother and Lord Quinn. “Okay, I think I got it.” Laverick reported cheerfully. He faced Zoe again, this time placing both of his hands on the emerald attached to his bizarre looking necklace. Staring intensely into Zoe’s eyes, he shouted “identitatis apparentia effingo!”

The moment the words left his lips, the emerald glowed and Laverick’s skin became liquid-like. His hair changed shape, perfectly resembling Zoe’s hairstyle. Next, its color darkened, turning black. Then, his entire body shape-shifted into Zoe’s form. Needless to say, Zoe was in total shock as she witnessed the transformation. Laverick now completely resembled her in perfect detail, despite his clothing which was rather loose and baggy on his new form. The emerald ceased its glowing as Laverick took his hands off of the necklace and turned to Lord Quinn.

“Ta-daaah!” he exclaimed in Zoe’s voice.

What the hell are you going to do with my body, you creep?! Zoe screamed within her mind. You’d better hope you’re not around when I’m able to move again.

Lord Quinn smiled. “Excellent. You have exceeded my expectations.”

“Marvelous work, Laverick,” Veronica added, clapping her hands in approval. Laverick bowed.

“We shall carry out phase two in the morning,” Lord Quinn said, turning his attention back to Veronica. “You and your son may sleep in any of the guest rooms for tonight. Report back to this room at 9am for further instruction.”

Veronica got out of her chair. “As you wish. Come, Laverick!”

Laverick placed his hands on the emerald. “Identitatis apparentia authenticum!” The jewel glowed once again as the shape-shifting process reversed itself, returning him to his original form. Veronica walked toward the door as Laverick ran to catch up with her.

Once the two had left, Lord Quinn approached Zoe. He stood in front of her for a moment, saying nothing at first as he eyed the ‘X’ on her forehead. Then, looking into her eyes, he spoke. “When you awake tomorrow, you are to stay in your room. Understood?” He paused before saying, “umbra somnus,” causing Zoe to suddenly lose consciousness and collapse. Catching her as she fell, Lord Quinn carried her out of the room.

Chapter 35: Reflections Of The Past (Part VI)

He spent the rest of the day studying The Forbidden Art of Necromancy (For Scholastic Use Only!) carefully. It was going to take a lot of work to bring Vera back, but he read that he could communicate with her quite easily using a rather simplistic ritual. The next day, he gathered the materials he would need to perform it. The book warned that there were many dangers involved with the endeavor, but he was unconcerned. He did not care what risk he would have to take. He now knew that he could bring her back, and he had to act as soon as possible.

Once nighttime had arrived, he made his attempt. Carefully lighting several candles and positioning them to form a large circle, he sat in the middle and read the long chant aloud. Being rather gifted in the field of magic, he was successful on his first try. Voices soon flooded his head. He found the clutter to be extremely unpleasant. Following the book's instructions, he closed his eyes and remained still, focusing his thoughts on Vera. Slowly and gradually, the voices faded one by one. Soon, only a single voice remained. At last, he had found her. His eyes glistened; the tears were impossible to hold back.

He apologized profusely for his inability to defend her, and went on to explain all that had happened since her passing. He told her that, with the aid of the book he had recently discovered, he would be able to bring her back. He expressed again and again his eagerness to resume their life as it was, feeling his days of darkness were at last coming to an end.

Vera's reply, however, was not at all what he had expected. She told him that it had been her time to go, as tragic and unwanted as it may have seemed in the moment. She said that he would understand one day, and though she cared about him deeply, she wanted to remain where she was. She told him that it would be best for both of them if he just let go.

Refusing his pleas over and over again, she eventually apologized and ended the communication. He opened his eyes and sat in silence. What would he do now? He didn't know. Hours passed. Finally, he got to his feet.

Then, something unexpected happened as he blew out the last candle. "Javan," he heard. Hastily, he snapped his head around, attempting to find the source of the voice. But there was only silence. Perplexed and a bit frightened, he collected the book and left the room.

Chapter 36: A Killer In White

Lucas awoke abruptly after receiving a sharp kick in his stomach. “Ah!” he gasped.

“Wake up.”

Looking up, he saw the woman in the white cloak standing over him. Lucas slowly hoisted himself off of the floor and onto his feet. The room was rather dark, illuminated only by the dim light of the rising sun.

“Collect your companions and leave,” the woman ordered. Admittedly, Lucas wanted to stay long enough to at least eat some of the remaining food in the backpack. However, he didn’t want to take advantage of the woman’s kindness, and obeyed her request.

He approached Iris, who had eventually ended up on the floor near Hagan. Lucas kneeled down beside her, looking up to see the woman in white. She remained in place, watching his every move. That’s when it occurred to him. *Maybe now would be a good time to read her... Since she’s the only person awake right now, it shouldn’t be hard to tell her emotions apart from everyone else’s.*

“Well?” the woman in white barked. “Are you going to wake them up or do I have to kick them too?”

Lucas quickly scanned the woman’s emotions. He was surprised by the feeling. It was cold, yet there was a distant warmth, like a small fire in a blizzard. It was most unusual. *Who is this woman?*

Lucas deactivated his power and gently shook Iris’s arm. “Iris... wake up. We need to go.”

She sat up and yawned. “Good morning, Lucas. Did you sleep well?”

“Yes,” he replied. “But we need to go now. Wake up Hagan, I’ll get our things together.” Lucas collected the lantern, still resting on the table from the night before, and returned it to the backpack.

Meanwhile, Iris shook Hagan’s arm. “Hagan...” He didn’t respond. She tried again. “Hagan, it’s morning.” Hagan’s eyes slowly opened.

“How are you feeling?” she asked.

“Better,” he replied. “Still hurts like hell, though.”

After putting on the backpack, Lucas looked back at the woman in white. “Thank you again,” he said. She ignored him, turning her head toward Iris who was helping Hagan off of the makeshift bed. Seeing this, Lucas darted to assist.

Once Hagan was on his feet, he scanned the room. “Where’s my bow and quiver?”

“Over there,” the woman replied, pointing to a chair in which Hagan’s things rested. There was a pause while Hagan slowly walked to collect his equipment.

Lucas eyed the wound on Hagan’s back, completely exposed due to his lack of shirt. *Looks like he’s still in pretty rough shape... Wait! I should be able to conjure now that I’ve slept. That means I can try the heal-*

“You never answered my question, by the way,” the woman in white suddenly asserted, interrupting Lucas’s train of thought.

He looked at her, puzzled. “What question?”

“What are you doing out here?” she quickly replied.

“We told you,” Lucas answered, “we’re lost.”

The woman did not seem pleased with this response. “I find it doubtful that you came to the desert for a little hiking. I’ll only ask one more time, and I want the truth. WHY are you here?”

“Does it really matter?” Hagan grumbled.

“Yes,” she replied sternly. “I have a right to know. If you disagree,” she placed her hand on the hilt of her katana, “I’ll be pleased to take back what I’ve done for you.”

“Alright, geez!” Hagan abruptly responded.

“Hey now, we don’t want any trouble,” Lucas asserted, “it’s just a bit of a lengthy story.”

The woman in white returned her hand to her side. “Then tell me your ‘lengthy story.’”

To the best of his ability, Lucas once again explained everything that had happened since his departure from his home just outside of Cymbeline. The woman in white said nothing the entire time, even during the parts that were usually cut short due to the listeners’ disbelief. Still, Iris occasionally interrupted to verify his claims, likely a result of her own skepticism when Lucas initially told his tale to her.

“After Aiden ran off, we tried to get into Secar. The guards wouldn’t let us in, so we had to turn around. It wasn’t long before we encountered those monsters and you showed up.” Once Lucas had finished talking, the room was silent.

“So there you go,” Hagan finally said. “Happy?”

The woman in the white cloak appeared to have no response at first. Then, softly, she spoke. “Quinn...” She paused briefly before going on, much more audibly than before. “When I first saw you, struggling against those monsters, I was about to leave you to die. The only reason I didn’t is because there were times in my life where the kindness of strangers was essential to my survival. Initially, I felt as though I were repaying a karmic debt. But now I see – perhaps fate is responsible for our meeting.”

Much to the trio’s surprise, the woman in the white cloak proceeded to remove her hood, revealing the upper half of her face. Her hair was black, with subtle signs of graying. She had straight

cut bangs, and when she pulled the rest of her hair out of the cloak, she unveiled a rather lengthy ponytail. “Consider yourselves lucky,” she said as she untied the cloth concealing the remainder of her face below her eyes. “I don’t show my face or share my story with very many people.”

The woman’s face was now completely visible. Her skin was worn. Dark bags hung beneath her eyes as the result of innumerable sleepless nights. The trio remained silent, eager to hear what the woman would say next. “Now listen carefully, kids,” she continued, “I’m going to tell you about my personal encounter with Javan Quinn.

“My name is Sezuni Haahn,” the woman revealed as she made her way over to a cabinet. “In my younger years, I was a member of an assassins’ guild known as The Order of the Sacred Blade.” Removing a rather large bottle of whiskey and a glass, she shut the cabinet and sat down at the small table. “It wasn’t easy work by any means, but killing proved to be something I was good at and the Order kept me taken care of.”

Sezuni filled the glass with whiskey. “One day, I got an assignment to take out Lord Javan Quinn. I was a bit surprised that I would be responsible for eliminating the king’s adviser, but the client was offering a decent bounty for his death.” Tilting her head back, she gulped down half of the glass’s contents with seemingly little trouble. She set it back on the table. “Little was known about the client or the reasoning behind his request. But the price was right, and I took the job. Assassins rarely ask questions. We just do what we’re assigned to do and call it a day.”

She took another, smaller drink before continuing. “It wasn’t long before I found an opportunity to hit my target. Quinn was hosting a party... it was late in the evening, and I was able to slip in undetected. This didn’t take much effort considering the large number of people in attendance. All I had to do was isolate him from the crowd long enough to carry out the act. I waited until he had downed a few glasses of wine before introducing myself to him under a false name, feeling the impairment would work to my

advantage. Then, once I'd spoken with him a bit, something strange happened that I'd never experienced before."

Sezuni paused for a moment, finishing the glass. "Not only was he rich and handsome, but he was absolutely brilliant. There was something so dark and mysterious about him... it was irresistible."

"Hold on," Hagan chimed in. "Is this going where I think it's going?"

Sezuni glanced at him. "Do you honestly think any man in his right mind would form a meaningful relationship with someone who kills for a living? I had to get what I could take, and Quinn was quite a score. So, I decided I'd have a little fun with him before I finished the job... After all, I would need to isolate him anyway. Luring him into the bedroom was an effective method to accomplish the task. It worked perfectly... Thanks to the wine, it didn't take long for him to doze off, allowing me an excellent opportunity to strike.

"I took out my dagger... and that's when everything went wrong. He unexpectedly awoke as I raised the blade. Needless to say, I was unable to kill him. To make matters worse, it turned out that he was a master of Shadow magic. I was outmatched. I had to escape if I wished to live.

"Returning to the Order wasn't an option. They do not tolerate failure in any form. If an assassin is unable to kill a target and escape unseen, they are marked a liability, and become targeted themselves. Knowing this, I fled and went into hiding.

"Luckily, I was able to use the skills I had learned as an assassin to survive as a successful thief. I thought everything was going to be alright. Then, I hit a snag when I began feeling sick and unbearably fatigued weeks later... It turned out that my intimate encounter with Javan was more than just 'a little fun.'

"Those were some of the most difficult months of my life... Still, I managed to survive with the help of kind strangers I met

along the way. When the baby was finally born, I was unsure of what to do next. I'm a killer, not a mother. So I did what I thought was best. I placed the baby in a basket, and left it on Quinn's doorstep. From that point, I decided to close that chapter of my life and never look back.

"For a good while after that, I spent my life as a nomadic thief and continued to keep a low profile. Eventually, I found this place and have been living here ever since. I've remained undisturbed by the Order... and am able to easily sneak into Secar at night to get anything I need. I guess you could call it my retirement."

"That's a hell of a life story," Hagan commented.

"Do you know what became of your child?" Iris queried.

Sezuni shrugged. "Like I told you, I've put that part of my life behind me. Quinn lives the good life. I knew the kid would have a better chance of surviving with him than with me. But to be entirely honest, part of me just didn't want the responsibility. I had enough trouble as it was."

She poured another glass of whiskey. "Now, after hearing your story, I'm beginning to put the pieces together. Whoever the client was must have known about Quinn's plot long before it evolved into what's going on today. I find it intriguing that they came to us instead of the king... but on the same token, they probably knew that Quinn would be able to snake his way out of the accusations and turn the table on them. Smart man, whoever he was. Sadly, I wasn't successful and it seems that countless others have lost their lives as a result."

Sezuni took a drink. "Damiano's Disk... I heard it was a myth. Then again, I always believed monsters to be mythical too. I'm curious to know why Quinn began chasing it in the first place. I'm also wondering how Kuraikaji became involved." She paused before shrugging and taking yet another drink.

“So,” Sezuni said, “if I understand correctly, you’re trying to stop Quinn, Kuraikaji, and this ‘Spade’ guild from completing Damiano’s Disk. Is that right?”

Lucas nodded. “We’ve decided that the only way to ensure its power isn’t used for anything but returning peace to Aria is to get it ourselves.”

Sezuni chuckled. “Good luck.”

“Thanks for the reassurance,” Hagan grumbled.

Sezuni stared down at her glass. “I’ll admit that you have guts. But you’re just wasting your time. It’s been roughly twenty years since Quinn was assigned as my target. If he’s so determined to unlock the temple himself that he hasn’t given up after this long, the only way to get that fragment from him will be to kill him.” She looked at the trio. “From my own experience, I can tell you with absolute certainty that he won’t go down easily.”

“I’d rather try than do nothing,” Lucas responded. “If it wasn’t for Lord Quinn, my parents would still be alive. Now, Grandpa is the only family I have left, and I’m not going to let these monsters take him away from me too. I knew this wasn’t going to be easy from the start, and I’ll admit that things look pretty grim. But I refuse to quit until Aria is restored.”

“That’s very courageous,” Sezuni replied, “but if you’re still struggling against the monsters, I’d hate to see what Kuraikaji or Quinn would do to you.”

“We’re well aware of the risk involved,” Iris asserted.

“Are you really?” Sezuni responded. “You may have very well died in the desert last night if I hadn’t found you. What makes you think you’re suited to take on some of the deadliest men in Aria?”

“At least we’re doing something about it,” Hagan argued. “Everyone’s affected by this, including you.”

The room briefly fell silent. “I can see that you’re not going to be easily deterred,” Sezuni noted. “However, stumbling around Hravart Desert isn’t my idea of ‘doing something about it.’”

“We told you,” Hagan shouted, “we ended up here by mistake!”

“Then why aren’t you taking advantage of your ‘mistake?’” Sezuni inquired. “Think about it. You’ve been unintentionally led directly to Kuraikaji, the man responsible for destroying your home town and a key player in the hunt for this disk. And much like Quinn, he will only be stopped by death.” With a mighty gulp, Sezuni finished her glass of whiskey. “I believe that all things happen for a reason. Our meeting is no coincidence. Perhaps I’m supposed to prevent your death by offering my warning. Or maybe, you’re destined to succeed regardless. Ultimately, it’s a matter of your determination.” She paused before adding, “If you’re serious about this, then I’m willing to help you get into Secar. Just don’t be surprised if you never make it back out.”

“Pfft,” Hagan scoffed, “we can take Kuraikaji. No sweat.” He grunted as he felt a surge of pain, still sore from the effects of the scorpion’s sting.

Sezuni smirked. “Sure.”

Lucas approached Hagan. “Let me try the healing spell.” Hagan cast a glare at Sezuni before facing Lucas and giving a soft nod. Placing his hand on Hagan, Lucas focused. “Lumen sana.” Hagan began to glow and was soon alleviated of his pain as the injury vanished. Once he was finished healing, Lucas removed his hand. “Any better?”

Taking a quick moment to stretch, Hagan replied. “Hell yes! That’s more like it!” He looked at Sezuni. “Just wait and see, Kuraikaji won’t know what hit him!”

Ignoring his remarks, Sezuni turned her attention to Lucas. “Impressive. You said that you just started conjuring a few days ago?”

“Yeah,” Lucas answered. “It took a lot of practice, but I think I’m getting the hang of it.”

“Your healing skill is remarkable,” she asserted. “You must be quite gifted to have learned so quickly.”

“Iris is just a good teacher, I guess,” Lucas replied. Iris smiled at the comment.

“I mean no offense to her,” Sezuni responded, “but you will only get so far learning from an Ice mage and books. Light is the most difficult center to master. Yet you’ve managed to learn basic healing within a matter of days. With a natural skill like that, you have the potential to become an advanced mage, or possibly, a master. However, you will need guidance from someone experienced with advanced Light conjuring. Are you familiar with a man named Aalok Bonham?”

Lucas shook his head.

“Aalok Bonham is a famous master of Light conjuring,” Iris informed him. “He lives in and works from Ivyvyne Village, the town I grew up in.”

“So you know him?” Sezuni queried.

Iris gave a nod. “Indeed. In fact, I was his student for a while. After I expressed my interest in alchemy, his school provided me with a scholarship to attend college.”

Hagan lifted an eyebrow. “Didn’t you say he was a total grouch?”

“He’s definitely a unique individual,” Iris responded, a bit embarrassed. “Regardless, his skill is unmatched. I’m certain Lucas could learn a great deal as his student.”

“If you want my advice,” Sezuni asserted, “I think it would be wise to pay him a visit before taking on Kuraikaji and especially Quinn.”

“What?!” Hagan blurted. “We don’t have time for that!”

“Fine,” Sezuni said calmly, “get yourselves killed.”

“Sezuni has a credible suggestion,” Iris interjected. “Perhaps we should consider her advice.”

“We can go see him after we take care of Kuraikaji,” Lucas asserted. “Hagan has a good point too. If we don’t take out Kuraikaji now, Ivyvyne Village could be destroyed before we can even make it over there. We need to act now, while we’re already here.”

“Kuraikaji isn’t the only person you need to worry about,” Sezuni said sternly. “His army of Cobras keeps him well guarded. They are vicious fighters, as I’m sure you’re well aware. They have been so successful in maintaining Kuraikaji’s control over Secar, that even King Ashraf’s knights have ceased their efforts to take back the town. Pulling this off will take incredible strategy and precise timing.”

Lucas gasped. “That’s right... Aiden said that the Cobras protect Secar from monsters. Without them, the people will be defenseless.”

“I believe he also stated that they’re the primary source of goods,” Iris added. “Perhaps we should reconsider our strategy...”

“It’s them or the rest of Aria,” Hagan argued.

Sezuni got out of her chair. “If you somehow manage to eliminate Kuraikaji and the Cobras, then yes, Secar will have no defense against the monsters. But I assure you, there is no other way to stop him. He will not be reasoned with. And don’t forget the likely possibility that you will all be slaughtered in your attempt. I recommend that you take some time to weigh the options. As I said before, I am more than willing to help you get into Secar if you decide to go through with this. I’m honestly not sure if you’re ready, but I’ll leave the decision in your hands.”

She walked toward the makeshift bed Hagan had slept on. “I need to get some sleep. You may stay here and help yourself to anything while you think it over.” Sezuni removed the sheathed katana from her back and placed it on the floor beside the blanket. Resting herself on the scruffy bed, she let out a loud burp before rolling onto her side, facing the wall.

Lucas turned to his companions. “I want to keep Kuraikaji from destroying any other town, but I don’t feel right doing this without a plan to protect the people of Secar.”

“I’m sure we’ll think of something,” Hagan assured Lucas, casually making his way to the table. He grabbed the whiskey bottle. “She said we can help ourselves to anything, right?”

Iris’s eyebrows lowered. “That’s hardly a necessity.” Hagan shrugged and proceeded to refill his flask.

After setting the backpack on the ground and seating himself in a nearby chair, Lucas pondered the situation. *There’s got to be some way we can keep Secar livable and stop Kuraikaji from continuing his rampage. Then again, Sezuni doesn’t seem to think we’ll stand a chance against him anyway. Maybe she’s right. Maybe we aren’t ready. Maybe we’re in over our heads with this whole thing... No. There’s some way to do this. I just need to think.*

“Lucas?” asked Iris. Lucas looked at her, raising his eyebrows. “Are you okay?”

“Yes,” he replied. “I’m just trying to figure out how we should do this.”

There was a pause before Iris spoke again. “I’m feeling unbearably hungry. Maybe we should eat and replenish ourselves before putting anymore thought into the matter.”

Lucas nodded. “Alright. I just hope we make the right decision.”

Chapter 37: Faux Zoe

Veronica and Laverick entered the meeting room at 9am to find Lord Quinn sitting at the head of the large table. “Good morning,” he greeted as the pair approached.

Veronica smiled. “Good morning. Will Zoe be joining us shortly?”

Lord Quinn was puzzled by the question. “Is her presence necessary?”

“Of course,” Veronica answered. “Laverick will need her in order to transform again.” She pulled out the chair to Lord Quinn’s left and sat down.

“It’s too early, Ma...” Laverick griped as he seated himself next to Veronica.

“Oh hush,” his mother snapped.

“I was under the impression that she would not need to be in attendance,” Lord Quinn asserted. “Laverick has taken her shape once before, can he not simply resume it?”

Laverick shook his head. “Nope, it doesn’t work like that. She’s gotta be here or I can’t do it.”

With a sigh, Lord Quinn got to his feet. “Very well. I shall return shortly.”

* * * *

Zoe sat in front of her bookshelf, flipping rapidly through every magic book she owned. From the moment she awoke that morning, she had immediately resumed her search for information on removing jinxes. However, despite her tireless effort, her hunt was unsuccessful. *Dammit, I’m going to be stuck with this stupid jinx forever.* She slammed the book in her hands shut. *Okay, so I*

just need to think. What do I already know about jinxes? Well, I know that they prevent the afflicted person from conjuring through their center or performing enchantments, and that you have to be an advanced Shadow mage to cast them. That's about it. Letting out a grunt of frustration, Zoe picked up yet another book and flipped through its pages. I know I read about jinxes in one of these – or was it in the library?

Without warning, her thoughts were interrupted by a loud knock at her bedroom door. “Go away!” she shouted without looking up.

Ignoring her words, Lord Quinn entered the room. “It seems that your presence is necessary for Laverick’s transformation.”

Zoe shut the book and looked up at him before rising to her feet. “What makes you think I care?”

“I am uninterested in whether or not you care,” Lord Quinn calmly responded. “I will allow you one chance to proceed to the meeting room and cooperate of your own free will. If not, I shall be forced to temporarily paralyze you once more.”

Zoe made her feelings clear by raising her middle finger.

Noticeably enraged by the gesture, Lord Quinn swiftly pointed his index finger at her and shouted, “*Umbra immobilis mutus!*”

* * * *

The doors of the meeting room burst open as Lord Quinn entered, carrying Zoe’s statue-like body. He placed her on her feet, in the same area of the room she had stood the previous day.

Veronica eyed Zoe, noticing her raised middle finger. “I’m assuming she wasn’t very pleased with the news.”

Lord Quinn rubbed his forehead as he sat down. “An understatement,” he muttered. Veronica chuckled.

“Now, shall we begin?” Lord Quinn suggested.

“As you wish,” Veronica replied. She glanced at Laverick, giving a single nod.

A large grin swept across Laverick’s face as he hurriedly got out of his chair and approached Zoe. “Hi Zoe!” he exclaimed. “You shouldn’t raise that finger. Ma says it’s a bad finger. Okay, well I guess I gotta borrow your body again so just hold still! Ha! Get it? It’s ‘cause you can’t mo—”

“That’s quite enough, darling,” Veronica interrupted. “There is much work to be done. You want to make mommy proud, don’t you?”

Laverick quickly nodded several times. “Uh-huh! Sorry, Ma, I’ll transform now.” Facing Zoe, he took a moment to carefully study her.

She was incredibly irked by his close proximity, especially knowing what he was about to do. *At least my finger’s talking for me this time.*

The wide grin returned to Laverick’s face as he placed both of his hands on the emerald tied to his neck. With his eyes fixed to hers, he said, “identitatis apparentia effingo,” causing him to morph into an exact replica of Zoe. Once the transformation was complete, he faced Lord Quinn and his mother.

“Okay, I did it,” he proclaimed with Zoe’s voice.

“Perfect,” Lord Quinn replied. “Now, listen carefully. Using her telepathic ability, Veronica shall lead you directly to the Spades’ headquarters. Once inside, you are to locate and secure the disk fragment. When it is in your possession, return to this room as soon as possible.”

Laverick saluted, “Aye-aye, Captain! You can count on me.”

“I urge that you monitor your behavior carefully,” Lord Quinn added. “It is absolutely imperative that the Spades are

entirely convinced that you are Zoe. We cannot afford to raise any suspicion. Are we clear?"

"Yep," Laverick responded. "Don't you worry, they won't suspect a thing."

"I certainly hope so," said Lord Quinn. "Now, I need you to listen carefully, Laverick. Once you have left the mansion, you are to proceed directly to the building which once housed Roshan's Cafe in northern Cymbeline. Knock on the door six times and you will be let inside. I've had my men working hard to reconstruct the old man's previously destroyed gateway. By passing through it, you will be led to the same area of the In Between in which the fragment was, apparently, delivered by a blond-haired young man. I can only assume that this is the same person your mother witnessed handing the fragment to Zoe. From that point on, your mother will direct you telepathically to the Spades' headquarters."

"Okie dokie!" Laverick exclaimed as he excitedly dashed toward the door.

"Stop!" Lord Quinn shouted. Freezing in his tracks, Laverick slowly turned around. Lord Quinn got out of his chair. "You will require appropriate dress as well as the purple crystal used to access the base." He reached down and picked up a brown sack resting on the ground by his chair. Handing it to Laverick, he explained: "Inside is a change of clothes as well as one of the aforementioned crystals. We will leave the room momentarily to allow you time to dress yourself. Make certain you remove your necklace and secure the crystal in your pocket. Be very careful not to misplace it."

Laverick took the bag and examined its contents as his mother and Lord Quinn walked out of the room. The pair waited outside until they heard Laverick shout, "Kay! You can come back now!"

They reentered the meeting room to see Laverick now dressed in clothing strongly resembling what Zoe had worn during her expedition to Valdis Prison, the only addition being a black cloak. "Excellent," Lord Quinn remarked. "Do you have the crystal?"

“You betcha,” Laverick reported, pulling the purple crystal out of the cloak’s pocket and displaying it briefly before tucking it away.

“Then it seems you’re ready,” said Lord Quinn, “though I suggest concealing your emerald.” Complying, Laverick quickly removed the emerald necklace and added it to the contents of his cloak pocket. Lord Quinn turned to Veronica. “Will I be required to leave as you establish the telepathic link?”

“Not at all,” she replied. “The link will allow me to see what he sees and communicate with him via my thoughts. However, there’s no mind reading involved, and I will not need to activate my emotional sense to form a connection.”

“Magnificent,” Lord Quinn commented. “Then let us delay no longer. Proceed at will.”

Veronica placed her index and middle fingers on her temples as she turned to Laverick, shutting her eyes and focusing all of her attention to him. “Lumen intellectualis connexus!”

The room was silent for a moment before Laverick said aloud, “Yep! I hear ya loud and clear, Ma!”

“Marvelous!” Veronica responded.

Lord Quinn glanced at a nearby clock before looking back at Laverick. “Now that all preparations have been made, you must make haste. I’ve given the manor’s guards and servants tasks to keep them out of the lobby as you exit the mansion, considering they had received previous orders to apprehend Zoe if she attempted to escape. Remember, the moment you leave this room you are Zoe. No one else must know your true identity.” Obeying, Laverick walked to the door once again and exited the room.

Once he had left, Veronica and Lord Quinn resumed their places at the table. After several moments had passed, she reported, “He’s well on his way to Roshan’s Cafe as we speak.”

“Excellent,” Lord Quinn replied. “Inform him to take as much time as he deems necessary to complete this mission. Considering the In Between’s vastness, I’m expecting it to be a lengthy endeavor. Nevertheless, when it comes to the disk fragment, I am exceptionally patient.”

Chapter 38: An Unexpected Reunion

“I think I have an idea,” said Lucas, breaking the silence. Iris and Hagan looked at him.

“An idea?” Hagan asked, his mouth stuffed with bread.

“About Secar, I mean,” Lucas clarified. He laid the map of Aria he had been examining on the table and motioned for his companions to come closer and take a look. He pointed to a region labeled, ‘Hravart Desert.’

“Secar is in the southern part of the desert,” he explained as Hagan and Iris approached, eying the map. Lucas slightly slid his finger down the chart. “If we can manage to take out Kuraikaji and the Cobras, we could escort the people here to Valletal, a town in the Jhar Mountains to the south.”

“Interesting proposal,” Iris commented. “I must admit that such a massive migration could prove to be a toilsome challenge. Regardless, I feel that Secar will likely suffer without protection and there is no other ethical option.” She turned to Hagan. “Would you like to express an opinion?”

“Sounds like a plan,” Hagan responded, crumbs flying out of his mouth as he finished the last of his bread. “It’s not going to be easy protecting all those people from monsters with just the three of us, though.”

“Maybe Sezuni will help us,” Lucas suggested.

Hagan glanced at Sezuni, lost in a deep slumber on the blanket in the corner of the room. He looked back at Lucas. “I doubt it. Even if she was willing to, she probably wouldn’t want to risk being seen by so many people at once. But, I guess it’s the only option we really have other than leaving them behind in a defenseless city.”

“Then it’s settled,” said Lucas, placing his finger back on the map. “After we get the people of Secar to safety, we can head west to reach the Cymbeline region. It’ll give me a chance to check up on Grandpa before we head north to Ivyvynne Village and see Aalok.”

“He prefers to be addressed as ‘Master Bonham,’” Iris informed. “He becomes quite agitated when referred to as ‘Aalok.’”

“Oh,” said Lucas. “I’ll have to keep that in mind.”

“What if the Cobras have already been to Valletal?” Hagan asked. “If it’s in ruins, they’ll be no better off there than in Secar.”

“I actually thought about that myself,” Lucas responded. “The Cobras we met in the In Between seemed to be on their way to carry out an attack like the one we saw in Azure. I’m thinking that Kuraikaji is sending them to villages far away from Secar to keep suspicion away from him. If that’s the case, Valletal should be safe.”

“Your theory is highly plausible,” Iris remarked. “Unfortunately, we are incapable of confirming its accuracy at this time.”

Lucas folded the map. “Then we’ll just have to take a chance.”

Suddenly, Hagan pointed to the window and shouted, “Is that Aiden?!”

Sezuni awoke instantly. Lucas and Iris quickly turned to see Aiden, a good distance from the shack. He was running as fast as he could from a large group of the brown snake creatures the trio had encountered previously.

Lucas jumped out of his chair and dashed toward the door. “We have to help him!”

“Help him?!” Hagan replied in disbelief. Before he could speak another word, Lucas had already run out the door. “Dammit,” Hagan grumbled, hurriedly equipping his bow and quiver as Iris followed Lucas out of the door.

Sezuni watched Hagan exit the shack before groaning, “Whatever,” and lying back down.

Unsheathing his sword as he bolted toward the monsters, Lucas was surprised when Aiden suddenly stopped and turned to face the pursuing beasts. *What is he doing?! He’s going to get himself killed!*

“Lumen orbis!”

When Lucas conjured the light orb, Aiden hastily threw his gloves to the ground and his hands erupted in flames. Shocked at the sight, Lucas slowed his pace to an eventual halt as Aiden wildly thrust his palms toward the charging enemies, rapidly firing countless fireballs.

“Oh my,” Iris commented as she caught up to Lucas. “I’ve never witnessed such a technique.” They both watched as the monsters were pelted by the flames. After Aiden had shot the final fireball in his attack, his hands returned to normal. While the fiery onslaught took out a good deal of the snakes, a few dodged the attack. As they got dangerously close to him, Aiden shrieked in terror and continued to run, prompting Lucas to charge the beasts.

Iris took off behind him as Hagan approached where they had stopped. “Wait!” he yelled. Lucas and Iris continued running as Hagan slowed down. “...Dammit!” He darted to catch the pair.

Once he had reached a good vantage point, Lucas halted and threw his light orb at the snake closest to Aiden. While hitting and successfully injuring it, this caused the remaining two serpents to change direction toward him. He gripped his sword.

“Glacies crystallos discus!” Iris shouted, materializing a large snowflake in her right hand. She came to a stop beside Lucas and

threw it much like one would throw a Frisbee. It whirled through the air at spectacular speed, whizzing between the two snakes, unfortunately hitting neither of them.

“Nice shot,” Hagan sarcastically remarked as he approached, reaching for an arrow. Simultaneously, Lucas prepared to swing his blade at the snakes which had moved into close proximity. The foes were about to lunge when, unexpectedly, the snowflake’s trajectory curved in a boomerang fashion. It looped around with lightning speed, slicing through both of the serpents and shredding them to pieces before flying into the distance and shattering.

“Nice shot,” Hagan repeated with sincerity, lowering his bow.

The trio watched as Aiden finished off the snake Lucas had injured, pelting the reptilian beast with a barrage of fireballs. When he had finished, the flames surrounding his hands dissolved once again. He collapsed to his knees, breathing heavily as the trio approached him.

Aiden looked up at them. “Uh, thanks.”

“Thank Lucas,” Hagan responded coldly. “I wasn’t in a hurry to save you.”

“Lucas, huh?” Aiden replied as he got to his feet. He turned to Lucas. “I’m guessing that’s you, blondie. Thanks a million. Sorry ‘bout that whole tryin’-to-rob-ya thing. Water under the bridge, eh?”

Lucas sheathed his sword. “I did it because it was the right thing to do.”

Aiden crossed his arms and raised an eyebrow. “Ya think I buy that selfless hero bullcrap? What’s the catch, buddy?”

“There’s no catch,” said Lucas. “My friends and I learned how rough it is out here firsthand. I’m not here to judge you for what you have to do to survive. Just try to be more careful.” He turned and walked back toward the shack. “Besides, you should thank Iris. She did most of the work.” Iris and Hagan looked at

each other, then back to Aiden. Unsure of what to say, they followed Lucas. Aiden stood speechless as the trio walked away.

“Quite an act of kindness,” Iris commented, catching up to Lucas. “Admittedly, I’m uncertain I would have assisted him if you hadn’t rushed out so quickly.”

Lucas glanced at her. “I can’t imagine what it must be like having to live out here. He needs all the help he can get.”

“I guess you’re right,” Hagan agreed hesitantly. “This place ain’t a cakewalk... but I’m keeping his knife.”

The trio reentered the shack, causing Sezuni to hurriedly snap awake and sit up. “What’s going on?” she asked as Hagan closed the door.

“We saw Aiden being chased by monsters,” Hagan explained. “Lucas ran outside t–” There was a loud, rapid knocking at the door behind him. Turning back toward it, Hagan opened the door to see Aiden.

Hagan raised an eyebrow. “Now what?”

“What’s up?” Aiden responded as Lucas and Iris approached the door. “Ya live here?” Aiden queried, eyeing the shack’s exterior. “I thought you guys weren’t from Hravart Desert. What’s the deal?”

Rolling his eyes, Hagan began to shut the door but Aiden stopped it with his foot. “Get lost!” Hagan barked.

Aiden raised his arms. “Whoa, whoa, take it easy! I just wanted to say thanks again. That was pretty awesome of you guys after I tried to mug ya and whatnot.”

“You’re welcome,” Hagan answered bitterly. “Now go away.” He attempted to close the door but was blocked by Aiden’s foot again.

“I just wanna pay ya back!” Aiden asserted.

“That’s not necessary,” Iris replied. “I suggest that you return to wherever you came from, as this is not our dwelling and I’m certain the owner wouldn’t be fond of—”

Sezuni, who had hidden her face and reequipped her weapon during the conversation, shoved her way through the trio and unsheathed her katana. Aiden’s eyes widened to an enormous size as he hastily backed away, nearly tripping over himself. “Never return to this place,” Sezuni ordered coldly.

“Alright, alright!” Aiden responded nervously, continuing to distance himself from the shack’s front door.

Lucas grabbed her shoulder. “Wait!” She shot him an intense glare, but said nothing. He looked at Aiden. “You said you came here to pay us back?”

Aiden nodded. “No one’s ever done me a favor like that before. I felt like I owed ya one. I don’t got much, but just name it and I’ll try to get my hands on it for ya.”

“How about this instead,” Lucas suggested. “My friends and I are about to attempt something very dangerous, and we need all the help we can get. You seem like a risk taker, and we could really use your help with this. Think you’re interested?”

“We can’t trust him!” Hagan protested.

Lucas looked back at him. “You said it yourself: this is going to be tough to pull off with only the three of us. If he really wants to help us, we should accept the offer. Plus, he knows things that could really help us a lot.”

Returning his attention to Aiden, Lucas asked, “Are you in?”

“Ya got it,” Aiden answered with a grin. “So, what’s the scoop?”

“Come inside and we’ll fill you in,” Lucas replied.

“My house isn’t a hotel,” Sezuni snapped. “If you want to speak to this man, you’ll have to do it outside.” She glared at Aiden. “He does NOT look trustworthy to me. I’m very familiar with his type.”

“My type?!” Aiden argued. “Look, lady. I know ya ain’t hidin’ your face for fashion, and if you’re survivin’ out here, ya gotta be sneakin’ into Secar at night and stealin’ just like me. Cut me some slack; we’re practically family.”

Sezuni was enraged by his rebuttal, but couldn’t argue with the logic behind his statement. Continuing to cut into him with her gaze for a few seconds, she slowly sheathed her katana. “If you take anything from my house,” she warned, “I will find you.”

There was another pause as Aiden raised his eyebrows before responding, “Fair enough.”

Sezuni glanced at Lucas as she walked back into the shack. “I don’t appreciate you inviting strangers into my house.”

“Sorry,” Lucas apologized, “I wasn’t really thinking abo—”

“That’s exactly it,” Sezuni interrupted harshly. “You weren’t thinking.”

Lucas watched her as she took a seat at the small table. *That was pretty rude of me now that I think about it. Sezuni’s done a lot for us. I need to be sure not to offend her anymore. On top of that, I’d hate to be on the wrong side of her katana. I guess I was just so caught up in this Kuraikaji business that I wasn’t thinking straight. Oh well, what’s done is done. Besides, Aiden’s a former Cobra. He knows a lot of information we won’t be able to learn any other way.*

Aiden entered the shack. “Nice setup ya got here,” he remarked as he examined the room. “I like it!” He looked at Sezuni, who refused to comment on his statement. Again feeling pierced by her cold stare, he turned to Lucas. “So, your name’s Lucas, eh? Ya got a last name?”

“Bardsson,” Lucas responded. “These are my friends, Iris Ivaska and Hagan Caine.” Iris smiled as she was introduced, while Hagan gave a single nod.

Aiden bowed. “Aiden Kerbs.”

“I remember,” Hagan replied.

“Oh yeah, that’s right,” said Aiden. “So, can I have my knife back now?”

“No,” Hagan answered bluntly.

Aiden shrugged, “Worth a try.” He looked at Sezuni. “And you are?”

“That’s none of your concern,” Sezuni snapped.

There was a pause. “I’ll just call ya Sunshine,” Aiden responded with a wide smile before turning back to Lucas. “Alright, so what’s this dangerous thing ya want me to help out with?”

Chapter 39: Breaking Point

Zoe gazed out of the window of her room. *I can't believe that moron is out there pretending to be me. The worst part is that he just might pull it off. Not only will Javan get the disk fragment, but the Spades are going to think I'm the one responsible. If I could just get rid of this jinx!* Slowly turning away from the window, she walked to the edge of her bed and sat down. *Who am I kidding? I just need to face the fact that I'm stuck with this damn thing. If I don't act now, that fragment is practically his already. But what can I do? I'm unarmed... and I can't use magic... Ugh.*

Unexpectedly struck with an idea, she jumped to her feet. *That's right! The basement! Javan said everything I had with me when I went to Valdis Prison is there! If I can get my scythe back, I might be able to make it to HQ before it's too late.* Bolting for the door, she was surprised to find an armored guard standing just outside.

He looked down at Zoe, her eyes widened from the unexpected encounter. Breaking the awkward silence, the guard spoke. "Master Quinn has ordered me to ensure that you remain in your room."

"Seriously?!" Zoe barked. She attempted to shove the guard out of her path, but was promptly pushed back into her room.

"Master Quinn has also given me permission to restrain you with force if necessary. Just stay in your room; I don't want to hurt you."

Gnashing her teeth, Zoe slammed the door shut. "This is ridiculous!"

* * * *

Meanwhile, Lord Quinn quietly sipped a cup of coffee at the end of the large table in the meeting room. Veronica, still seated to

his left, remained motionless with her eyes shut and her fingers against her temples.

Setting his cup on the table, Lord Quinn asked, “How is Laverick progressing?”

“He’s journeying through the In Between as we speak.” Veronica informed. “It could be a while before he arrives at the Spades’ base, but he has gone quite far.”

Lord Quinn smiled. “Excellent. It’s simply a matter of time.”

“Indeed,” Veronica responded. “My only concern would be your daughter. She doesn’t seem at all pleased with what’s taking place; if she were to interfere, our efforts would be in vain.”

“No need for distress,” Lord Quinn answered. “The manor’s staff is well aware of her ‘mental condition’ and they have orders to apprehend her if she attempts an escape. For extra measure, I stationed a guard just outside of her door shortly after returning her to her bedroom. I informed him that she has recently suffered a serious episode and to disregard any of her requests. Regardless, even if she somehow managed to escape, the gateway Laverick used in Cymbeline is heavily guarded. She would have no choice but to traverse Aria’s wilderness to reach the In Between. Given her inability to use magic, it’s doubtful she would get far.”

“Marvelous,” Veronica remarked. “Then it truly is just a matter of time. I assure you, Laverick will not fail.” The room fell silent as Lord Quinn slowly drank his coffee and Veronica continued to focus heavily on telepathically guiding Laverick through the In Between.

* * * *

Zoe frantically paced in her room. *I can’t get my scythe, I can’t use magic – that mama’s boy is going to steal the disk fragment, and I still haven’t learned a damn thing about removing jinxes! What the hell am I supposed to do?!* She caught a glimpse of her reflection in her dresser mirror. The stressful events of the

previous days had caused dark circles to emerge beneath her eyes. Again, the 'X' on her forehead drew her attention, as though it were mocking her efforts. She quickly turned away from it.

Standing in silence, thoughts began surging through her mind. *All of this is my fault. If I would have stayed at the base like Alex had begged me to, he'd still be alive... and none of this would have happened.* There was a pause. She felt overwhelming guilt as she replayed Alex's demise in her head. *I wouldn't listen to him... He pleaded over and over for me to stay, and I ignored him. Even knowing I was just being stubborn, he still refused to let me go alone. Still, he stuck by me when no one else would. He really cared about me... and I got him killed.* Her lips trembled; tears streamed down her cheeks. This time, she didn't hold them back. *He was right – there was nothing I could have done to save Roshan. And Roshan... Roshan...* The mere thought of her dear friend was too much. Her knees hit the velvet carpet as she lamented his death.

The grief was only amplified as the horrific scene of Roshan's final moments crept into her mind. She could see him, sitting in the chair, completely terrified as Lord Quinn leaned down to his eye level, quietly warning him, "Resistance will merely result in a slower and far more agonizing death."

She could feel her heart breaking as Roshan looked at her, offering his final words. "You did all you could, and for that I'm truly thankful."

She saw the blade thrust deep into Roshan's stomach and could bear no more. Lost in a moment of pure chaotic agony, she began wildly throwing her books around the room. There was a loud crash as one of the books shattered her mirror. Grabbing the shelf, she pushed it to the ground with surprising strength.

Her door opened as the guard peered inside. "Zoe! Calm down. Now."

She snapped her head in his direction. "Shut up!!" Simultaneously reaching for a nearby statuette, she hurled the

object at his head. The guard ducked to avoid the projectile, causing it to smash against the wall behind him. After narrowly dodging the assault, he charged her. She responded immediately by dashing toward him, smashing her fist into his armor only to be met with excruciating pain. Unaffected by the blow, the guard promptly tackled her to the ground. He called back into the hall for assistance as he desperately struggled to keep the infuriated Zoe restrained.

* * * *

Lord Quinn turned his attention to the doors of the meeting room as Passford poked his head inside. “I apologize for disturbing you, Master Quinn,” he said, “but there is an urgent situation which requires your attention immediately.”

“It had better be of paramount criticality,” Lord Quinn warned sternly. “I told you not to bother me. I’m conducting extremely important business.”

“I understand, sir, and I do apologize again,” Passford quickly replied. “But it concerns Miss Zoe.”

Lord Quinn jumped out of his chair as Veronica’s eyes snapped open. Glancing at her as he hastily made his way to the doors, he ordered, “Remain focused on the task at hand. I will handle this.” She nodded, quickly closing her eyes and resuming contact with Laverick.

Chapter 40: Reflections Of The Past (Part VII)

For days he would hear the mysterious voice call his name. It usually happened when he was alone.

“Javan.”

He would look over his shoulder, and see no one. Then, it began speaking when he was among others.

“Javan.”

He would turn to someone nearby and ask, “Did you hear something?”

Always, they would respond with a no.

One day, King Ashraf was speaking to the general of his royal knights in his throne room. Javan stood nearby, ready to offer the king counsel if needed. His eyes were unexpectedly drawn to the large throne the king sat upon.

“Javan.”

He glanced around, but again saw that no one appeared to be addressing him.

“Do you like the throne?” the same voice queried. Javan’s eyes widened but he remained silent. “Look at him... King Ashraf.”

With subtlety, Javan slowly turned his head toward the king.

“What a fool,” it said. “He would be nothing without you. You’re the brains, after all. This imbecile would run Aria into the ground if not for your superior guidance.”

Javan began to perspire. It was overwhelmingly obvious to him at this point that no one but him was able to hear the voice. Trying his best not to attract attention, he remained silent and

looked away from the king, staring forward at the massive doors on the opposite side of the room.

“Why do you serve him?” the voice asked. “Why do you humble yourself before this over-glorified harlequin?”

Javan was completely terrified. The voice’s malicious tone sent shivers down his spine each time it spoke.

“You fear me?” it queried. “Do not, Javan; I understand your pain. I can feel your torment; I sympathize greatly.” He tried to ignore the voice, but found that it was nearly impossible. The less attention he tried to pay to it, the louder and more noticeable it became. “I only want to help you. You want to feel whole again, don’t you? You’re not a servant, Javan... you’re a leader. I can help you lead. I can make you into the mighty king you truly deserve to be – but you cannot fear me. You must trust me.”

“Care to assert an opinion, Lord Quinn?” King Ashraf asked, startling Javan.

He had not been paying attention to the conversation, and was unsure of how to answer. “I apologize, Your Majesty,” Javan replied. “I’m feeling rather ill, may I please be dismissed?” King Ashraf raised an eyebrow, but softly nodded, granting his request.

As Javan made his way down the castle’s main corridor, the voice spoke again. “That throne belongs to you, Javan.”

“Shut up,” Javan muttered in frustration.

“You fool,” it responded. “Still stuck on ‘love.’” Javan increased his pace. “There is no love in this world, Javan. You’ve felt what happens when you love. Your heart is nothing more than a weak spot to be exploited.” Placing his hands over his ears in a fruitless attempt to block out the voice, Javan advanced his step to a run. “Look at what love has brought you, Javan. Sorrow, pain – you’re pathetic.”

“I am not,” he grumbled, hurriedly making his way out of the castle.

“Yes, go home and cry, you deplorable infant. Prove what ‘love’ is all about. Miserable failure.”

The voice continuously taunted him without end, even in his sleep. With each passing day, he felt the sting less and less. Through its constant jabbing and jeering, the voice had finally drained him of all emotions. Soon, his heart turned to stone. It had him right where it wanted him.

After a while, the voice made an unexpected change. It constantly complimented him, in sharp contrast to what he had experienced before. It gradually swelled his ego, more and more each day, slowly befriending its captive. The process was long and ongoing, but eventually, the voice’s offers of power began to intrigue Javan.

“I chose you for a reason, Javan. I heard how Vera rejected your greatness, despite your selfless effort to restore her life. She doesn’t deserve you, Javan. Imagine how she would feel to know that she turned down the opportunity to be your queen...”

“I know a secret, Javan... a secret which will grant you more than Aria alone. This secret is the key to total and absolute power over all existence. You will become more than a mere king; you will be a god. All will tremble before you. All who have wronged you, all who have tormented your unfortunately misunderstood soul – I can help you attain this power. All you must be willing to do is listen. Are you ready, Javan? Are you ready to listen?”

Javan nodded slowly. “I am ready.”

“A wise decision from a wise man. Tell me Javan; are you familiar with an object known as Damiano’s Disk?”

Chapter 41: Destination, Secar

“Wow,” Aiden responded after hearing the trio’s tale. “That’s a pretty crazy story. You should make a book outta that!”

“So are you going to help us or not?” Hagan asked impatiently.

“Take out Kuraikaji?” Aiden answered. “The guy that screwed me over? Heck yeah I will! But I gotta warn ya, he’s one tough dude.”

“That’s an understatement and you know it,” Sezuni interjected, sharpening her katana in the corner.

“Who cares?” Aiden rebutted. “If all five of us jump him at once, we’ll have him pushin’ daisies before he can blink!”

Sezuni glanced at him. “I’m helping them infiltrate Secar and setting them in the right direction. That’s all. I have no interest in facing Kuraikaji.”

“Well that sucks,” Aiden asserted. “Same plan with just the four of us?”

“Don’t forget,” Sezuni added, “You’ll have to defeat several Cobras before even having a chance to face Kuraikaji himself.”

“I know that,” Aiden responded smugly. “I used to be one of ‘em, remember? Sure he’s got alotta bodyguards, but we’ll just have Iris do her snowflake disky thing and chop their heads off. No prob.”

“You’re a true moron,” Sezuni commented, returning her focus to her katana.

Aiden turned back toward the trio. “Don’t mind what ol’ Sunshine has to say. We’ll be fine. Heck, I’d-a done it a while ago if I’d had some help.”

As he spoke, Lucas quietly attempted to scan Aiden's emotions, though it proved to be rather difficult to hone in on them considering the number of people in the small room. *It's hard to tell if he really thinks we can do this or if he's just putting on a show. I don't think I feel nervousness anywhere... I guess it's not that important. It won't hurt having him along either way.*

Deactivating his ability, Lucas decided to change the subject. "From what I saw earlier, I'm guessing you're a Fire mage like Hagan."

"Oh," Aiden replied, "ya mean this thing?" Without warning, Aiden's hands burst into flames.

"Doesn't that hurt?!" Lucas asked, taking a step back.

Aiden smiled. "Not a bit."

"Fascinating," Iris commented. "How did you manage to conjure without verbalizing a chant? I've never witnessed such a bizarre method."

Aiden shrugged as the flames were extinguished. "I've been able to do that since I was ten. I've never learned a thing about magic."

Hagan crossed his arms. "I worked my ass off learning how to conjure, and you just figure it out on the playground one day?! That doesn't make any damn sense at all!"

Aiden smiled. "Yeah, I know. I'm special."

"How exactly do you conjure?" Iris queried. "After years of researching magic, I find this to be a nearly impossible phenomenon."

"I dunno why I can," Aiden answered, "I just can. It's kinda hard to control once I get goin' though."

“I ain’t trying to give you advice or anything,” said Hagan, “but why are you robbing people with a knife when you can just shoot fire from your hands without even saying a chant?”

“Way less messy that way,” Aiden replied. “I don’t wanna damage the loot, ya know? That’s why I usually wear gloves. Keeps accidents from happenin’. Not that it matters, though; I don’t get a chance to mug many people out here anyway. Ya don’t find many travelers wanderin’ around monster-infested deserts. Mosta the time, I just get what I need from Secar, like Sunshine over there.” Sezuni’s eyes made her annoyance with the nickname apparent, though she chose not to respond.

The group remained in the confines of the shack for the rest of the day, chatting amongst themselves as they awaited nightfall. However, as the sun set, they were suddenly startled by a loud thumping against the shack’s exterior. “What was that?!” Hagan exclaimed.

“I know that sound too well,” Lucas answered, unsheathing his sword and bolting out the door.

Quickly making his way around the corner of the shack toward the source of the noise, Lucas saw what appeared to be a human-sized skeleton. “Lumen orbis!” He promptly conjured a light orb, causing the skeleton to snap its head in his direction. *This thing’s just plain creepy!* Lucas was about to throw the orb when the monster’s empty eye sockets were suddenly illuminated by a lime-green glow. The moment Lucas turned his attention to the strange light, he became completely terror-stricken and was unable to move a single muscle.

With its glowing eyes fixed to his, the skeleton slowly approached Lucas, opening its mouth to display a pair of razor-sharp fangs. Lucas remained frozen, despite the oncoming threat, totally overwhelmed by a deep sense of impending doom.

“Ignis orbis!” There was a flash of heat as a fire orb whizzed from behind Lucas into the skeleton. The glow left its eyes on impact as flames consumed the foe. Instantly, the fear left Lucas.

Without a moment of hesitation, he threw the light orb at the burning skeleton. Backing away, he watched the beast collapsed.

“Lucas, are you injured?” he heard Iris ask behind him.

Turning around, Lucas saw Hagan as well. “No,” Lucas replied, still feeling a bit confused by what had taken place. “I’m fine...”

“Is everything alright?” Sezuni asked as she emerged from around the corner, followed by Aiden.

“We took care of it,” Hagan replied. He looked at Lucas. “Why were you just standing there?! You had a clear shot at the thing. It wasn’t even moving that fast.”

“I couldn’t move.” Lucas answered. “When I came around the corner, I saw it beating on the wall and conjured a light orb. As soon as I did, it turned its head toward me and its eyes started glowing. Next thing I know, I was completely terrified. I couldn’t think straight; I barely even knew what was going on.”

“That’s weird,” Aiden remarked. “I’ve never seen anything like that out here before.”

“Nor have I,” Sezuni added.

Iris examined the smoldering ash where the skeleton had stood. “It appears that the Knowms are continuing to create new varieties of monsters. The mere thought of a beast with the ability to inflict fear-driven paralysis via eye contact is alarming in itself.”

“Yeah,” Hagan agreed. “And there’s no telling what else they’ve got in store.”

Lucas nodded. “Just another reason Quinn and those Knowms have got to go.”

Sezuni glanced at Lucas. “For your sake,” she began as she walked back around the corner of the shack toward the door, “I certainly hope you still intend to visit Aalok Bonham.”

Puzzled, Aiden turned to Lucas. “Who’s Alex Bone-ham?”

“Aalok Bonham,” Iris corrected. “He’s a well-known and highly respected master of Light conjuring. Lucas intends to enroll at his school as one of his pupils once we have completed our work here, in order to advance his abilities.”

“I’d go sooner,” Lucas added, “but I don’t want to give Kuraikaji any more time to destroy cities. Once I get my conjuring up to par, we can get that disk fragment from Lord Quinn.”

“Keep in mind,” Hagan asserted, “we’re not even sure if Lord Quinn is holding the disk fragment himself. Like I said the other day, he’s probably hidden it somewhere secret. I don’t think it’ll be as simple as us barging into his mansion with our fists flying. Maybe we should stick with our original plan and try to get in with the Spades and get their disk fragment before going after Quinn. They were founded by one of Quinn’s guys after all. We’d probably learn a lot of useful stuff.”

“How?” Lucas argued. “The Spades keep themselves well hidden. Even Quinn and all of the Knowms can’t find them. We went to the In Between looking for them ourselves and found out firsthand.”

“Perhaps it’s best that we focus our attention on Kuraikaji in the meantime,” Iris interrupted. “We can plan our next course of action during our trip to Cymbeline and Ivyvyne Village. It will require careful, well thought out planning to obtain both disk fragments while preventing all contenders from completing it first.”

The four reentered the shack and ate dinner along with Sezuni. The remainder of the evening was relatively uneventful, and soon nighttime had arrived. After gathering their belongings and preparing themselves for the events to come, they set out for Secar. Following closely behind Sezuni, the trio and Aiden proceeded out the door of the shack and into the night.

“It’s pretty dark out here,” said Lucas. “Maybe I should get out the lantern so we can see approaching monsters.”

“No,” Sezuni snapped. “We don’t want to attract any attention. It’s already going to be difficult enough sneaking five people into Secar at once.”

“Your eyes’ll adjust,” Aiden assured Lucas.

Sezuni glanced over her shoulder at them. “Just stay close to me and you’ll be fine. I possess the Shadow elemental center, which allows me to see well, regardless of the lighting.”

“That’s useful,” said Hagan.

Aiden looked at him. “It’s cheatin’ is what it is! I always gotta do this with normal-people eyes!”

“Using my natural ability is hardly cheating,” Sezuni argued. “Now keep it down. We need to remain as quiet as possible, even while we’re out here. We can’t risk being seen or heard by any Cobras.”

Slowly and silently, the group continued toward Secar. It wasn’t long, however, before Sezuni softly warned, “Stay still.” Obeying, the group froze.

“Monsters?” Hagan quietly queried. Without answering, Sezuni slowly unsheathed her katana and took a few steps forward.

“Imps,” Lucas whispered.

“I see ‘em too,” said Aiden. Suddenly, he took off running toward the threat.

“Aiden!” Lucas and Iris exclaimed.

Before Sezuni could turn around to shush them, she saw Aiden zoom by her as his hands glowed brightly in flames. “You idiot!” she muttered as Aiden proceeded to pelt the enemies with fireballs. While the flames consumed the small group of imps rather quickly and effortlessly, the surrounding area was briefly

illuminated by the attack. Shaking her head, Sezuni sheathed her katana.

Returning to the group with a cocky grin and his hands extinguished, Aiden proudly announced, “Got ‘em!”

Sezuni slapped him. “You’ve revealed our location, you fool!”

“Ya didn’t have to slap me you bit—”

Before Aiden could finish, she slapped him again. “Shut up. Keep your voice down or you’ll get us all killed. I thought you would know better, but I suppose I’ve overestimated my already low expectations of your capacity to strategize.” Without warning, Aiden hands burst into flames. “Don’t you dare,” Sezuni coldly warned, unsheathing her katana with incredible speed.

“I can’t help it,” Aiden responded with clenched teeth. “It happens when I get angry!”

“Then calm yourself,” Sezuni snapped.

Closing his eyes and taking several deep breaths, Aiden returned his hands to normal. “We’re not even close to Secar yet,” he argued.

Sezuni sheathed her katana. “There could be Cobras anywhere in the desert, you know that!”

“How strange,” Iris whispered to Lucas and Hagan. “Emotionally activated conjuring is another first for me. We must be certain he’s not angered during our infiltration.”

After nodding in agreement, Hagan softly responded, “He’s got as much control of his magic as he has of himself.”

Lucas looked at Aiden. *Sezuni’s being pretty hard on him. Then again, she’s right. I thought he’d be a lot better at this considering that he does it all the time. I just hope having him along doesn’t turn out to be a decision I’ll regret.*

Chapter 42: Laverick Incognito

Laverick, still disguised as Zoe, at last reached his destination after spending the majority of the day traveling through the In Between. On his waist was a small bag of rations, which had been provided to him by a man in a red hooded cloak before entering the gateway in the building formerly known as Roshan's Café.

As directed by his mother telepathically, he approached the large colorless mountainside before him.

"Continue walking straight ahead," Veronica mentally instructed. "Once you're close enough, you'll notice a small groove in the rock shaped exactly like the purple crystal in your pocket. Place the crystal inside of it and the passage leading into the Spades' base should be revealed."

"Got it, Ma," Laverick replied.

"Marvelous, darling," Veronica answered. "After you've entered the base, you'll need to locate and retrieve the disk fragment with subtlety. Remember, we cannot allow the Spades to suspect anything. I will keep our link established in order to track your progress, though I will send you no further communication once you're inside to prevent distracting you."

"Don't worry about a thing, Ma," said Laverick. "I'll get the fragment and get out in no time!"

"I'm certain you will, darling," Veronica responded. "In the event you are discovered, however, don't hesitate to run. I wouldn't want anything to happen to my precious little Lavee-wavee!"

"I'm not gonna get caught, Ma. I promise!" Laverick replied with confidence.

After walking a little farther to reach the cragged rock face, Laverick removed the purple crystal from his cloak's pocket and

vigorously searched for the small groove. *Where is it? Everything looks so funky here.*

* * * *

Back in the meeting room of Quinn Manor, Veronica turned to Lord Quinn. “Currently, Laverick is standing just outside the base. He’s attempting to locate the area in which to place the crystal.”

Lord Quinn smiled, delighted by the news. “Magnificent.”

Veronica smiled back at him before returning her attention to Laverick.

* * * *

All the while, Zoe was sound asleep in her room, blissfully unaware of the events taking place. Shortly after her intense emotional outburst, Lord Quinn had used a sleeping spell to quell the situation. Once he’d placed her on her bed, he ordered a second guard to assist in ensuring that Zoe remained in her room.

* * * *

“Found it!” Laverick excitedly proclaimed as he placed the purple crystal into the small groove on the mountainside. Much like what Veronica had viewed while exploring Zoe’s memory, the crystal began to glow and the rock shifted to create an opening. Returning the crystal to his pocket, Laverick prepared himself. *Okay, I gotta remember that I’m Zoe. Not Laverick.* He slowly entered the passage, repeatedly thinking the words, *Zoe, not Laverick.*

He suddenly let out a fearful shriek, startled by a loud rumbling behind him. Quickly turning around, he watched as the rock returned to its original formation, closing the entrance. *Uh-oh! How am I supposed to get outta here?!*

“Zoe!” A voice excitedly exclaimed from farther down the passage behind him. Laverick’s eyes widened as he cleared his

throat, preparing himself to interact with the stranger. He faced the source of the voice to see a man dressed in a black short-sleeved shirt. "You made it," the stranger said as he approached. "Did you rescue Roshan? Where's Alex?"

Who the heck is Alex? Laverick thought. He had been previously informed by Lord Quinn of Zoe's attempt to break Roshan out of prison, but hadn't the slightest clue who Alex was. Trying his best to emulate an unhappy tone, he replied to the stranger. "I'm not really sure where Alex is."

The man looked puzzled. "Did you get split up?"

"Yeah," Laverick answered, hoping the explanation would suffice. "I couldn't find him after that."

"Oh," said the man. "Alex is a good fighter, I'm sure he's fine. He'll probably be coming back soon. What about Roshan? What happened?"

Laverick bowed his head, trying his best to look saddened. "I searched all over... but I couldn't find Roshan anywhere."

"Oh no," the man responded. He paused for a moment, apparently taking in the news. This caused Laverick to feel incredibly awkward.

"Roshan was a good man," he finally went on. "I know you two were close. I can't imagine how you must feel." Laverick said nothing, attempting to look as heartbroken as possible. "He saved all of us, if you think about it. Everything would've been over if he hadn't risked his life to protect the fragment." He paused again. "What you did took a lot of courage. I can see why Roshan respected you so much."

Trying to get out of the conversation as soon as possible, Laverick began walking down the passage. "I'm sorry. I don't really feel like talking about this right now."

Laverick was a bit nervous, feeling that his short answers may have come across as suspicious. However, considering that it was

normal for Zoe to speak very little of personal matters, the man didn't suspect a thing. Instead, he sympathized, assuming that she was just upset over the failure to save her friend's life. In spite of his effort to escape the conversation, it wasn't much longer before Laverick heard another voice call, "Zoe!"

"Dang it!" Laverick grumbled softly.

* * * *

Meanwhile in Quinn Manor, Veronica looked over at Lord Quinn. "He's in. After entering the main passage, he had a brief exchange with a Spade. From what I saw, the disguise seems to be working quite well so far."

"Excellent news," Lord Quinn replied. "I must say, I'm profoundly impressed with you and your son's work. Inform me once he's located the fragment. The moment it is in my possession, I will see to it that you are both compensated greatly for your combined effort." Giving a single nod, Veronica returned her focus to Laverick.

* * * *

"...and I still don't know where Alex is," Laverick explained to Spade leader Tarren Haden.

Tarren looked down at his feet, obviously troubled by the news. "That's a shame," he said. After a small pause, he looked back at Laverick. "While I admire your bravery, I'm highly disappointed by your actions. Alex never would have gone on that mission if you hadn't stormed out of here like you did. Now, instead of just one missing Spade, we have two."

"I'm sorry," Laverick replied, "I just wasn't thinking straight."

"'I'm sorry' isn't going to change anything, Zoe," Tarren responded sternly. "I've warned you about your temper in the past. This time, not only did you unnecessarily put yourself in great danger, but a fellow Spade as well. If you're not going to follow

orders, you have no place in our organization. I will not tolerate insubordination such as this again. Do you understand?" Laverick nodded. "Good."

Again, there was a silence. Then, Tarren continued. "I understand that Roshan was a very special person to you, and I know that you were only acting out of compassion for him. But he was well aware of the risks involved with our organization from the start. He did what he did because he believed in our cause. Protecting the fragment is our number one priority over anything else. You should honor him by showing the same level of dedication. The more Spades we lose, the closer Javan Quinn gets to completing Damiano's Disk. You know better than anyone else what that means, Zoe. That's why you came here in the first place.

"Now, you must understand that I can't let you off the hook without disciplinary action. Tomorrow morning, you're going to scrub every inch of this base, and it had better be spotless. Then, you are to sharpen every sword, axe, and knife in our arsenal. Understood?"

Laverick nodded. "Yes sir." *Ha! I'm not gonna be here tomorrow!*

"Good." Tarren turned around and walked away. "Get some rest. We can only hope and pray that Alex returns unharmed."

Laverick watched as Tarren disappeared down the corridor. *I thought he'd never shut up. Alrighty, time to find me a fragment!*

For the next hour, Laverick inspected every inch of the base for the disk fragment. This proved to be quite a strenuous task, however, as his endeavor was often interrupted by inquiring Spades, curious about the details of Zoe's mission and the status of Roshan and Alex. Discovering it was best to simply state that he didn't feel like discussing the matter and would explain later, he managed to deter the threats to his mission.

Laverick dug through various cabinets and drawers in the base's kitchen area. *This is gonna take a lot more work than I*

thought it would. Let's see, this looks like some sorta medical storage cabinet, lotsa potions and herbs – no fragment though. Ah, shoot. Where is it?

“Are you alright, Zoe?” Laverick felt his heart jump as he quickly slammed the cabinet shut. Snapping his head in the direction of the voice, he saw the same man with the black shirt he'd spoken to when he first entered the base.

“I-I'm fine!” Laverick replied nervously. The man's eyebrow was raised.

“Are you looking for something?” he asked.

Quickly shaking his head, Laverick responded, “No, no. I was just, uh, thinking about making myself a little snack before I get some sleep. I'm pretty hungry and tired from the whole thing. Forgot there was no food in that one! Ha!”

“Alright...” the man said. It was apparent that he was a bit perplexed by Zoe's strange behavior, but he mostly attributed it to stress and lack of sleep. “Why don't you go ahead and lie down,” he suggested. “I'll get us both something to eat and bring it back to the barracks.”

Not wanting to raise any further suspicion, Laverick complied. “Okay, sounds good,” he said as he hastily exited the kitchen. The man watched as he left. “What's with her? Something doesn't seem right.”

Laverick walked down the hallway. Glancing around to be sure no one was nearby, he came to a halt and whispered, “Ma, can you hear me?”

“Yes, darling?” Veronica responded immediately.

Laverick looked over his shoulder before continuing. “That was a close one. I don't know how I'm gonna do this if all these people keep trying to talk to me!”

“There’s no rush, dear,” Veronica answered. “They will have to fall asleep eventually. Simply wait until the activity around the base has slowed a bit. Then you may carry on your investigation without interruption.”

“That’s a great idea!” Laverick excitedly replied, trying to keep his voice down while concurrently inspecting the surrounding area once again. Once he was certain no one was listening, he whispered, “Thanks, Ma.”

“Of course, doll,” said Veronica. “I’ll remain linked to you throughout the mission’s duration. In the event you require my guidance again, merely ask.”

“You betcha,” Laverick assured her, advancing down the hallway.

Noticing an entrance to a room on his right, he peered inside. The area contained a large colorless table with several chairs. It reminded him of a similar room in Quinn Manor. *This must be some kinda meeting room.* He was tempted to walk inside and search for the fragment, but ultimately decided to continue down the hallway. *I’ve gotta find the barracks. That guy’s gonna get real suspicious if he catches me poking around the base again. I just gotta stick with Ma’s plan. As soon as these suckers fall asleep, I’ll be home free.* He yawned. *I gotta be sure I don’t fall asleep either! This whole thing’s got me pretty darn tired...*

* * * *

“In order to prevent raising skepticism,” Veronica informed Lord Quinn, “Laverick has decided to postpone his search until after the Spades have fallen asleep. This could be a lengthy affair, however, and I will need to remain awake in order to keep my link with him established.”

“Are you certain you will be able to maintain a connection long enough?” Lord Quinn inquired. “Won’t you be nearing your conjuring limit soon?”

“Not at all,” Veronica replied. “Establishing a link requires the most energy. Maintaining the connection takes hardly anything.”

“I see.” Lord Quinn walked toward the double doors of the meeting room. “Very well. I will have Passford brew coffee poste-haste. As long as the fragment is ultimately secured, I’m more than willing to wait as long as necessary.”

* * * *

Laverick at last located the barracks. There were only a few people in the room, but the moment he entered, he was bombarded with questions.

“Zoe! You’ve returned!”

“Where’s Alex?”

“Did you find Roshan?”

Overwhelmed, he snapped, “Alex and I got split up, okay?! I couldn’t find Roshan and I just wanna sleep!” He quickly dove into the nearest bed and buried his head under the pillow.

The room was bewildered by the reaction. After a brief pause, one of the Spades asserted, “Uh, that’s my bed, Zoe.”

Laverick jumped up. “Okay then, where’s mine?” He looked at their faces, each one totally perplexed. “I got hit on the head pretty hard,” Laverick quickly explained. “My memory is a little messed up.”

“Uh-huh...” one man said, scratching his head.

“Where?” another queried. “You look alright to me.”

“That’s because I drank a potion and the mark went away,” Laverick spat out, starting to perspire. “Now tell me where my bed is.”

Veronica became nervous as she watched the situation unfold. *He's panicking!* "Laverick! Calm yourself! Have patience!"

Hearing his mother's words, Laverick took several deep breaths as his eyes darted around the room. This only enhanced the onlookers' skepticism.

Luckily for him, at that very moment, the man in the black shirt entered the room. Observing Laverick's deep breathing and fear-stricken expression, he nearly dropped the plate he was carrying. "What's going on?!" he asked worriedly.

"I don't know; she's just freaking out," one of the Spades answered.

Setting the plate on the end of a bed, the black-shirted man darted to Laverick, who quickly backed away from him. "Zoe. Calm down," the man calmly ordered. He looked back at the other Spades, who were visibly baffled and concerned. "I think she's having a nervous breakdown," he told them.

At that very second, a light bulb went off in Laverick's mind. *Yeah! A breakdown! I'll go with that!* Immediately, Laverick stumbled around the room, purposely amplifying his 'symptoms' to the best of his ability.

"She's completely lost it!" he heard someone say.

Laverick ran into a corner and curled into a fetal position. "Roshaaaan!!!" he screamed, rocking back and forth.

"What the hell happened to her?!" one of the onlookers asked as he backed toward the barracks' entrance.

"Laverick! Stop this nonsense at once!!!" Veronica shouted within Laverick's mind.

Without hesitation, Laverick sprang to his feet. "I gotta sleep now," he informed the room, diving onto a random bed and snapping his eyes shut, pretending to instantaneously fall asleep. Veronica slapped her palm against her forehead.

“A-alright... then...” said the black-shirted man.

“I always thought she was a bit crazy,” Laverick heard one of the Spades comment, “but this is just plain scary.”

“Yeah,” another one agreed, “I’m not sleeping in here with that psycho.”

“She’s not crazy,” the black-shirted man said. “I just feel like something bad happened out there that she’s not telling us.”

The room fell silent. “Is she really asleep?” someone queried.

“Zoe! You awake?” someone else asked. Laverick didn’t respond.

“Weird...” one of the Spades said, flabbergasted.

* * * *

Lord Quinn reentered the meeting room. “The coffee should arrive shortly,” he told Veronica.

“Oh, wonderful,” she replied nervously.

Lord Quinn was quick to detect the worry in her tone. “What happened?” he asked sternly.

Veronica hesitated for a moment. “A minor snag,” she responded. “He appears to have the situation under control. No need to worry! Ha ha ha!” She could tell by the look on his face that he was displeased with her answer. “I assure you,” she hastily added, “he will get the fragment. He just panicked a bit for a moment. The Spades still seem thoroughly convinced that he’s Zoe.”

Lord Quinn approached his chair at the end of the large table. “I certainly hope so,” he said. “It would be most wise not to disappoint me after guaranteeing success.”

“Of course, sir,” Veronica replied.

* * * *

“You cannot allow a slip up like that to happen again, understood?” Veronica’s voice echoed in Laverick’s head. “Stay in the bed until absolutely everyone has fallen asleep. If you want to make mommy rich and famous, you must not fail!”

“Sorry, Ma,” Laverick whispered.

“Sssssshhhhhhuushhh!” Veronica hissed. “Just stay there until the time has come and do NOT make a single noise!”

Chapter 43: The Infiltration

“The guards will be changing shifts at any moment,” Sezuni softly informed the group as she peered over the large rock they had concealed themselves behind.

“That’s the best time to do it,” Aiden explained to Lucas, Iris, and Hagan. “There’s a good minute or two there when no one’s watchin’ the border. Then, it’s just a quick dash and ya got yourself a Secar free-for-all!”

“I hope you’re all decent runners,” Sezuni said as she continued to watch the border of Secar. “This takes excellent timing.” She glared at Aiden. “We can’t afford any screw ups.”

“Yeah, yeah,” said Aiden. “Of course it’s gonna be ME who screws up.”

“Admittedly,” Iris confessed, “my athletic abilities are mediocre at best.”

“Don’t worry,” Lucas responded, “it doesn’t look like we’re that far from the border.”

Hagan glanced at Lucas. “Are you going to be able to lug that backpack?”

“I don’t really have a choice,” he replied.

Hagan extended his arm. “Give it here.” Lucas hesitated. “Come on,” Hagan protested, “just give it to me. I’m not trying to one up you or anything, but my Fire center gives me increased strength. That thing is gonna slow you down a hell of a lot more than it will me.” Lucas gave a single nod and handed the backpack to Hagan, who quickly secured it to his back.

The group waited patiently, readying themselves to make the dash. Lucas stretched his legs in anticipation. *This is it. Once we get in there, it’s all or nothing. Come on Lucas, you can do this.*

A few minutes passed when Sezuni suddenly gestured for the group to follow her and took off running toward Secar with extraordinary speed.

“That’s the cue!” said Aiden as he bolted behind her. Following suit, the remaining trio dashed for the border.

Sezuni was the first to reach the town, followed closely by Aiden. Hagan, despite the added weight of the backpack, proved to be much faster than Lucas or Iris and was the third to cross into the city. Lucas entered next, hastily accompanying Sezuni, Aiden, and Hagan, who were crouching in a nearby alley, motioning for him to join them. Finally, Iris emerged into view, gasping for breath as she came to a halt.

“Psst! Iris!” Lucas whispered. Hearing his call, she promptly united with her companions.

“We made it!” Hagan quietly proclaimed.

“See?” said Aiden, “Piece-a’ cake!”

“Quiet,” Sezuni ordered, slipping farther down the alley. “Follow me.” Obeying, the group emerged from the opposite side of the alley and onto an empty street.

Lucas observed the dilapidated buildings in the surrounding area. The sandstone structures were brittle and cracked. Many had broken windows; a few completely devoid of glass. He noted that the road didn’t appear to be in much better shape, observing several cavities as he ran to keep up with the group. *This place is in far worse condition than I imagined.*

Without warning, Sezuni came to a sudden stop as she neared the end of the block, giving a ‘halt’ signal with her hand as she pressed her back against the wall of the building. As the others complied, she carefully poked her head around the corner before snapping it back toward the group. “Just keep still,” she whispered.

“Should we go back into an alley?” Lucas suggested, feeling a bit uncomfortable in the open area, well-lit by the burning street lamps. Sezuni swiftly responded with an angry shushing gesture.

Unexpectedly, a terrible shriek emanated from a distance around the corner. “What the hell was that?” Hagan quietly asked.

“Monster probably got into town,” Aiden replied. There was another shriek. Aiden raised his eyebrows, “Make that two.”

“Shut up and follow,” Sezuni quickly ordered as she bolted to the other side of the street, disappearing into the first alley.

As the group pursued, Lucas glanced toward the source of the shrieks to see a battle between three armored Cobras and a handful of imps. Snapping his head forward, he increased his pace. *Please don't see us, please don't see us!*

Lucas and the others regrouped with Sezuni in the dead-end alley. No one said a word for the first few seconds. Then Sezuni said, “In order to reach Kuraikaji's stronghold, you'll need to continue east. I'm afraid I will be leaving you on your own at this point. I need to gather a few items before returning home.”

“You're just going to leave us here?!” Hagan blurted, still managing to keep his voice low.

Sezuni looked at him. “I got you into Secar. The rest is up to you. Aiden will be able to provide you with further instruction.”

Aiden grinned. “See? I'm useful.”

Ignoring him, Sezuni went on. “You will need to use every ounce of strategy and stealth in you to pull this off. Though you'll inevitably be forced to deal with the Cobras, I recommend getting as close to Kuraikaji as possible before making your first move. Cut off the head and the snake dies.”

“Can't you just sneak in there and take him out for us?” Hagan argued. “It shouldn't be any trouble for you.”

“This isn’t my endeavor,” Sezuni responded. “If you’re serious about restoring peace to Aria, you’re going to have to face many dangers such as this along the way. I’m not going to babysit you.” She paused, taking a moment to ensure the area surrounding the alley was clear. “Taking out Kuraikaji and the Cobras is a good first step. From what I’ve gathered, it’s also going to be the easiest phase of your venture. If you can’t handle this on your own, your efforts are futile.” She turned away from the group. “I wholeheartedly wish you all the best of luck. Even though the possibility of your success means that I may have to relocate, it would be pleasant to one day discover that I’d played a part in healing this damaged world for once.” Without another word, she disappeared back into the streets of Secar.

“Well,” Aiden remarked, “looks like I’m the boss now.”

“Not by a longshot,” Hagan quickly asserted. “You’re just here to give us a hand. We’re still calling the shots.”

Iris peered out of the alley. “I find Secar’s vacancy to be both eerie and surprising. I expected we’d encounter at least a few citizens by this point.”

“It ain’t vacant,” Aiden replied. “Everyone’s just inside. Once the sun goes down, it’s nothin’ but Cobras and monsters out here. Who’d wanna stick around for that?”

Lucas crinkled his brow. “Do monsters get in that often?”

“Depends on what’cha mean,” Aiden answered. “Daytime shift is pretty good at keepin’ the oogie-boogies outta here. Town’s a lot safer then. But they slip in all the time when those half-ass night guys take over.”

“Enough talking,” Hagan interrupted. “We’ve got to get moving.”

“Right,” Lucas responded, walking to the edge of the alley. “Sezuni said Kuraikaji’s place is to the east. I’m guessing that’s the same direction we’ve been heading.”

“Yep,” Aiden confirmed. “Ya want me to lead?”

“No,” Hagan said bluntly.

Aiden crossed his arms. “What’s your problem, pal? I’m here to help, ya know. Ya gotta trust me, I ain’t gonna pull a fast one on ya.”

Taking note of the tension, Iris voiced her opinion. “Aiden’s familiarity with Secar and the Cobras greatly surpasses our own. I suggest we accept his guidance.”

Aiden turned to Hagan. “See? The smart one thinks I’m awesome.”

Hagan rolled his eyes, inaudibly muttering, “Good call, Miss Know-it-all.”

Lucas looked out at the empty street. *Aiden might be reckless, but he somehow manages to sneak in here every night and make it out without getting caught. That was one of the major reasons I decided to bring him along, and I’ve got to stick with it. Even though I’ve had my doubts along the way...*

“I agree with Iris,” Lucas finally said, turning back to the group. “Aiden, lead the way. We’ll be right behind you.”

Aiden smirked, glancing at Hagan before walking to the alley’s edge. “Stick close to me, folks. I’ll get ya to Kuraikaji’s place in no time.”

The group followed Aiden back into the open. Quickly and quietly, they reached the end of the block. Cautiously slowing his pace, Aiden took a moment to check around the corner of the last building before zipping across the street, motioning for the others to follow.

Once they reached the other side, Aiden came to a stop and turned to them. “Kuraikaji’s place is at the end of the next block on the street just north of here. Unless you guys plan on walkin’ right up to his front door, we gotta head south a bit before continuin’

east. Then we can go north and come in from the back. The bad news is that it's pretty well guarded all the way around. But we might be able to slip in through a window or somethin' if we stake out at a distance and wait for a chance."

Hagan's eyes widened. "Shh! You hear that?" The group listened intently. The sound was unmistakable. Footsteps. Instantaneously, they scampered into the nearest alley. Once they had retreated, the footsteps approached rapidly, halting excruciatingly close to the group's hiding spot.

"I know I heard something," a voice said.

"Damn monsters," another replied, "I hate this job."

"It wasn't monsters," the first asserted. "I heard voices."

"So what?" the second said.

The four looked at each other, as though waiting for someone in the group to authorize a course of action. Yet, they all remained silent, afraid to move or make any noise that might attract unwanted attention. Lucas clenched his jaw. *They've heard us! This isn't good. Hopefully they won't look down here.*

"So what?" the first voice snapped. "No one leaves home at night. I think we've got trouble."

"You're just being paranoid, man," the second said.

"I know I heard voices," the first asserted, taking several steps toward the alley's entrance. The group became tense as the two came to another stop just out of view. "It could be the thieves who have been stealing from the food supply. They couldn't have gone far."

"I doubt it," the second voice promptly replied. "Why would they be here? All the stuff is way the hell over there."

“Can’t you just do your damn job for once?!” the first voice barked. “Come on, help me find them. I’ll go this way, you look over there.”

As he spoke, the group took off down the alley, swiftly arriving on the opposite side. Unfortunately, as they entered the open area, their retreat was brought to a sudden stop by three armored Cobras. Both the group and the Cobras were shocked by the unexpected confrontation, briefly staring each other down in a brisk moment of sheer astonishment.

“It’s that traitor, Aiden!” one of the Cobras exclaimed.

Aiden glanced at the trio. “Run for it!!” he shouted as he dashed toward the west. He was immediately pursued by one of the men, and eventually tackled to the ground.

As he struggled, the two remaining men focused on the trio. “Don’t get any ideas,” one of them harshly warned.

Hagan lowered his eyebrows. “Or what?” The two Cobras responded by speedily unsheathing the sabers at their waist-sides and pointing them at Hagan’s throat.

“Yeah, I probably should have saw that one coming,” Hagan said bluntly.

Synchronously, Lucas unsheathed his sword. *Dammit Hagan, why couldn’t you just keep your mouth shut?*

With a cocky grin, one of the Cobras transferred his blade’s aim to Lucas. “Resisting will get you nowhere, boy. Drop the weapon.”

Iris glanced over her shoulder to see the two Cobras who had initially been searching for the group. They were now rushing into view, to assist their comrade in apprehending Aiden. Unexpectedly, Lucas swiped his blade at the saber pointed in his direction, successfully disarming the foe. Hearing the loud clink, Iris snapped her attention back to the confrontation.

Surprised by the action, the first man swung his saber at Lucas, who swiftly blocked the attack with his sword.

“Glacies orbis!” The disarmed Cobra hastily retaliated by conjuring an ice orb. At the same time, Hagan conjured a fire orb while Iris materialized an icicle missile.

As Lucas continued to block the swipes of the first Cobra, the second threw his ice orb at Lucas, pelting him in the stomach and sending him to the ground.

“Lucas!” Iris shrieked as Hagan hurled the fire orb at the armed Cobra. The man stumbled backward as the searing flame impacted his chest plate, giving Hagan a chance to deliver a powerful right hook to the other Cobra’s jaw. Iris used the opportunity to fire her sharp icicle at the armed Cobra, brutally finishing him with a direct hit to his forehead. As Hagan proceeded to savagely beat the second Cobra using nothing but his fists, Iris darted to aid Lucas, who was helplessly quivering on the ground.

“Lucas, speak,” Iris said frantically, kneeling beside him. He was unable to respond, temporarily dazed by the excruciating pain in his stomach. “Do not lose consciousness,” she told him. “I know it seems impossible, but you must breathe. Breathe Lucas.” He gasped for breath, each attempt only worsening the cold, sharp sting that was far too overwhelming to ignore.

Turning her head, Iris saw one of the men who had been struggling with Aiden approach rapidly with his saber drawn. She placed her palm against the ground with her fingers stretched toward the charging enemy. “Glacies lubricus fascino!” Immediately, ice encased the ground beneath her hand, spreading with extraordinary speed across the stone toward the oncoming Cobra. Seeing the approaching ice, the man attempted to slow his pace. Too late: the ice had already reached the area below his feet. He slipped and fell with a mighty thud.

Iris glanced over to Hagan, who had just knocked out his opponent.

“Is Lucas okay?!” he asked.

“He’s injured,” Iris replied, “and struggling to retain consciousness.” She snapped her head back at the Cobra who was attempting to return to his feet. “Glacies stiria telum!” Iris ceased his effort with an icicle missile through the chest before turning her focus back to Lucas.

“More Cobras on the way,” Hagan warned, looking to the east at a charging group of armored men. He slung the backpack to the ground and prepared an arrow. By this time, many of Secar’s citizens were watching the massive battle from the windows of their homes, both confused by and fearful of the unanticipated occurrence.

Aiden, who had been using every ounce of strength he possessed to free himself from capture, was at last subdued. He’d tried to save himself with his bizarre brand of Fire magic, but was mercilessly beaten the moment his hands blazed to life. Enduring many blows to his head, he was soon unable to conjure. His face was now a badly brutalized mess. One of the men secured Aiden’s hands behind his back while the other dashed to combat the trio.

Hagan ducked to avoid a fire orb from the nearing foe, responding with an arrow which expeditiously eradicated the threat. Turning back to the east, he witnessed the approaching group of Cobras conjuring various Fire and Ice spells. “Iris!” he shouted, “Shield! Now!!” Rising to her feet, Iris prepared herself.

“I’d kill you now,” the Cobra told Aiden as he tightened the rope on his wrists, “but I wouldn’t want to take the pleasure away from Kuraikaji.” Aiden knew he’d been beat, and was far too disoriented to even retaliate with words.

Suddenly the man’s eyes widened and his mouth swung open. He fell to the ground. Much to Aiden’s surprise, he felt a tugging at the rope around his hands. Someone was cutting it off. With his hands freed, he turned to see Sezuni holding a blood-soaked dagger.

“I knew you’d screw up,” she said, tucking the dagger back into her cloak. “Just stay put and try not to be stupid for a few minutes.”

Aiden was utterly baffled. “Okay,” he said softly, watching Sezuni dash to assist the trio through his blurred vision.

“Glacies amplius scuto!” Iris shouted, creating a massive wall of ice, blocking the entire road in front of the charging Cobras. Instantly, they began hurling their conjurations at the barrier. “We must withdraw,” she told Hagan, using all of her strength to drag Lucas away from the quickly dissolving blockade.

Hagan glanced at the Cobras, then back to Iris. “It’s too late for that.” He put away his bow, positioning himself to conjure a counterattack. “We’re just going to have to face them.”

“They’re far too great in number,” Iris shouted. “We must retreat immediately!”

“Don’t,” Sezuni commanded. Hagan and Iris were both astonished and relieved by her presence as she lowered her arms and said, “Umbra obscurum crystallinus!” She lifted her hands above her head, causing a large black crystal to jut from the ground below the mob, sending them flying in various directions. A few were killed by the attack, but most merely sustained injuries. “Remove the barrier and finish them,” Sezuni ordered as the crystal vanished. Iris obeyed, dissipating the wall of ice by flicking her wrist.

The moment the icy barricade had disappeared, Hagan pointed his palms at the surviving Cobras and bellowed, “Ignis sterno!” A wide stream of flames rushed from his open palms, scorching the enemies in a sweeping inferno.

“Glacies gelidus zephyrus!” Simultaneously, Iris ensured their demise with an icy barrage of her own.

“Hey!” Aiden slurred loudly. “Bad stuff over here!” He fell to the ground, unable to withstand the pain of his injuries any longer.

Sezuni glanced back in his direction to see more Cobras emerging in the distance. Observing that Iris and Hagan had the current situation well under control, she unsheathed her katana and sprinted to combat the men.

As she neared the assailants, Sezuni quickly jumped to her right to avoid an icicle missile and ducked as a fire orb zoomed over her head, continuing to run forward. Shocked that she had managed to dodge his attack, the nearest Cobra began to unsheathe his saber only to be viciously sliced across his neck by Sezuni's katana. "Umbrā orbis!" Sezuni threw a shadow orb at another man who was in the middle of conjuring a Fire spell, knocking him to the ground as she hastily approached the Cobra responsible for launching the icicle missile. She swiped at him with her katana, only to be blocked by his saber. "Nice," she commented, sweeping her leg and tripping the enemy. With a stab to his head, she glanced up to see an ice orb whizzing directly toward her. She narrowly dodged it, returning a shadow orb to the attacking foe.

Lucas slowly got to his feet, witnessing Hagan and Iris defeat the last of the large mob. Noticing the movement, Hagan turned his head.

"Lucas! You're alright!" He and Iris rushed to their companion.

"I'm fine," Lucas told them, holding his stomach.

"Thank goodness," Iris replied. "Quickly, heal yourself."

Hagan glanced to the west. "I'd better go help Sezuni. Stay here with Lucas." He took off to assist her.

"Sezuni?" Lucas said, puzzled. "She came back?"

"Yes." Iris answered. "Details are not essential right now. You must recover from your injury immediately."

Closing his eyes and focusing, Lucas proceeded to heal himself. "Lumen sana!"

As he recovered, Iris scanned the road to the east. She could see more Cobras exiting the building at the end of the next block, noting that the structure was likely Kuraikaji's hideout. She turned to Lucas. "It seems our struggle is only beginning. Reinforcements are approaching from the east. To make matters worse, I feel that I'm nearing my conjuring limit."

Lucas finished healing and collected his sword lying on the ground nearby. "Is anyone else hurt?" he asked.

Iris glanced at Sezuni and Hagan, both who seemed to be in good condition as they concluded their battle. Suddenly, Aiden's stagnant body caught her eye. "Aiden requires immediate attention."

Lucas looked at Aiden in the distance. "Do you have enough in you to hold them off while I heal him?"

"I'll do my best," she responded, looking back to the east. To her surprise, the Cobras were nowhere to be seen.

Running as fast as his legs would carry him, Lucas made his way over to Aiden. Kneeling down, he turned his ally face up. Lucas was astonished by Aiden's dire physical condition. *Wow, he took a pretty harsh beating. It's going to take a lot to heal him. I hope I can do it.*

As Lucas slowly revived Aiden, Iris saw the Cobras suddenly reappear from around the corner of the next block's end, now mounted on horses. She prepared to raise another large wall of ice as the Cobras drew closer. It was then that Iris noticed something unusual. The man in the middle of the group of seven was dressed much differently than the others. He wore a dark-gray, long-sleeved overcoat with red trim and golden buttons. His pants were the same shade of gray, held by a black belt with a shiny gold buckle. Iris gasped. *Could that be—?*

Aiden's eyes opened as Lucas removed his hand. "How do you feel?" Lucas asked.

Aiden quickly got off the ground. “What the heck just happened?! What’s going on?” His jaw dropped as he noticed the seven men riding toward them in the east. “Kuraikaji!!” Gasping, Lucas gripped his sword and bolted to Iris.

Without warning, an arrow sped past Aiden, striking down a Cobra running toward him from an alley. “Don’t even think about running,” Hagan warned as he and Sezuni took off to face the impending conflict to the east.

Lucas halted beside Iris. “It’s Kuraikaji,” he told her.

“I’d feared so,” she responded.

The mounted Cobras came to a stop in front of the two as Hagan and Sezuni joined them. A bead of sweat ran down Lucas’s face. *Dammit! Not now! Healing Aiden took almost everything I had left in me. Iris said she’s almost drained too... but I can’t let Kuraikaji know that. I have to stand my ground.*

Aiden joined the group, attempting to hide his face behind Hagan. The Cobras didn’t say a word or even conjure as Kuraikaji looked down at the group. He had short black hair and a thin pencil mustache. His left eye was green with an eye patch obscuring his right.

“What are you doing in my city?” he queried coldly.

“Your men attacked my town,” Hagan angrily responded. “This is payback.” As he began to reach for an arrow, Sezuni quickly grabbed his arm and shook her head.

“I haven’t the slightest clue what you’re talking about,” Kuraikaji said calmly.

“We know about Damiano’s Disk,” Lucas asserted, causing a look of surprise on Kuraikaji’s face. “We ran into more of your Cobras in the In Between. It seems that you really want that thing. But your rampage stops here. Just give it up, Kuraikaji.”

Kuraikaji chuckled. “Ah, heroes, huh? Cute.” The other Cobras laughed at his remark. There was a pause as Kuraikaji observed the cadavers in the surrounding area. “You’re quite skilled fighters,” he finally said. “Nosey fighters as well.” Suddenly, his visible eye widened. “You!!” Kuraikaji barked, pointing his finger at Aiden.

“Eep,” Aiden sheepishly responded.

“Now I see what’s going on,” Kuraikaji seethed before turning to his men. “Kill them!”

He took off to the east as the six remaining Cobras prepared to attack. Three of them conjured massive fireballs, one prepared an ice orb, while the remaining two loaded arrows. Without hesitation, Sezuni sheathed her katana and lowered her arms. Meanwhile, Iris prepared to conjure another ice barrier as Hagan fired an arrow and Aiden’s hands burst, once again, into flames.

The Cobra holding the ice orb leaned and barely dodged Hagan’s arrow, returning fire with his conjuration, but missing. At the same time, the two Cobras armed with bows released their arrows. Aiden’s hands extinguished as he leaped through the air to dodge the first while the second narrowly missed Iris.

“Glacies amplius scuto!”

A large wall of ice appeared between the group and the Cobras, prompting Sezuni to raise another massive crystal below their feet. This threw the men from their horses, causing their conjured Fire spells to vanish. The crystal disappeared, leaving the Cobras in a scattered mess while the horses galloped away.

“Holy crap, that was awesome!” Aiden blurted.

Iris felt her legs weaken. “Unfortunately, I’ve reached my conjuring limit. I will be unable to assist any further.”

Out of the corner of his eye, Hagan noticed another Cobra pop out from behind a nearby building and launch an arrow.

“Watch out!” he yelled, pointing to the sniper as the arrow plunged into Sezuni’s arm.

“Ahh!” she cried.

“Sezuni!” Iris and Lucas ran to her as Hagan returned an arrow at the stealthy foe, who merely took cover behind the building while another Cobra fired a second arrow.

Luckily, he missed, prompting Aiden to ignite his hands. “I got ‘em!” he said, running toward the enemies.

Hagan turned back to Sezuni, who had just pulled the arrow from her arm. She threw it to the ground, bleeding profusely from where it had entered. “Lucas, heal her!” Hagan shouted.

“I can’t,” he replied. “It took a lot to heal Aiden. I’ll be lucky if I can even conjure a light orb.”

“Dammit!” Hagan yelled in frustration, putting away his bow and turning back to the icy barrier. Four of the men had survived the attack, and were running into an alley on the other side of the subzero barricade. “They’re coming around!” Hagan warned his companions.

“Keep fighting,” Sezuni ordered, taking a small bottle of red liquid out of her pocket. “I’ll be fine.”

As the first sniper poked his head around the corner with a loaded arrow, he was unexpectedly pelted by an onslaught of fireballs from Aiden. Seeing this, the other Cobra shot at him. The arrow screeched just over his head, prompting Aiden to turn to the assailant and give him the same fiery treatment.

“Ha!” Aiden exclaimed victoriously as his hands returned to normal. He bolted to rejoin the group but almost immediately came to a stop in order to avoid a slithering brown snake-like creature covered in spines. It hissed at Aiden as he reignited his hands, speedily turning the threat into a pile of ash.

Sezuni, who had cut a portion of her sleeve to create a makeshift bandage for her wound, held a shadow orb in the hand of her uninjured arm while Hagan waited with a loaded arrow.

I've only got one arrow left in my quiver, Hagan thought. I don't think I'll have enough time to collect the rest of them. As soon as I fire these two, I've got to get conjuring, pronto.

Noticing a Cobra appear from around a corner, Sezuni threw her orb, delivering a direct hit as the other three ran out from behind him. Aiden, who was nearby, quickly shot a barrage of fireballs at them as Hagan released his arrow. Stifled by the concurrent attacks, the Cobras never had a chance to take offensive action before meeting their demise.

The fire surrounding Aiden's hands vanished as he reunited with the group. "I just saw a monster back there. While we've been keepin' the Cobras busy, they musta started making their way into town."

"That's just what we need," Hagan griped.

"Fortunately," said Sezuni, "it seems that we've already defeated a great deal of Cobras. There can't be many left alive."

"Did anyone see where Kuraikaji went?" Lucas asked.

Hagan shook his head. "I lost track of him when we started fighting."

"Same," said Aiden. "I know he went east though. Mighta went home."

"I suppose we should pursue him," Iris suggested. "Shall I remove the barrier?"

"Yeah," Lucas responded, "let's do it."

As Iris dissolved the icy wall, Hagan turned to Sezuni. "You know, I could have just shot him if you hadn't stopped me."

“The moment you would have raised your bow,” Sezuni retorted, “his men would have annihilated you. That’s not even taking into consideration Kuraikaji’s ability as a fighter. I’m certain he was anticipating an assault.”

“What if I had hit him?” Hagan argued. “Those Cobras weren’t so tough. Besides, we just ended up fighting them anyway.”

“I can’t read the future,” Sezuni said bitterly. “I did what I thought was best.”

“There’s no time to argue about what could have happened,” Lucas interjected. “It worked out. We just have to think about what we’re going to do next.”

Following a brief pause, Hagan looked over to Iris. “What the hell, Iris? Are you still holding on to that satchel?”

“Of course,” she answered. “I’m positive it will prove useful at some point.”

“It’s an empty bag,” Hagan protested.

The two were interrupted as Aiden’s hands burst into flames. “We got more monsters out west!”

Sezuni unsheathed her katana with her good arm. “I’ll take care of them. Try to save your magic for Kuraikaji and any remaining Cobras.” She raced toward the beasts as Aiden’s hands extinguished.

He turned back to the group. “So, we gonna do this or what?”

“Let me pick up my arrows first,” Hagan replied. “My quiver’s empty.”

Aiden gave a nod. “Fair enough. When ya get done, we gotta get to that building on the end of the next block. I’m bettin’ ol’ Kajimyster’s in there.”

Iris eyed the windows of the surrounding buildings, noticing the faces of the people who had been watching their battle. “Our crusade seems to have attracted the attention of Secar’s populous.”

After collecting the backpack still lying where Hagan had dropped it, Lucas observed the onlookers. “I hope they’re not upset about what we’re doing.”

“Doubt it,” Aiden responded. “This town’s a hellhole. Once ya get them to Valletal like you were sayin’ earlier, they’ll be linin’ up to kiss your ass. All we gotta worry ‘bout now is Kuraikaji.”

Chapter 44: Laverick's Discovery

“Laverick!” he heard his mother’s voice snap as he bordered on unconsciousness. “Do not fall asleep!” Laverick slowly opened his eyes. Gradually rolling over, he observed his surroundings. Most of the beds were now occupied, and it appeared that he had at last found an appropriate time to proceed with his hunt for the disk fragment.

“Do you think I should go now?” he whispered as quietly as possible.

“Yes,” she responded. “Try to remain undetected. It would probably be best to avoid any conversations after your little display earlier.”

Slowly, Laverick got out of bed and tiptoed into the hallway. As he exited the barracks, he took a moment to check the passage, ensuring its vacancy. *Okie doke. Guess I should see what’s in that meeting room now.* Walking softly, he carefully made his way down the hall and into the meeting room.

As he entered, Laverick scanned the surrounding area. The room had a large table with many chairs, all solid black with bright white outlines. He also noticed a bookshelf equipped with cabinets and drawers. *Ah ha!* He grinned, cautiously approaching the discovery.

Opening the first cabinet, he searched its contents. *Not here.* He closed it and rummaged through the second cabinet. *Not here either.* Shutting it gently, he continued through the rest of the drawers. Again, he was unable to find the fragment.

After removing various books from the shelf to ensure the disk wasn’t hidden there, he walked around the perimeter of the room, hoping something would strike his eye. Still, he found nothing. Poking his head under the table before exiting the room, he left empty handed.

It's not in here... where should I look next? Let's see, I've been in the kitchen already... Walking farther down the hallway, he noticed a room he had yet to explore. *Here we go.* He peered inside to see a large, muscular man with a bald head and a bushy red beard. He was standing perfectly still, holding a battle-axe.

He looked at Laverick. "Zoe?"

Laverick was caught off guard, and responded with a simple, "Hi."

"Are you having trouble sleeping?" the man asked.

Laverick nodded. "Yeah. I just wanted to see if anyone else was awake."

"Oh, I hate when that happens," the man said with a warm smile. "You know what always does the trick for me? A nice midnight snack and a glass of water."

"Uh-huh," Laverick replied, making his best effort to subtly browse the room. Its contents didn't appear to be relevant to his search. There was an old shovel leaning against the wall next to a small chair. A red cloak hung on the wall, with an impressive looking sword mounted nearby. An unused set of armor rested across from the chair. *Just a bunch of junk.*

"So," the man went on, "are you feeling... back to normal?"

Laverick snapped his attention back to the conversation. "Oh, yes. I just have a lot on my mind. Guess I kind of went overboard."

"It's understandable," the man responded. "I've lost buddies since I joined too. It's a terrible thing to go through. But hey, who knows? Roshan might have already busted himself out."

At that moment, Laverick noticed that the man was standing directly in front of a large chest, held shut with a rather sizeable chained lock.

“Has Alex made it back yet?” the man asked as Laverick quickly took his eyes off of the enticing trunk.

“Not yet,” Laverick answered.

The man looked disheartened by the news. “I hope he’s alright. It was very noble of him to accompany you on such a dangerous mission. His father and I were good friends, you know.”

“Really?” Laverick said, half paying attention, still entranced by the chest’s presence.

The man gave a nod. “Mark Beauford. He was one of the first Spades; recruited by Tarren himself. Loved his family. He hated that he only got to see them every so often, but he was totally dedicated to the organization. Then he started getting sick... had to go back home to Leath. Said he’d be back as soon as he recovered. To be honest, some of us thought he was just faking it so he could go home and see his wife and kids a bit. Next thing we know, his son Alex shows up to Eugene’s smith shop and tells him Mark passed away. Said he wanted to join in his place. Wanted to make his father proud.” He paused. “You know, Alex took a real liking to you after you showed up. He was always asking, ‘Anyone talk to that new girl yet?’” The man smiled. “I thought he was gonna piss his pants when we told him who you were.”

“Ask what’s in the bloody chest!!” Veronica suddenly screamed in Laverick’s mind, causing him to jump.

“You alright?” the man inquired.

“Oh yeah... yes, I’m fine.” Laverick quickly answered. “So... what’s in the box?”

Befuddled by the question, the man replied, “You know...”

“Actually, I don’t,” said Laverick. “I guess they didn’t tell you, but I got hit pretty hard on the head. My memory is a bit messed up. I’m still trying to remember everything.”

The man raised his eyebrows. “Sorry to hear that. I had no idea.”

“I remember some stuff,” Laverick added, “but the rest is kind of fuzzy.” The room was silent. “So, what’s in the chest?” he inquired a second time.

“The disk fragment,” the man responded.

Laverick was overwhelmed with excitement, but tried his best not to display his joy externally. In his mind, however, he was screaming, *Yes, yes, yes!!!*

“I’m on guard duty right now,” the man continued. “No one’s getting in here on my watch. Heck, I can’t even get in there if I wanted to.”

“Oh! Right, of course,” Laverick spat out, trying his best to sound embarrassed for ‘forgetting.’ The man chuckled to himself, apparently buying into the ruse.

Echoing Laverick’s own joy, Veronica exclaimed, “Splendid discovery, darling! Now it’s just a matter of locating the key to that lock and getting by this buffoon.”

* * * *

Veronica turned to Lord Quinn. “He’s found it.”

Smiling, he softly said, “At last.”

“It’s confined in a large chest,” she explained. “The chest is locked shut, however, and a rather sizeable man equipped with a battle-axe is guarding it. We’ve already determined that he does not hold the key himself, which means all Laverick must do now is find it and come up with a way to get to the chest.”

“Is your son capable of conjuring?” Lord Quinn queried.

“Sadly, no,” Veronica answered. “I’ve tried to teach him a few times, but he’s simply uninterested.”

Lord Quinn was visibly frustrated by the news. “Then I certainly hope that he is either highly skilled in physical combat or is some sort of tactical genius. The likelihood that this chest will be without a guard for even a second is nearly nonexistent.”

“No need to fret,” Veronica assured him. “We will find a way.”

* * * *

Laverick was back out in the hallway, unable to hold his conversation with the man any longer, when Veronica’s voice unexpectedly exploded into his mind. “What are you doing back out here?!”

Startled at first, Laverick darted his head around before quietly answering, “I ran outta things to say!”

“That’s no excuse, Son!” she barked. “We know the fragment is in that chest. You must find some way to get inside of it!”

“But how, Ma?” Laverick whispered. “It’s locked and the guy guarding it is all big and scary looking!”

Veronica was irritated by his lack of innovation. “Then go find the key, hit him over his head with that shovel you saw, and get the fragment!!”

“But what if I don’t knock him out?!” he responded. “He’s gonna beat me up extra bad in this girl body!”

“Stop making excuses and do it!!” she angrily shouted.

“Yes, Mommy!” Laverick answered submissively. “Please don’t get mad. I’ll try real hard to find it.”

“Good boy,” said Veronica. “I’ll be watching you. Make us rich, darling!”

Laverick stared down the passage. *Aw, man. I got all excited and now I gotta search more. That key could be anywhere!*

Chapter 45: Reflections Of The Past (Part VIII)

The voice told Javan of Damiano's Disk and the power it unlocked, which was concealed within the ancient temple on Nazareno Island. It explained that the object was split into two fragments which were currently located in another dimension called the 'In Between.' Completely captivated by the thought of obtaining unlimited power, Javan asked the voice how he was to reach this dimension. "Seek out The Crimson Clan of Gethin Woods," the voice instructed. "With their assistance, you will at last obtain the godhood you rightfully deserve."

Once he had agreed to the voice's request, it said something quite unexpected. "I will be leaving you now, Javan. But rest assured, we will meet again." Those were the last words Javan heard from the voice, leaving behind nothing, save an infinite lust for the power promised to him.

Without hesitation, Javan informed King Ashraf that he would be taking a vacation and soon set out for Gethin Woods. On horseback, he searched the seemingly vacant forest for hours before finding a small village deep within the woods. A group of twenty-five men in red cloaks emerged into view as he approached the area.

"Who are you? What brings you here?" One of the men asked as Javan dismounted his horse.

"My name is Javan Quinn. I have ridden here from Cymbeline seeking The Crimson Clan of Gethin Woods."

"Javan Quinn, the king's adviser?" the man queried. Javan gave a single nod. The man quickly conjured a fire orb, prompting his companions to conjure orbs of their own. "Leave at once and tell your king that it would be wise to keep his nose out of our business."

"I will be doing no such thing," Javan answered calmly.

The man's eyebrows lowered. "In that case, consider those to be your last words."

All nine men hurled their conjurations at Javan, who simply said, "Umbra disseptum." The men were shocked as their orbs vanished into black voids.

"I assure you," Javan explained as the men stood speechless, "I have not come to you on royal business. I've recently been informed that your organization could possibly assist me in reaching a dimension known as the In Between."

Chapter 46: Kuraikaji, The Cobra King

“So how are we going to do this?” Hagan asked as the group walked down the street toward Kuraikaji’s stronghold.

Aiden shrugged. “Pop in there and let ‘em have it, I guess.”

“You know it won’t be so simple,” Sezuni remarked.

“Why not?” Aiden argued. “We killed mosta the Cobras. Kuraikaji might be pretty good at fightin’ but he’s not gonna stand a chance against all five of us.”

“Four,” Iris corrected. “Due to the excessive use of magic during our last phase of combat, I’ll be unable to conjure without first acquiring some rest.”

“I don’t have much left in me either,” Lucas added. “I might be able to make one more light orb, but I’m going to have to rely on my sword for the most part.”

Iris turned to Sezuni. “How’s your arm?”

“I’m ambidextrous,” she replied. “I’ll be fine.”

“What’s the deal with that eye patch, anyway?” Hagan queried, breaking a short silence. “Is Kuraikaji a part-time pirate or something?”

“It musta got gouged out a while ago,” Aiden answered. “He’s always had it as long as I can remember.”

“He can’t be too tough with a big blind spot like that,” Hagan remarked.

Sezuni looked at him. “He didn’t become the leader of a thieves’ guild by losing fights, you know.”

Hagan was irked. “Why are you always talking about how Kuraikaji is such a great fighter?! We get it! Kuraikaji’s the man, and we suck!”

Sezuni’s face softened behind its concealment. “Arrogantly underestimating your opponent is a surefire way to ensure your own demise. All I’m telling you is the truth.”

The group approached the double doors leading into Kuraikaji’s lair. Constructed of bath stone, the building was noticeably larger than the surrounding structures. Massive pillars supported the edifice’s overhang, towering far above heroes’ heads. It also appeared to be well maintained, in stark contrast to the remainder of the city.

“Here it is,” said Aiden. “Ha! We took out so many Cobras that he doesn’t even have anyone left to guard the front door!” He twisted the doorknob.

As the group entered the spacious room, they carefully scanned the area for threats. They appeared to be in a lobby decorated with furniture, bookshelves, vases, and an old piano. From the ceiling, two large chandeliers provided excellent lighting. On the far side of the room was a decorative rug, which sat at the bottom of a stairway leading to another set of double doors. There were no Cobras in sight.

“Nice place,” Hagan commented.

Iris looked at Aiden. “Are you certain Kuraikaji is here?”

“He’s here, alright,” Aiden replied. He pointed to the doors at the top of the stairway. “I bet ya five hundred gold he’s in the room at the end of the hallway, just through that door. Probably cryin’ like a little girl after seein’ what we did to his guys.”

Aiden strode toward the staircase when Sezuni suddenly said, “Stop.” Halting, he turned back toward her. “Something doesn’t seem right,” she warned.

“Indeed,” Iris added. “I find it hard to believe that Kuraikaji would send all of his remaining men to eliminate us without preserving enough of them for personal protection.”

“Seems fishy,” Hagan agreed.

Sezuni gave a nod. “He would never leave his stronghold unguarded, especially during a time like this.”

“Just relax!” Aiden said nonchalantly, as he continued toward the stairs. “The only reason it’s unguarded is ‘cause we’re total badasses and took out all his guys! If there’s anyone left they’re probably—” he had only managed to climb a few steps before an arrow speedily buried into his leg. “Yeeow!”

“Aiden!” Iris shrieked.

Sezuni, Lucas, and Hagan drew their weapons as Aiden stumbled down the stairs and collapsed on the rug, moaning in anguish. Lucas darted his head around the room in an attempt to locate the shooter, but saw no one. Dropping the backpack, he kneeled beside Aiden. “Aiden, what happened? Who shot you?”

“Hell if I know!” Aiden sharply responded. “I’m a little busy freakin’ dying here!!”

While the two spoke, another arrow whizzed beside Iris’s head, causing her to let out a fearful scream.

“There!” Sezuni shouted, pointing to a small balcony concealed by a curtain. From it, a Cobra was barely visible, peeking out from the drape’s cover, preparing to fire another arrow. He shot it at Sezuni as Hagan returned an arrow of his own. In a display of incredible accuracy, Sezuni blocked the projectile with her katana while Hagan’s arrow plunged into the Cobra.

“Got him,” Hagan proclaimed.

As Hagan spoke, Lucas jumped to avoid another arrow shot from the balcony on the opposite side of the room, causing the sharp missile to smash into a vase. Sezuni quickly sheathed her

katana. “Umbra orbis!” she shouted, eliminating the second attacker with a well-aimed shadow orb.

Lucas carefully inspected the room. “Is that all of them?”

“I think so,” Hagan replied.

“Is everyone okay?” Iris asked.

Aiden winced. “Not me!”

“You’ll be fine,” Sezuni said as she approached him. In one swift motion, she pulled the arrow out of his leg.

“Aaaaahhhh!” Aiden yelled.

Rolling her eyes, Sezuni reached into her pocket and handed him a small, half-empty bottle of red liquid. “It’s Sanguis Elixir,” she informed. “It should stop most of the bleeding but it won’t spare you much pain.” After Aiden had drunk it, she dressed his injury using the yellow cloth around his neck. “There,” she said as she finished tying it. “Will you stop your whining now?”

The second Aiden opened his mouth to reply, the double doors at the top of the stairs burst open. Four Cobras dressed in brown cloaks entered the room, followed by Kuraikaji himself. Sezuni quickly jumped to her feet and unsheathed her katana. Responding similarly, Hagan raised his bow while Lucas gripped his sword. Two of the Cobras remained by the doors, armed with bows. The other two walked beside Kuraikaji toward the group, carrying ice orbs. Aiden stumbled to his feet, trying with all of his might to fight the pain surging through his leg.

Lucas noticed a sword sheathed on Kuraikaji’s waist. *Damn, he’s a swordsman too.*

“Settle down,” Kuraikaji said calmly, as he and his men approached. The throng of men halted halfway down the stairs. “I admit,” Kuraikaji went on, “I’m quite impressed by how easily you’ve managed to slaughter my men.” He looked at Aiden. “I never expected you’d retaliate so harshly after being banned from

Secar and the Cobras. Especially with your own group of highly proficient fighters.”

“I wasn’t gonna let ya off that easy,” Aiden replied, desperately trying to mask his agony.

“We’re not here because of him,” Hagan asserted. “Your men attacked Azure! We want answers.”

“Ah, yes,” Kuraikaji responded, “that’s right. Very well. I suppose I could reward your effort with an explanation.” He paused briefly before continuing. “You see, one of my men recently made a startling discovery within a cave out in Hravart Desert: a portal to another dimension. I was intrigued by the news, to say the least, and accompanied five of my best men on an expedition to explore this unexpected finding.” He looked at Lucas. “From what you said in town, I can assume that you’re already quite familiar with the In Between and Damiano’s Disk.” Lucas remained silent.

“It wasn’t long after we arrived in the In Between,” Kuraikaji went on, “that we noticed a man walking alone in the distance. We approached him, but he saw us coming and quickly ran. Needless to say, my Cobras were much quicker and apprehended him with little effort. I asked him where we were. He was quite uncooperative at first.” Kuraikaji chuckled. “They always crack when a sword is held to their throat.

“I learned a great deal of information from that man. Apparently, this dimension I’d stumbled into was a buffer world between our realm and the land of the dead, also known as the Netherworld. With a little more prodding, he informed me that the monsters plaguing Aria had originated from this place. It seems that the beasts are nothing more than lost souls that have been transformed with advanced necromancy.”

“We already know all of that, too,” Hagan interrupted impatiently. “Just tell us why the hell your men attacked my town!”

“My,” Kuraikaji responded, “you’re a clever bunch, aren’t you? If you want the short version: this man turned out to be a member of the Spades. He informed me that the Knowms work for Javan Quinn, who has seized control of Aria secretly not only for massive wealth and political power, but in search of the second half of Damiano’s Disk being held by the Spades. To be blunt, I’m most fascinated by the power this object supposedly unlocks and want it for myself. I asked the man where the Knowms were holding their fragment, but he was unsure. Despite further interrogation, I was unable to learn the location of the Spades’ fragment either. So I killed him, and sent my men to find the two pieces of Damiano’s Disk themselves, one town at a time.” He looked at Hagan. “The destruction of your city was nothing personal, I assure you. Just luck of the draw.”

“That’s it!” Hagan shouted furiously, raising his bow. The Cobras beside Kuraikaji were about to launch their ice orbs when he made a ‘cease’ motion with his hand. They reluctantly obeyed.

“Say goodnight!” Hagan exclaimed, firing the arrow directly at Kuraikaji’s head. The group was flabbergasted as Kuraikaji caught the projectile in midair.

“No way!” Hagan blurted.

Lucas’s eyes widened. *Whoa!*

Kuraikaji smiled. “If you’re wise,” he said, tossing the arrow aside, “you’ll shut your mouth and open your ears for a moment. As I’ve said before, I’m highly impressed by your abilities as fighters. So much, in fact, that I would like to offer you a chance to work alongside me in acquiring the two fragments of Damiano’s Disk.”

“Sounds like a pretty sweet deal to me,” Aiden commented nervously. The remainder of the group glared at him.

Lucas turned back to Kuraikaji. “We’re not interested, Kuraikaji.”

“Please,” Kuraikaji scoffed, “do you take me for a fool? You’re not going to convince me that you yourself are not at all interested in its power.”

“Of course we are,” Lucas responded, “but we only want to use it to restore Aria to the way it was before Quinn destroyed it.”

Kuraikaji laughed. “You’re not giving up on that pathetic hero act, are you? Listen, boy. There are no heroes in this world. The strong eat the weak, and that’s that.”

Lucas smirked. “Guess you’re just weak then.” The group was surprised by his response.

Kuraikaji became visibly furious. “You’ve got a lot of nerve to talk so big, boy.”

“We’re not the one’s desperately trying to make a deal, are we?” Lucas replied. “I think you’re scared.” The room fell silent.

Kuraikaji slowly made his way down the stairs, motioning for his Cobras to stay put. “You think I’m scared of you, huh?” he said calmly. “Then, considering you’re such a fearless warrior, I presume you wouldn’t be opposed to a fight to the death.” He halted in front of Lucas, towering over him. “What do you say? You against me. One on one. My Cobras will not interfere if your companions agree to stay put as well. Winner takes all.”

Lucas was stunned by the unexpected challenge. *Now I’ve done it! This guy’s going to rip me to pieces! Ugh, I should have just kept my mouth shut.*

“Answer me, boy,” Kuraikaji asserted harshly. “Don’t tell me you’ve suddenly transformed into a sniveling coward.”

Lucas lowered his eyebrows. “You’re on. Let’s do it.”

Chapter 47: The Search Continues

Laverick poked his head into the room. Inside, Tarren was asleep on his bed. Instantaneously, Laverick recognized him as the man who had scolded him earlier. *I think that guy's their leader. The key's gotta be in here! I have to look. But I gotta be super-duper careful not to wake him up.* He quietly tiptoed inside.

Among the furniture, Laverick spotted a dresser, a bookshelf, and a desk as potential hiding places for the treasure he sought. Selecting the dresser as his first mark, he softly approached it. Gently placing his hand on the first drawer, he gradually opened it to find several pairs of pants and undergarments. *Aw man, now I gotta search through undies.*

Deciding to start with the pants, Laverick lifted each pair and looked underneath them. He found nothing. Sticking his hand into every one of the pockets produced the same results. He cringed as he viewed the undergarments, partitioned on the other side of the drawer. Unwillingly, he checked under and between each neatly folded pair of underwear. *Nothing here,* he thought as he checked the final pair. *Phew! Glad that's over. Okies, next drawer.*

Unexpectedly, Tarren let out a loud snort and rolled onto his side. Startled, Laverick froze. He slowly turned his head toward the bed, and was alleviated to find that Tarren was still asleep. Letting out a soft sigh of relief, he returned to his task.

Laverick tediously searched the rest of the dresser, but alas, was unable to find the key. Shutting the final drawer, he delicately advanced toward the desk. His eyes were drawn to a map lying on its surface. As he studied it, he was alarmed when his mother suddenly remarked, "What a delightful find, darling! It seems to be a map of the In Between. My! What detail!" She paused. "Take it, Son. I'd like to examine it once we return to Kieran Forest." Complying, Laverick carefully rolled up the map and placed it into his bag.

Glancing at Tarren to ensure his slumber had remained uninterrupted, Laverick discreetly explored the contents of the desk. While he found ink, several pens, blank parchment, and various documents among other things, he failed to locate the key. *Dang it. Guess I gotta look through the bookshelf – and it’s right by his bed! I gotta be super-duper-extra-wextra quiet!*

Tiptoeing his way to the bookshelf, Laverick suddenly halted when he made an astonishing discovery. His eyes widened as a grin swept across his face. There, partially obscured by the pillow which Tarren rested his head on, was a ring containing several keys.

“Fantastic!” Veronica proclaimed cheerfully.

* * * *

Lord Quinn crinkled his brow as Veronica opened her eyes and turned to him smiling. “He’s found a ring of keys,” she announced. “I’m positive one of them must open the chest.”

“We can only hope,” Lord Quinn responded. “While I’m pleased by this news, there is no cause for celebration until the fragment is in his possession.” He sipped his coffee. “We’re not out of the woods quite yet.”

* * * *

Using extreme caution, Laverick inched his hand toward the keys. When at last he held them, he gingerly pulled them out from under the pillow. Despite his vigilant manner, they jingled profusely as he lifted them off of the bed. A shot of pure terror surged down his spine as Tarren mumbled and tossed. *No, no, no!!* Laverick screamed in his head, while externally remaining completely still. Much to his surprise, Tarren eventually ceased moving, and appeared to remain asleep. Shaken by the close call, Laverick stood in place for a short duration as a bead of sweat ran down his face. Then, gripping the keys with both hands and holding them closely to his chest in order to prevent further jingling, he exited the bedroom as quietly as he’d entered.

Once he was safely back in the hallway, Laverick stuffed the keys into his bag. As he did so, Veronica returned her focus to him. “You have the keys! Outstanding work, Son! Now the only obstacle remaining is that guard.”

“Uh-huh,” Laverick whispered. “I still dunno how I’m gonna do that.”

“It’s simple,” Veronica replied. “Use the shovel to knock him out. Remember?”

Laverick shook his head repeatedly. “No way, Ma! I’m gonna be in big trouble if I mess up.”

“Don’t think about what if,” she snapped, “just do it!”

“But Maaaa,” he whined, “what if it’s super loud and wakes everyone up? I still need time to figure out how the heck I’m ‘sposed to get outta here!”

There was a pause. Somewhat astounded by her son’s logical argument, Veronica responded, “I didn’t think about that.”

Laverick briefly examined the hallway around him, making sure it remained empty. “So what do I do then?”

“I’m not sure, Son.” Veronica answered, following a short delay.

Laverick crinkled his brow. “B-but Ma! I got the key and everything! We gotta come up with something!”

“Complaining isn’t helping me think, Son!!” she harshly bellowed.

Laverick looked down at his feet. “Sorry, Mommy...”

After a few moments had passed, Veronica suddenly spoke. “I’ve got it! It’s absolutely brilliant! Why didn’t I think of this before?”

“Think of what, Ma?!” Laverick quietly responded.

“Return to the kitchen,” she ordered. “I have a perfect solution to our little dilemma.”

“The kitchen?” Laverick asked, baffled by his mother’s request.

Veronica chuckled. “Trust me, darling. That fragment is practically ours already. All you must do is follow my instructions to a tee.” Still oblivious to what exactly his mother had in mind, Laverick proceeded to the base’s kitchen.

Chapter 48: Lucas Versus Kuraikaji

Lucas stood across from Kuraikaji in the middle of the large room with his sword drawn. From the area at the top of the stairs, the four Cobras and the remainder of the group watched in suspense. On the two balconies, now with the curtains drawn back, additional Cobras stood equipped with loaded bows, their sights set on Lucas's companions.

"This is crazy, Lucas!" Hagan yelled. "Just swallow your pride and back out!"

"Don't even think about fleeing this battlefield," Kuraikaji warned. "You've agreed, and we're going to fight." He glanced back at Hagan. "As I've said before, the moment my Cobras even think you're going to interfere, you will all be killed on the spot." Coldly staring at Lucas, he added, "The only way to get out of this is to best me, one on one." He drew his sword. "Well, hero. Make the first move. I'm just 'scared' after all." The Cobras chuckled.

Lucas tightened his grip on the sword. *This is it! I don't know how the hell I'm going to win this. His reflexes are unreal. The way he caught that arrow... But I don't have a choice now. Well, here it goes.*

Lucas swung his sword but was blocked almost instantly. *Dammit!* As quickly as he could, he backed away and tried again. Immediately, his effort was obstructed by Kuraikaji's expeditious blade. Lucas darted to avoid a hasty counterattack. *Now's my chance!* Taking another swing, there was a loud clink as his maneuver was thwarted yet again. Hurriedly stepping backward, his face mirrored his internal frustration.

Kuraikaji smirked. "Come on, boy. I'm barely trying. Dazzle me with your heroics."

"He's dead," Aiden bluntly uttered.

Hagan glared at him. “You’d better mean Kuraikaji.”

“I dunno which fight you’re watchin’, pal,” Aiden replied as Lucas tried again and again to land a single blow on his skillful opponent.

Hagan gnashed his teeth. “You could show a little optimism, you know.”

“The unfortunate truth,” Sezuni interjected, “is that Lucas is simply outmatched. He’s clearly not a master swordsman. Kuraikaji is merely making a show out of him to impress his men.” Iris and Hagan felt their hearts sink as she spoke.

Apparently overhearing their conversation, one of the Cobras looked at them. “Your friend’s got to have a death wish challenging Kuraikaji to a duel like that.”

The man’s comrade chuckled. “Wait until he starts conjuring.” Though he was enraged by their commentary, Hagan returned his attention to the duel below.

The sound of clashing metal echoed throughout the room as Lucas’s blade repeatedly met Kuraikaji’s. *He’s too good! Every time I swing, his sword is already there; and he’s barely even fighting back!* Kuraikaji thrust his blade. Though he attempted to dodge, Lucas was grazed by the attack, cutting his shirt sleeve and drawing blood. He grunted, speedily retaliating with a counterstrike. Again, their blades met as the attack was blocked.

“This is pathetic,” Kuraikaji remarked. “After seeing what you did to my Cobras, I had expected much more from you.”

I’ve got it. I’ll make a fake swing and land a hard strike while he’s distracted. Without warning, Lucas pretended to go in for another swipe. To his astonishment, however, Kuraikaji didn’t move his sword to block. Putting all of his might into a real swing, Lucas’s sword smashed into Kuraikaji’s.

“Nice try,” Kuraikaji commented smugly.

“Ugghh! I can’t take this anymore!” Hagan proclaimed, cupping his hand.

A Cobra watching from the balcony simultaneously pointed his arrow at him. “If you conjure anything,” he warned, “consider yourself a dead man. I can release this arrow a lot faster than you can materialize an orb.” Frustrated, Hagan lowered his arm.

Meanwhile, Lucas continued to swing furiously, only to have his attempts intercepted with little effort from his opposition.

“Kuraikaji seems to anticipate his every move,” Iris noted. “He appears to be positioning his sword to perform a block well before Lucas begins to strike. It’s almost as though...” Her eyes widened. “The eye patch!!” she suddenly called.

Lucas glanced at her. Taking advantage of the temporary distraction, Kuraikaji promptly thrust his blade to Lucas’s stomach. Luckily, the assault was picked up by Lucas’s peripheral vision, scarcely allowing him a chance to elude the strike. As he continued to wage battle against Kuraikaji, Lucas yelled back to her, “What about it?!”

“I believe it’s enchanted,” she quickly replied. “It’s highly probable that it doesn’t obstruct his vision at all, but rather enhances it!”

The two duelists came to a standstill. Kuraikaji chuckled. “Well, I suppose your clever associate has caught me. Yes, I’ll admit, I don’t wear this eye patch because it makes me look devilishly handsome. It grants me the ability to see offensive strikes seconds before they’re made, both physical and magical. The extra reaction time works wonders in duels.”

“You cheating bastard!!” Hagan screamed. “Take it off and fight him like a man!”

Without removing his eyes from Lucas, Kuraikaji responded, “Cheating? Not at all. The rules were that we would engage in a

one on one fight to the death. We never established any guidelines regarding the use of enchanted objects.”

Unnerved by the revelation, Lucas perspired. *There’s no way I can beat him. Even if I can muster up the strength to conjure an orb, he’ll see it coming.*

“If you think you can get it off of me,” Kuraikaji went on, “then be my guest. Though I doubt it will do you much good – especially if you haven’t been holding back on me this whole time.”

Uncertain of what to do next, Lucas rapidly swung at Kuraikaji, who grinned as he calmly negated each blow. *Come on! He has to screw up sooner or later!*

“No wonder Kuraikaji is such a great fighter,” Sezuni acknowledged before glancing at Iris. “How did you know?”

“It was only a theory,” Iris replied, continuing to carefully watch the duel. “I hope he’s able to remove it somehow. Otherwise...”

“Don’t give up, Lucas!” Hagan shouted. “Let him have it!” The Cobras snickered. Hagan glared at them, using every ounce of restraint to hold himself back.

“Easy, buddy,” said Aiden, noticing the boiling rage on his face.

Hagan snapped his head to him. “I’m not your buddy!”

“Keep your cool, baldy,” Aiden responded, “you’re gonna get us all shot!” Enraged by the use of the term ‘baldy,’ Hagan swiftly kicked Aiden’s injured leg.

“Aahhh!!” Aiden screamed, collapsing to the floor.

“Hagan!” Iris snapped. “Control yourself!” Biting his lip, Hagan returned his focus to the duel.

Lucas was feeling exhaustion grab at his lungs. *I don't know how long I can keep this up. The moment I stop, he's going to kill me. I have to think of something.*

Suddenly, Kuraikaji's blade sent Lucas's sword flying out of his hands, landing a good distance from where he stood. Kuraikaji raised his eyebrows. "Got you." Without hesitation, Lucas dashed to collect his weapon. Remaining in place, Kuraikaji sheathed his sword. "I'm growing bored. Let's finish this while it's still mildly interesting."

As Lucas picked up his weapon, Kuraikaji shouted, "Ignis planitia verrunt!"

"Lucas!" Hagan and Iris yelled as a large flame swept along the ground toward their companion at alarming speed. Lucas dove out of the flame's path. It exploded into the wall, causing some nearby furniture to catch fire. Though he avoided the brunt of the assault, Lucas suffered minor heat burns from the resulting blast.

"Extinguish the flames," Kuraikaji ordered one of his men before conjuring a fire orb. Complying, a Cobra standing near the group quickly used an Ice spell to snuff out the lingering blaze. At the same time, Lucas got to his feet as Kuraikaji hurled the fire orb. Lucas avoided the threat by mere inches, causing the flame to burst into the sandstone wall.

Immediately after dodging the orb, Lucas bolted directly at Kuraikaji. *He's going to kill me anyway, I might as well make him fight for it!* Kuraikaji was stunned by the move, hastily unsheathing his sword. Though Lucas delivered a powerful swing, his blade inevitably clashed with Kuraikaji's, beginning another chain of loud clinks as Lucas relentlessly swiped at his adversary.

"That's it, Lucas!" Hagan yelled encouragingly. "Give him hell!"

One of the Cobras scoffed. "Kuraikaji's just playing with him. If he were trying, your friend would be dead."

Hagan was about to unleash his fury on the man when Sezuni calmly replied, “If Kuraikaji’s such a tough guy, why doesn’t he fight without the eye patch?”

“Yeah!” Hagan agreed. “Lucas would have him in pieces if he weren’t cheating!” The Cobra chuckled and turned back to the fight.

Lucas was sweating profusely. *I’m getting way too tired. I can’t believe this. I could be living the final minute of my life right now.* In that moment, he reflected on all of the events that had taken place since he’d left from his home. Receiving the fragment from Morice, the old man. Meeting Roshan and being hurled into the In Between. His encounter with Zoe. Fading into unconsciousness as Hagan rescued him in the snow. Coming to in Iris’s cozy home in Azure.

His eyes widened. *Wait! Iris!* As quickly as possible, he distanced himself from his opponent.

Kuraikaji laughed. “What’s wrong, boy? Scared?”

Lucas faced him. *Please work, please work!* He outstretched his arm in a cupping formation with his palm facing upward.

Kuraikaji remained in place, amused. *An orb, hm?* he thought.

“Lumen orbis!” Lucas bellowed, successfully conjuring a light orb. *Yes!* Immediately, his legs began to shake. *I’ve definitely reached my limit with this one. I’ve got to do this perfectly.*

Kuraikaji raised an eyebrow. “Light magic?” He chuckled. “What are you planning to do, boy? Suffocate me with fairy dust?” The Cobras laughed hysterically at their leader’s comment.

Lucas’s face turned to stone. Without a word, he hurled the light orb directly at Kuraikaji, who easily dodged it with a simple side step. His eyes still fixed to Lucas, he smirked. “You’re going to have to do a lot better th—”

“Kuraikaji!!” A Cobra shouted. “Look out!!”

Before Kuraikaji could turn around, however, he was suddenly knocked to the ground as the light orb smashed into him from behind.

Fighting through his exhaustion, Lucas bolted toward Kuraikaji, who was struggling to get back to his feet. All of the duel's onlookers gasped as Lucas savagely buried his blade into Kuraikaji's chest. One could have heard a pin drop for the pause that preceded the fatal blow.

Quivering as blood poured from his wound, Kuraikaji struggled to speak. "Y-you... b-but... how?"

Breathing heavily, Lucas smirked. "Maybe I'm just some 'boy' throwing 'fairy dust,' but you're the one who lost to him." Kuraikaji attempted to respond to the remark, but ultimately collapsed.

Slowly, Lucas looked up at the spectators. "He wanted a fight to the death." He lifted his blood soaked sword. "All's fair, right?"

"T-that kid just killed Kuraikaji!!" One of the Cobras blurted in utter disbelief.

"You're damn right he did," Hagan proudly responded. "Way to go, Lucas!"

"That was incredible!" Iris cheerfully proclaimed. Aiden stared in silent disbelief while Sezuni smiled.

Lucas turned his attention to the Cobras on the balconies. "If the eye patch wasn't cheating, neither was that. I played by his rules and I beat him. Fight to the death, winner takes all. That means you work for me now." The Cobras hesitated, uncertain of how to react to the development. "Lower your bows," Lucas commanded sternly.

"And if we don't?" a Cobra queried.

Lucas lowered his eyebrows. "If you don't, you might manage to kill some of us. But it's only going to take one of us to

finish off the rest of you. So I suggest you play nice while you still can.” After a short delay, the Cobras lowered their weapons. “Good,” said Lucas. “Now, all of you. Go outside and kill all of the monsters that have infiltrated Secar while we’ve been busy. Then, I want you to go door to door and inform every citizen that the entire town will be evacuating tomorrow morning at 9am to Valletal. That is, if you haven’t destroyed it already.”

“We haven’t,” a Cobra replied. “Kuraikaji gave us specific instructions to save it for last. It was a primary target for thieving.”

“As long as it’s safe,” said Lucas. “After you’ve spoken to every citizen, get some rest. You’re going to help us make sure that everyone in Secar makes it there alive. Once that’s done, you’re all free to go.”

The Cobras obeyed, and began the requested task immediately. Meanwhile, Lucas and the group seated themselves on the various chairs and couches in the large lobby room, at last having time to relax. Iris looked at Lucas. “What you did was absolutely brilliant.”

He smiled. “Thanks. Actually, you’re the one who made me think of it.” A confused look appeared on her face. Lucas elaborated. “I remembered seeing you conjure that orb in your backyard without using your hands. I figured, if it’s mostly mental, I should be able to stop it in mid-air. So I threw the orb, knowing he’d dodge it, and stopped it behind him. I knew he would be able to see any attacks I was about to make with that eye patch, so all I had to do was get the orb out of his sight. When he started talking, I pulled it back to me with my mind, and it ran right into him.”

“Now that’s smarts!” Hagan remarked.

Aiden stretched, comfortably relaxing in his chair. “I knew you’d find some way to win. Never doubted ya for a second!” Iris, Hagan, and Sezuni glared at him.

Lucas turned to Iris. “I’m glad you figured out that the eye patch was enchanted. You just can’t stop saving my life, can you?”

She chuckled. “I can’t claim all of the credit. I’m simply relieved that you’re okay.” She paused before adding, “Admittedly, it’s a rather clever enchantment; successfully fooling one’s opponent into believing they will have tactical advantage.”

“Speaking of which,” Aiden said, stumbling to his feet in pain. “I’m callin’ dibs on the thing.” He approached Kuraikaji’s body.

Iris cringed and Hagan commented, “Seriously?”

Aiden shrugged. “Why not? Seems useful.”

“It’s on a dead guy,” Hagan bluntly responded.

Aiden put on the eye patch. “Whaddya think?”

Iris lowered her eyebrows. “Please remain a safe distance from me while you’re wearing that.”

Sezuni turned to Lucas. “Take it from someone who has killed more than she can count: the way you defeated Kuraikaji was a work of sheer tactical genius. I can’t even begin to imagine what you’ll be capable of once you’ve received proper guidance from Aalok Bonham.”

Chapter 49: Laverick's Score

Once inside the kitchen, Laverick opened the cabinet containing potions and herbs he'd viewed hours before during his initial search of the base. "Kay," he whispered to his mother, "now what?"

"Search its contents," Veronica answered. "If we're lucky, we might be able to find something we can use to poison the guard."

"That's a great idea, Ma!" Laverick softly replied. He reached for a bottle of pink liquid and examined its small label which read, 'Anodynum Elixir.'

"That's a healing potion," Veronica informed. "Keep looking." As Laverick returned the bottle to the shelf, Veronica suddenly shouted, "Wait! There! The gray one!"

Quickly scanning the array of potions in front of him, Laverick located the bottle his mother had referred to. He grabbed it, squinting his eyes to view the small writing on its label. "Somnus Potion?" he whispered.

Veronica chuckled. "Just as I thought! That should do the trick."

Shutting the cabinet door, Laverick continued to marvel at the bottle. "Is it poisonous?"

"Not quite," his mother responded. "It's a sleeping potion. A rather useful cure for insomnia, though we'll be making tactical use of its effects. All we must do is prepare our 'friend' a delightful little snack mixed with our special ingredient. If he ingests even a miniscule amount, you should have more than enough time to nab the fragment and exit the base as he slumbers."

"Oh boy!" Laverick said cheerfully. "This is gonna be super easy!"

“I couldn’t agree more,” Veronica replied. “Now it’s only a matter of finding something to lace with the potion.”

Moments later, Laverick emerged into the hallway carrying a rather messy looking sandwich on a plate. “Remember,” his mother reminded him, “all you must do is convince him to eat just one bite.”

“Got it, Ma,” Laverick quietly responded. He continued down the passage and entered the room in which the large bearded man stood guard. “Hi again,” Laverick greeted as he walked in.

The man raised his eyebrows. “Zoe? You’re still awake?”

“Yeah,” Laverick replied. “I went and ate a snack like you suggested. I figured you might be hungry too, so I made you this while I was in there.”

The man eyed the sloppy sandwich as Laverick handed him the plate. “Uh, thanks,” he said, gently resting his battle-axe against the wall. He took the plate. Though the sandwich didn’t appear to be particularly appetizing, he kept his opinion to himself. “That was pretty thoughtful of you. I could use a bite right about now.”

“It’s got honey and syrup on it,” Laverick informed, watching in anticipation as the man lifted the sandwich to his mouth.

Yes, yes! Laverick thought excitedly. The man took a bite. As he chewed, a look of masqueraded disgust appeared on his face.

“Exquisite!” Veronica proclaimed. “It won’t be long now.”

The man gagged slightly as he swallowed. “I think our syrup is going bad,” he commented.

Laverick shrugged. “Tasted okay to me.”

Returning the sandwich to the plate, the man rested it on a small table. “I’ll... finish it later,” he said, frowning.

“Okay,” Laverick replied with a smile. “I’m gonna get some rest now. Good niight!”

The man lifted an eyebrow as Laverick exited the room. *She’s awfully peachy*, he thought to himself, collecting his axe. He glanced at the sandwich. *I’m never eating her cooking, that’s for damn sure.*

Laverick waited patiently in the hallway, a massive grin plastered to his face. About ten minutes had passed when he heard a loud thud.

“Bingo,” said Veronica. “Go, now!”

As he reentered the room, Laverick looked down at the large man. He was sound asleep on the ground in front of the chest. Not far from where he’d collapsed rested his dropped battle-axe. “I’m gonna hafta move him,” Laverick whispered. “Is it gonna wake him up?”

“Not at all,” Veronica answered. “Until the effects of the Somnus Potion have worn off, absolutely nothing will awaken him.”

Laverick grabbed the man’s arm and pulled with all of his might. Though it took a great amount of effort, he managed to drag the bulky guard far enough away from the chest to make it accessible. Reaching into the bag on his waist, Laverick took out the ring of keys he’d found under Tarren’s pillow. He approached the chest and kneeled in front of it, examining each key as he flipped through the ring. “Which one of these do you think opens it?”

“Just try them one by one!” Veronica ordered impatiently. “And hurry! We must be sure that you have enough time to distance yourself from the base before he wakes up.”

Hurriedly, Laverick stuffed one of the keys into the chest’s lock with no success. Quickly removing it, he flipped to the next one on the ring and attempted to insert it. This proved to be futile.

The following key went into the lock, though he was unable to turn it. As Laverick tried to pull it out, however, he quickly realized that it'd become stuck. *No, no! Dang it!* With a little wiggling, he managed to extract it. He hastily proceeded to the next key, which only went halfway into the lock.

“Damn!” Veronica snapped.

Laverick tried yet another key. “What if we got the wrong keys, Ma?” he queried.

“That’s impossible!” Veronica barked. “One of these must open that chest! The man was sleeping on them for goodness sake!!”

Laverick’s sixth attempt failed. “I dunno, Ma,” he said as he tried yet another key. “It’s sure not looking good right now. There’s only three more.”

“Don’t talk like that, Son!” she exclaimed, frightened by the prospect. “Try the next one.”

Laverick slid the subsequent key into the lock. He turned it and heard a click as the lock released. His eyes widened.

“Success!” Veronica declared as Laverick eagerly took the lock off and cleared the chains surrounding the trunk. He hoisted the lid and looked inside.

There it was at the bottom of the chest, all by itself: the disk fragment. Laverick trembled with excitement as he reached for it, the thoughts of his future as a wealthy nobleman racing through his mind. He grabbed it, closely ogling its curious engravings. Swiftly stuffing it into his bag, he jumped to his feet.

“Alrighty, Ma! Mission complete! Time for me to get outta here.”

* * * *

Veronica turned to Lord Quinn. "I'm proud to report that my son currently holds the disk fragment in his possession. He's exiting the Spades' headquarters as we speak, and will soon be on his way back to Aria." As she spoke, Lord Quinn's mouth slowly formed a smile.

"Impressive," he said. "I can now say wholeheartedly that my doubts have been effectively dispelled."

"Then I suppose it's time I received my payment, hm?" Veronica suggested.

Lord Quinn's smile faded. "I sincerely assure compensation for you and your son's assistance the moment I hold the fragment. No sooner."

Frustrated by the response, Veronica hesitated before replying, "Very well. Laverick will not return until the morning, however. He has quite a distance left to walk before reaching the portal. Unfortunately, if either of us falls asleep, our telepathic connection will be lost. Therefore, I will remain here for the rest of the night until he emerges back in Aria."

Lord Quinn got out of his chair. "Splendid. Considering my presence will not be required, I'm going to take this opportunity to acquire some much needed rest." He walked toward the double doors. "Do not hesitate to make any requests to my servants. I will return to this room early tomorrow morning." He glanced back at Veronica before walking out of the doors. "I highly anticipate our next meeting."

* * * *

Laverick stood at the dead end of the base's main corridor. *I think this is where I came in. Maybe there's another thingy for that crystal.* Cautiously running his hand along the solid black wall, he tried to find a small groove similar to the one he'd used to access the base.

Without warning, his mother chimed back into his head. “Any luck finding your way out, darling?”

“No,” he replied. “I can’t find the crystal majiggy.”

Just then, his hand bumped into a small protrusion on the otherwise smooth surface of the passage wall. “Wait, I think I found something!” He placed his hand on top of it and pushed it in. As he did, a loud rumbling filled the hallway as the rock at the dead end shifted to create an opening. Laverick froze in horror, certain that the resounding noise had put an end to his otherwise stealthy escape.

“What are you waiting for?!” his mother screamed. “Get out of there this instant!” Panicked, Laverick bolted into the wilderness of the In Between.

Chapter 50: Reflections Of The Past (Part IX)

Javan explained to the men that he'd learned of a great treasure known as Damiano's Disk and was sent to seek the Crimson Clan to assist him in reaching the In Between. All the while, he was certain to avoid the more personal aspect of his tale, including his encounter with the mysterious spirit. This led one of the men to ask, "Who told you of us and our practices?"

To which Javan replied, "A reliable source."

"Damiano's Disk is a myth," a young man with brown eyes informed him, his lengthy dirty-blond hair barely visible beneath the hood of his red cloak. "Even if it were real, what would it be doing in the In Between?"

Javan calmly responded, "While I do not possess the answer to your question, I'm quite convinced of the disk's authenticity. I would also like to make it entirely clear that I'm willing to pay your organization immensely for its assistance. In the event I'm able to attain both fragments, I plan to use my newfound power to lead Aria into a new era – and I certainly wouldn't overlook those who aided my rise to such a position."

The Crimson Clan of Gethin Woods was astonished. Unknown to Javan, they too had recently spoken to a spirit which told them that they would soon be visited by a man who would change the world. It said that the visitor would seek their help, and if they were to comply, the man would one day be responsible for leading them into an age of prosperity. At first, they were skeptical of the news but now believed its prophecy to be true and Javan to be the man of whom it foretold. Without further questioning, they agreed to his request.

Javan then learned that the men were practitioners of advanced necromancy, and often visited the In Between in order to perfect their skills. After explaining the dimension's purpose, they took him to a building in which many strange creatures were

encaged. Javan was quite fascinated to learn that these beasts were once lost souls, and had been transformed into what he saw. They explained that the potential for what they could make was nearly limitless, but that the process was quite arduous and they experienced great difficulty controlling their creations. The men expressed that they wished to create a perfect soldier, capable of speech and free will, yet compelled to follow their every command. With these soldiers, they had planned to start an empire of their own. Javan was highly interested in this concept.

Afterward, the group took Javan to the In Between, through a structure they referred to as a 'gateway.' He was amazed by the sight he beheld on the opposite side of the portal. The colorless landscape seemed surreal, yet there he was. Curious, Javan asked if it were possible to create a gateway while in the In Between. They informed him that they had attempted to do so before, but discovered that the destination of the portal was far too unpredictable. Building a gateway in one area of the In Between could lead to a random spot in Aria's wilderness, while building another merely a foot away could send the traveler to the middle of the Eastern Ocean. In order to keep other Arialites from discovering or interfering with their work, they destroyed their secondary gateways and resorted to using only the original one.

The men went on to tell him that the dimension was monumental in size, and that locating the fragments could prove to be a long-lived task. Discouraged by the news, Javan was uncertain he would have the time required to search the dimension while still managing to hold his position as King Ashraf's adviser. That's when he got an idea. He made the men an offer: he would pay them generously to hunt the In Between for the two fragments, and promised them that he would make certain the law remained unaware and did not interfere with their personal work. Without hesitation, the men took the offer, after which Javan stressed the importance of discretion while handling the matter. He warned of his close connection to the king and was certain to make it known that anyone who betrayed his trust would be dealt with. The men proceeded to swear him their loyalty, and ensured him that they would honor his wishes.

Upon his departure, he wrote the Crimson Clan a two hundred thousand gold check, and informed them that he would be returning periodically to monitor their progress and pay them further. He spent the next few days in the city of Dagus before returning to Cymbeline, to avoid raising suspicion as to where he'd been during his vacation.

Three years passed before Javan received a letter informing him that one of the coveted fragments had been found. As soon as possible, he left for Gethin Woods, only to be given dreadful news when he arrived. The men reported that shortly after its discovery, the fragment went missing along with Crimson Clan member Tarren Haden. Needless to say, Javan was infuriated by the news and nearly cancelled his arrangement with the men. But he knew that he would be unable to seek the fragment without their assistance, and instead ordered half of the remaining men to search Aria for Tarren and retrieve the fragment. The remainder of the group were to continue exploring the In Between for the second piece of the disk.

Weeks later, Javan was holding a party in celebration of his birthday. While he was not particularly fond of social gatherings, it was considered quite rude amongst Aria's upper class to not hold or participate in them at least periodically. He occupied the time by drinking wine and making small talk with his guests. The night seemed relatively uneventful until he was approached by a beautiful young woman. She introduced herself as Mindy Kaster, a distant cousin of a fellow nobleman Fredrick Dawson.

Javan was instantly entranced by her presence. Regardless, he made great effort to withdraw from the conversation. Compelled by the fear of yet another loss, his apprehension was reinforced as he recalled the voice's words. Nevertheless, she was persistent, and his attempt was futile. Once the two had spoken for a while, Javan soon realized that her interests were strictly carnal. More inclined to this notion, it wasn't long before the pair retreated from the crowd.

Succeeding an intoxicating incidence of heated passion, Javan fell into a euphoric slumber with the young woman at his side. His blissful oblivion was short-lived, however. The moment his eyes snapped open he saw, to his dismay, the woman hovering over him with a sharp dagger, poised to strike.

With adrenaline-fueled strength, Javan shoved her away from him and sprung out of bed, slinging an onslaught of conjurations at the woman. Though he managed to injure her, she was far too quick and escaped out the bedroom window. He hurriedly dressed himself and pursued her, but by the time he'd run downstairs and made it outside, she was nowhere to be seen. Returning to the party, Javan informed his guests that the events of the evening were going to be meeting an early end. He did not mention what had taken place, leaving the attendees baffled as they exited the mansion.

Javan suspected that the attempted assassination could not have possibly been a random act. The following day, he learned that 'Mindy Kaster' did not exist at all. With this information, he deduced that the woman was, in fact, an assassin who had likely been hired to execute him. With his suspicions confirmed, he knew of only one man who would have any reason to call for his murder: Tarren Haden.

For the following months, Javan remained on constant guard, spending little time outside of his mansion and the castle. Then, nine months following his encounter with the woman, he got an unexpected surprise on his doorstep: a baby girl. When one of his servants informed him of the child's discovery, Javan had no doubt it was his own. Deciding it was best to keep this detail to himself, he acted in the same bewildered manner as his servants. When one of them suggested taking the baby to a local foster home, Javan informed them that it was not necessary and that he would adopt the child himself. He named her 'Zoe.'

It was ten long years before the Crimson Clan had at last found the fragment which remained in the In Between. Javan was astounded to finally hold the long sought treasure in his hands, and

ordered the men to focus all attention on finding Tarren and the fragment he still held.

After several more years and a great deal of investigation, the Crimson Clan uncovered that Tarren was hiding in the wilderness just outside of the town of Anatolii and was the leader of a mysterious guild known as the Spades. Learning this, Javan ordered the men to raid the hideout in the cover of night. While the Crimson Clan were successful in killing several Spades, Tarren and the remainder of the guild fled with the fragment. In the months following their escape, the Crimson Clan continued to laboriously search Aria, but were ultimately unable to uncover the guilds' whereabouts. Despite his great wealth, the hunt had begun to take a notable financial toll on Javan. It was in this moment of desperation that he hatched his scheme. Much to the surprise of the Crimson Clan, Javan commanded them to redirect their focus to their original work.

Assisting his men whenever possible, Javan proved to be exceptionally gifted with advanced necromancy, and eventually discovered a method to control the monsters he'd spawned. He discovered this was possible by embedding a sort of pecking order within the creation's structure. Though it still acted wildly and impulsively, it was 'embedded' to fear Javan and the Crimson Clan, and thus would not attack them.

Though it took years of work and a long, grueling process of trial and error, the Crimson Clan and Javan at last succeeded in creating their 'perfect soldier.' It was human in appearance, capable of perfect speech, and followed their every command precisely. After dressing their creation in a dark-green cloak, they began calling the creature a 'Knowm.'

Not only was it given the ability to use advanced necromancy to create more like itself in the In Between, the Knowm was also capable of spawning and controlling monsters. Once they had built their army of Knowms and monsters in the In Between, the men created several well hidden gateways at various points of Aria.

They put the plan into action, sending wave after wave of monsters through the portals. Almost immediately, Aria fell into a state of chaos. The king's knights fought rigorously against the invaders, but found themselves greatly outnumbered as they continued to emerge from seemingly out of nowhere. When a mysterious group called the Knowms stood before King Ashraf, promising safety for the land in exchange for funding, Javan was certain to be at the king's side to persuade him in 'the right direction.'

Not only did Javan and the Crimson Clan now have unlimited funding, but even more: they also possessed eyes and ears in every town across Aria. "Mark my words," Javan told his men shortly after their plan's outstanding execution. "I will complete Damiano's Disk, and Tarren Haden will die by my hands."

Chapter 51: Payback In Spades

Tarren looked around him, at the failure of his organization, and reflected on his life and his choices.

There are times I wish I'd never become involved with the Crimson Clan of Gethin Woods. Initially, it was nothing more than sheer curiosity that attracted me to the group. I had always wondered what a mage could be fully capable of without restrictions. Alas, I was but a lost boy then. But even in those days, deep down inside of my heart, I knew the practices we partook in were forbidden with good reason. It's not man's place to play God. The perfect soldier project... I honestly doubted the Crimson Clan would ever succeed... and as time went on, I began to hope they wouldn't.

The thought of leaving the group had been swimming through my mind for days when we received a message from a spirit, foretelling the coming of a man who would lead us into an age of prosperity. The lone condition was that we complied with his request for assistance. We were wary of this information. Contacting spirits in the Netherworld is a risky endeavor to say the least. There was never a sure way to know the intention of the entity we were communicating with. Knowing this, we took its words with a grain of salt.

Then came the day Lord Javan Quinn arrived, seeking our help in exchange for vast wealth and positions of nobility in a new Aria under his rule, just as prophesized. To achieve this, he wished to locate the legendary Damiano's Disk and harness the supposed limitless power it unlocked. He claimed that it had been broken into two fragments, and was hidden in the In Between. The others seemed convinced that what they had been told was unquestionable truth. Personally, I remained suspicious, though I kept my doubts to myself.

It was something about Lord Quinn's presence. It was so dark... almost incomprehensible within the barriers of language.

However, the Crimson Clan didn't seem bothered at all by this and sincerely swore him their loyalty. I, on the other hand, remained on guard. I no longer wished to be part of the group, and was looking to start a newer, better life elsewhere. But part of me just had to know if Damiano's Disk was real. I couldn't run away with the knowledge that I could have prevented a potential catastrophe.

All those years later I held the fragment in my hands. It was no myth. No, the disk was all too real. I couldn't allow it to fall into Lord Quinn's hands. So I pocketed it and fled the group. I knew the second fragment would be useless without it. I decided it was best to destroy the disk piece while I had the chance.

Little did I know, it wasn't going to be so easy. The fragment remained intact no matter what amount of force I applied to it. I didn't leave so much as a scratch on its surface. Even magma could not damage it... I watched in disbelief as it simply floated in the pool of raw thermal heat, unscathed. I couldn't believe my eyes. The fragment was completely indestructible. The only way to ensure that the Crimson Clan or Lord Quinn would never find it was to guard it myself.

Fortunately, I was able to find an Ice mage to assist me in retrieving the fragment from the magma. I told him of Lord Quinn, and all that I had witnessed over the years. Through him, I learned of The Order of the Sacred Blade. I paid that guild nearly all the gold I had to place a hit on Javan Quinn. But it seemed that he was just as indestructible as the fragment I held. The assassin never returned from the mission... and was likely killed.

From that point on, my newfound ally gave me shelter in his home just outside of Anatolii. As for the fragment, we removed a few floorboards and buried it in a small box several feet below the house. I soon came to the realization that even if Lord Quinn were no longer in the picture, anyone could use the disk to do just as he wished. My companion and I agreed: no living man deserves such power. And so began the Spades.

Though our organization grew tremendously over time, Javan was relentless. The night the house was raided, I managed to

escape with the fragment, though many of my associates weren't as fortunate. Alas, that terrifying event proved to be only the first of several to come.

The most recent raid was perhaps the most devastating to date. So many casualties... And the death toll only increased with Morice and, likely, Roshan. I had honestly believed that the fragment was safe at last in this new base...

Exiting the confines of his inner thoughts, Tarren opened his eyes and looked down at the large table in the base's meeting room. Many Spades were seated, anticipating the purpose of the emergency meeting they'd been called to. When at last the final Spades entered and took their seats, Tarren spoke.

"It pains me greatly to deliver this news," he began, pausing for a moment. "The disk fragment has been stolen." Tarren watched as a look of panic appeared on the faces of each of the meeting's attendees.

"But how?!" a Spade exclaimed.

"Was Gavin unable to stop them?!"

"What are we going to do?!"

"Settle down!" Tarren ordered, causing a hush to fall over the room. "Allow me to explain. I awoke to the sound of the main gate opening. I jumped out of bed to see who had left the base without permission, but they had disappeared by the time I'd made it there. I didn't think much of the incident until I returned to my room to discover that my keys had been swiped while I was asleep. I quickly ran to check on the fragment, and found Gavin unconscious beside the open chest. Unable to awaken him, I noticed a sandwich resting nearby. I've since deduced that it was tainted with Somnus Potion and likely given to him by the thief. More upsetting than that, I've also determined the culprit to be a trusted member of our own. Though we will be unable to truly confirm my suspicion until Gavin has awoken, Zoe Quinn appears to be the only Spade missing."

“She wouldn’t!” a Spade interrupted.

“Don’t be so sure,” another replied. “She’d been acting strangely since she returned from that last mission. Do you think it’s possible, Tarren, that she was sent back to the base by Lord Quinn to steal our fragment?”

“I see no other explanation,” Tarren responded. “I’m theorizing that far more happened while Zoe was gone than she told us. I’d hate to think that she willingly betrayed us; still, we must take defensive action immediately. Charles, Amy, Xander, and Gregory: you are to remain at the base and monitor Gavin. The moment he awakens, I want a full report on exactly what took place. Meanwhile, I will accompany the remainder of our members to Nazareno Island. Once there, we will await Lord Quinn’s arrival. Unfortunately, we have nothing to go on at this moment but speculation. Regardless, we cannot allow him to reach the temple at any cost.

“Based on what we know at this time, we must prepare ourselves for war. All members assigned to Nazareno Island are to promptly ready themselves at the dismissal of this meeting. There is no way of knowing exactly what’s in store for us, so I implore that you brace yourselves for the worst. To those staying behind, once you’ve learned all that you can from Gavin, I need one of you to head for Nazareno Island and update me immediately. I will determine our next course of action based on what we learn. Until then, we are to assume that Javan Quinn now possesses both halves of Damiano’s Disk. This leaves us only two options: take it from him, or die trying.”

Chapter 52: Zoe's Great Escape

Zoe slowly lifted her head off of the pillow. As her eyes darted about her room, she tried to remember exactly what had happened. Recalling her moment of blinding rage, she noticed that the bookshelf was now back in place, though a few of her books appeared to have suffered damage. All at once, she came to a startling realization. *It's morning!* She jumped out of bed and ran toward her door. *Please, please don't tell me Javan has the fragment!*

As she swung the door open, the two guards positioned just outside of her room turned to her. Zoe's facial expression quickly changed from fearful to a blank stare. "Oh, that's right." She slammed the door shut before either guard could say a word.

Zoe turned around. *I have to get out of here. There's no guarantee I'll make it far without magic, but now I don't have a choice; I'm the only person left who can stop Javan from completing the disk. But how the hell am I going to get past those stupid guards?* Her eyes were drawn to the window. *Duh, the window!* She bolted toward it, quickly unlocking and sliding the glass open. *If I'm careful not to be seen, I can climb down and get a look at what's going on in the meeting room from outside. But once I'm out, I definitely don't want to end up back in here. It'll probably be a good idea to take something I can sell for gold, at least.* She looked down at her bare feet. *Shoes would help too.*

Zoe walked to her closet and looked inside. Disgusted by the sea of pink dresses, she hurriedly diverted her attention to her shoes. She carefully looked through the selection before her. *Where're my boots?! Great, he's 'updated' my shoes too. They're all heels! I might as well go barefoot!* Browsing her collection further, she came across a few pairs of bath slippers. *Well, it's better than the other ones.* She grabbed the only pair that weren't pink and shut the closet.

After putting on some stockings and slipping her feet into the fuzzy, light-blue slippers, Zoe approached her dresser and collected the jewelry box resting on top of it. Next, she took a pillow from her bed and pulled its case off, creating a handy tote sack in which she concealed the box of expensive trinkets. Tying it shut with a large knot, she threw it out the window and onto the grass below.

Carefully, Zoe stepped out of her window onto the slanted roof, cautiously making her way to its edge. Briefly examining the area below, it appeared that no one was in close proximity to witness her escape. *Here it goes.* She slowly crouched down and lowered herself by grabbing the ledge, dangling her feet as close to the ground as possible before letting go and landing on the soft grass.

Picking up the pillowcase, Zoe quietly walked around the exterior perimeter of the mansion, occasionally crawling to avoid being seen as she passed by each window. Eventually, she reached the outside wall of the meeting room. Gently placing the pillowcase back on the ground, she gradually inched her head toward the window and peeked inside.

With his back to Zoe's vantage point, Lord Quinn was seated at his usual spot at the end of the table with Veronica in the next chair to his left. It looked as though she were still heavily concentrating. Zoe moved her head away from the window. *I don't see Laverick anywhere. It's not too late after all! If it weren't for this stupid jinx, I'd bust through this window right now and put an end to this. But that's not the only thing in my way. Even if I had my scythe, Javan would just use effect magic to stop me before I could land a single hit on him.*

She grabbed the pillowcase and took off down the hill on which Quinn Manor rested. *My only chance at keeping the fragment out of Javan's hands is to stop Laverick. He's probably having trouble getting into the chest, which should give me enough time to sell this junk for gold and buy a weapon. Then, I've got to make it to HQ as fast as possible. From what I learned earlier, the*

portal in Roshan's Café is heavily guarded. It'll probably be less risky to use the one south of Cymbeline.

Zoe ran through the upper class community of Regal Heights toward the gate leading into downtown Cymbeline. She received many strange looks from her neighbors as she passed by their homes. Ignoring their gawking, she continued at full speed, slowing down only as she approached the gate.

“Good morning, ma’am,” the gate’s guard greeted. Replying with only a single nod, Zoe proceeded to walk toward town. “Excuse me,” the guard suddenly said. Zoe stopped.

Oh no, she thought as she turned toward him. *Javan probably told him I'm insane too.*

“I don’t mean to be nosey,” he went on, “but is that... a pillowcase?”

“Yeah,” Zoe responded.

There was an awkward silence as the guard eyed the ‘X’ on her forehead, her grass stained pink dress, and fuzzy, light-blue bath slippers. An expression of suspicion arose on his face. He looked into her eyes and calmly asked, “What do you have inside of it?”

Zoe’s eyebrows lowered. “Why does it matter?”

The guard stepped toward her. “Open it,” he commanded sternly.

Untying the pillowcase, Zoe displayed the box of jewelry to the guard. “There, happy? I’m selling some old jewelry in town today. I put the box in here so no one will try to steal it.”

“That’s interesting,” the guard replied. “You can afford to live in Regal Heights and own jewelry, yet all you have to carry it in is a pillowcase?” He grabbed her arm. “I’m afraid you’re going to have to come with me.”

“Let go of me!” Zoe screamed, throwing the guard’s hand off of her. “What the hell is your problem?!”

“Don’t resist, ma’am,” he warned, poisoning his spear toward her as a few passersby stopped to view the unfolding scene. “I have good reason to suspect you as a thief,” the guard explained. “It’s my duty to keep the community clean. You’re not under arrest yet, but I’m going to need to conduct an investigation before I can let you go.”

“What?!” Zoe shouted. “I’m not a thief! This is my jewelry and my pillowcase!”

“Then why were you running a moment ago?” the guard queried. “And how do you explain the grass stains on your dress?”

Glancing down at the green smears, Zoe’s eyebrows lifted. *Oh crap! This looks bad. I’d better think of something fast.* She looked back at the guard. “Look,” she said sternly, “my name is Zoe Quinn. I live in the mansion at the top of that hill. Unless you want to explain to my father why you’re pointing spears at me and calling me a thief, you’d better step aside and let me sell my damn jewelry right now!!”

The guard’s eyes widened as he quickly lowered his spear. “My apologies, ma’am. I was unawa—”

“Can it!” Zoe snapped, hastily tying the pillowcase and proceeding into Cymbeline. *Whew! That could have been bad. I got lucky. If he would’ve taken me back to the mansion, it’d have all been over.*

Pillowcase in tow, Zoe made her way into the busy city streets. *Okay, now to get some gold. I should probably try to stay in the crowd and avoid Knowms just to be safe.* Scanning each building she walked by, Zoe carefully searched for a suitable place to sell her jewelry. Various townspeople glimpsed at her as she passed, confounded by her bizarre appearance, much like the residents of Regal Heights. Noticing a woman gazing curiously at her shoes, Zoe commented, “They’re comfortable, okay?!” The

woman snapped her head straight forward and continued past her, avoiding the unexpected confrontation.

Soon, Zoe found herself in front of a building with a sign that read, 'Melville & Son Pawn.' Making certain there weren't any Knowms nearby, she quickly made her way out of the bustling crowd and entered the shop. Proceeding around various odds and ends scattered throughout the room, Zoe approached the counter.

As she neared, the young man standing behind it smiled and greeted, "Welcome to Melville & Son Pawn. How may I help you today?"

Zoe set the pillowcase on the counter. "I want to sell some old jewelry," she explained as she untied the makeshift bag. Removing the box, she opened it, displaying an assortment of expensive necklaces, rings, bracelets, and earrings. "How much can I get for the whole box?"

The young man's eyes grew to an incredible size as he viewed the treasures before him. Promptly masking his astonishment, he responded, "Excuse me, Miss. I'm going to have to consult my father for this particular sale. Could you please stay here for a moment?"

"Fine, just make it quick," Zoe answered impatiently as he hurried through a door behind the counter.

A bit frustrated by the delay, Zoe collected her jewelry box and occupied herself by browsing the assortment of items available for sale. She was relatively uninterested in most of the shop's selection until her eye caught a used clothing section. Among the apparel was an array of footwear. Intrigued, Zoe took off the light-blue bath slippers and tried on a pair of black boots. However, they were much too large. Putting them back, she turned her attention to some nearby cloaks. Just then, the young man returned through the door, followed by an older man.

Quickly sliding back into her fuzzy slippers, Zoe returned to the counter. “Her, over there,” the young man told the older man as she approached.

“Good morning,” the older man said warmly. “My name is Melville. I understand that you have some jewelry you’re interested in selling?”

“Yeah,” Zoe replied, placing the box back on the counter and opening it.

Melville gazed at the trinkets within the small trunk. “Oh, my!” he commented. “Do you have an asking price?”

“What are you willing to give me?” Zoe queried in response as the older man carefully lifted and viewing each piece of jewelry from the box.

“To be honest,” Melville answered, “I’m not sure I can afford to buy this.” He paused before adding, “Unless there’s any chance you’d be willing to settle for twelve thousand.”

Zoe thought for a moment. Glancing over at the used clothing selection, she got an idea. She looked back at the man. “Let me pick out an outfit from your clothing section and I’ll take it.”

Melville nodded profusely. “Yes, of course! Go right ahead! I’ll return shortly with your gold. The changing room is right over there if you need it.” He disappeared into the backroom as his son continued to ogle the valuable trinkets.

Attentively searching the pawn shop’s used clothing section, Zoe at last found a pair of brown shoes which fit her feet. *These will work for now*, she thought as she paced back and forth, testing their comfort. As she was looking through the available clothing, Melville returned from the backroom. Zoe walked back to the counter.

Melville smiled, handing her twelve one thousand gold banknotes. “Here you go, young lady. It was a pleasure doing business with you.”

Zoe took the money. “Thanks.”

“Take anything you desire from our clothing section,” Melville added as he picked up the jewelry box. “When you’re finished, simply take it with you. No need to visit the counter.” He disappeared through the door once again.

A little while later, Zoe emerged from the changing room. Still wearing the brown shoes, she was dressed in a red robe, partially obscured by a white cloak. Placing the pink dress and fuzzy bath slippers on the counter as she passed, Zoe glanced at Melville’s son. “You can keep these. I’d probably just end up burning that dress anyway.” The young man stared blankly as Zoe exited the store.

She reentered the busy streets of Cymbeline. *Now I just have to remember which side of town the blacksmith is on. I think it’s this way...* She covered her face with the cloak’s hood, keeping her head down as she made her way back into the crowd. Zoe walked a good distance, occasionally looking up to glimpse at the buildings around her, before finally locating the smith shop. She scanned her surroundings once again before quickly exiting the crowd’s concealment to her destination.

The blacksmith was much busier than the pawn shop, filled with customers viewing the vast collection of weapons and armor for sale. The sound of a hammer striking hot iron on an anvil in the shop’s backroom was audible over the voices of the many people. Zoe removed her hood and browsed the available weaponry. She passed by swords, spears, maces, flails, hammers, and axes among other things, when she unexpectedly heard a voice ask, “Can I help you find anything?” She quickly turned around, a bit startled, to see a man with a bushy black beard staring down at her.

“I’m looking for scythes,” Zoe replied. “Do you have any?”

The man seemed surprised by the request. “We do,” he said, “but scythes are a bit tough to use correctly. Have you thought about getting a small sword instead?”

A bit offended by the remark, Zoe harshly responded, “A small sword?! ...Oh, I get it. The short vulnerable little girl needs a small sword. Please, I’m not an amateur! I could take on any ‘pro’ swordsman with a scythe!”

The man chuckled. “Alright, sweetheart. If you say so.”

Zoe was further irritated by his reply. “Just shut up and show me where they are! I’m in a hurry.”

The man shook his head. “You’ve got a sharp tongue. You must’ve used it on the wrong guy to have been jinxed like that.”

Zoe was surprised. “Wait, you know about jinxes?”

He nodded. “You can’t be too good with scythes if you let your guard down long enough for that to have happened to you.” The man chuckled as he looked at her flabbergasted expression before walking away, gesturing for her to follow him. “But if you insist, ya little firecracker.”

He glanced back at Zoe as he led her through the swarm of customers. “A lot of business lately,” he commented. “People are starting to get brave and travel again. It’s good for us, but those monsters have taken a lot of lives from the unprepared – such as those purchasing weapons they’re incapable of using correctly.”

“I didn’t come here for your commentary,” Zoe growled, attempting to hold back her rage.

The man stopped walking in front of a small section where a handful of scythes were hung on the wall. “Here they are,” he said. “Few people come in here looking for scythes. We don’t have too many, but they’re all durable, high quality, and completely battle ready.”

“Hold on,” Zoe interrupted. “You wouldn’t happen to know how to remove jinxes, would you?”

The man raised an eyebrow. “I thought you didn’t care about what I had to say.”

Zoe was frustrated by his argument. “Well, excuse me for getting defensive when my competency is insulted by someone who doesn’t even have a clue about my capabilities as a fighter!”

There was a brief pause before the man answered, “Touché.”

“Well?!” Zoe blurted impatiently, following a second short pause. “Are you going to tell me or not?”

“I do ‘happen to know’ how jinxes are removed,” the man replied, “but it’s not easy. What I’m wanting to know is how you got jinxed in the first place.”

“An argument didn’t end well,” Zoe answered coldly.

The man looked bewildered. “Fair enough, I guess. Well, if you’ve been looking for a potion to get rid of it, you’re out of luck. The only way to get a jinx removed is with an advanced counter-spell only highly proficient Light mages can cast. If you don’t know anyone, I’d go see Aalok Bonham in Ivyvyne Village. He won’t do it for free, but he’s the best of the best when it comes to Light magic.”

“Good to know,” Zoe responded, “Thanks.”

The man nodded. “There are enchanted charms to keep stuff like that from happening, you know. You should probably look into it before getting into anymore arguments.”

I don’t have enough time to go all the way to Ivyvyne Village, Zoe thought. I’ll have to keep it in mind for later, though. If I can stop Laverick and get this jinx removed, all I’ll have to do is get my hands on one of those protective enchantments. Then, Javan won’t have a choice but to fight me fair and square. Don’t worry Roshan, I’ll make him pay for what he did to you.

“Now that we’ve got that settled,” the man continued, gesturing toward the wall of scythes, “let’s get down to business. See any in particular that strike your fancy?”

Browsing the selection, Zoe honed in on one distinct scythe with a sharp black chine. Its dark-red snath was decorated with hypnotizing symbols drawn in black, equipped with a spear-like point at the bottom. “Give me that one,” she answered.

“Excellent choice,” he commented with a smile. “I say that because it’s expensive.”

Reaching into her robe’s pocket, Zoe pulled out a one thousand gold banknote. “Got change?” she asked.

Taking the payment, the man examined its authenticity. “You’re rich AND a good fighter?” He looked up at her. “Do you have a man in your life?”

The question hit a sensitive spot in Zoe’s heart as images of Alex resurfaced within her thoughts. The resulting emotions manifested in a bitter look upon her face. Seeing that she was clearly not amused by the suggestion, the man let out another hearty chuckle.

“I’m just foolin’ with ya. Lighten up!” He took the scythe down from the wall and walked toward the front of the shop, again motioning for Zoe to accompany him. “Come on over to the counter and I’ll get your change.”

Moments later, Zoe emerged from the smith shop with her new weapon strapped to her back. Making sure the bag containing her change was secured in her robe’s pocket, she put on the cloak’s hood and made her way toward Cymbeline’s northern border. *Now that I’ve got a way to deal with the monsters I’ll encounter, I can finally get going. Hopefully I can make it to HQ before Laverick figures out some way to get into the chest. I doubt he will, though. He doesn’t seem like the brightest—*

In that moment, Zoe caught sight of a young man passing by. When she recognized who it was, she let out an audible gasp. Visibly exhausted with thick black rings under his eyes, Laverick walked right by her without even noticing she was there. *Laverick!*

She came to a stop as the crowd continued to move around her. *If he's back, he must have the fragment!*

* * * *

Laverick casually strolled toward Regal Heights. He had at last arrived in Aria through the portal in Roshan's now abandoned café. There, he was greeted by the same men in red cloaks who had seen him off. He displayed the fragment to them, after which he received much praise from the men. Then, once his mother disconnected their telepathic link, he was offered a change of clothes. Taking out his emerald necklace, he resumed his normal appearance and dressed himself. He collected the purple crystal from the cloak's pocket, as well as the map he'd discovered from the bag, before departing for Quinn Manor, eager to receive his long awaited reward.

I'm so tired, Laverick thought. *But boy was it worth it! Ma and I are gonna be rich and famous! And it's all thanks to me! I can't wait to—*

Laverick was abruptly tackled to the ground, causing him to let out a shrill shriek. Recognizing his attacker's face, he shouted, "Thief!!" as loudly as he could, attracting even more attention from the surrounding pedestrians.

* * * *

Quickly stuffing her hand inside the bag on his waist, Zoe felt the disk fragment. "Got it!"

She bolted as fast as her legs could carry her, tucking the fragment into her robe's pocket. A few citizens who had witnessed the assault attempted to pursue her, but were unable to keep up as she ruthlessly shoved her way through the busy streets. Taking notice of the situation, some nearby Knowms ran after her at great speed. Confused Arialites stepped aside to let them pass, giving them advantage as they gained on her.

Zoe glanced over her shoulder and saw the Knowms running toward her, their cold, bulging eyes fixed to their target. She came to a halt as a man grabbed her, attempting to help the Knowms capture the suspected thief. Fueled by adrenaline, Zoe threw the man off of her, shouting, “Moron!!” as she continued her escape.

Zoe was uncertain of where she was going, but luckily managed to find that the northern border of the city was in close proximity. As she crossed into the field, the Knowms halted their pursuit, unaware that the assailant possessed the disk fragment. Assuming her to be nothing more than a common thief, they returned to their posts within the city.

Perspiring excessively, Zoe finally slowed her pace to an eventual halt near a few large trees. *I made it.* She took a moment to catch her breath as her heart raced, reaching into her robe’s pocket to ensure the fragment’s safety.

* * * *

Laverick walked into the meeting room of Quinn Manor. Veronica jumped out of her seat, smiling as she ran toward him. “Magnificent work, darling! That was absolutely brilliant! You’ve made mommy very proud!” She embraced him as he stood in place and stared blankly, uncertain of how to break the dreadful news.

“I’m most impressed with your mission’s success as well, Laverick,” Lord Quinn asserted as he got to his feet, slowly approaching the two. “Today marks the inception of a new era for Aria. Soon, a—”

“Zoe stole it,” Laverick suddenly blurted out, causing a painful silence.

“Laverick,” Veronica said sternly. “Now is not the time for jokes.”

“But I’m not joking, Ma!” Laverick replied. “I was on my way back and she tackled me out in the road and took it. I yelled ‘thief’ but I don’t think they caught her.” He looked at Lord Quinn,

whose boiling rage was apparent beneath his calm exterior. “Sorry...”

“This is impossible,” Veronica argued worriedly. She turned to Lord Quinn. “Zoe was in her room the entire time, wasn’t she?!”

“Apparently she managed to escape,” Lord Quinn answered, seething with rage. Taking a moment to calm himself, he went on. “No matter; this merely delays the inevitable. Now that the fragment is in her possession, it’s likely that Zoe will return to the Spades’ base and attempt to remove our blemishes to her reputation. Fortunately for us, we’re already aware of its location. All we must do is take it back.” He walked toward the room’s exit. “Still, until the day arrives when I at last open The Temple of Damiano, I am bound to the duties of my occupation. Once I am finished fulfilling my obligations to King Ashraf, I shall instruct my most trusted men to prepare for a full scale invasion of the Spade headquarters at midnight. Until I return, you may rest in any of the mansion’s guest rooms.”

“And our payment?” Veronica asserted.

Lord Quinn paused. Without turning back to them, he responded, “As I’ve stated before. You shall receive your restitution once I have the fragment in my possession.”

After he exited the room, Laverick turned to his mother. “Sorry, Ma. I tried my best, honest!”

“No need to fret, darling,” Veronica replied. “It appears that Lord Quinn still intends to reward us for our efforts. And if he doesn’t, mommy has ways of getting what she wants.”

Chapter 53: A Night In Valletal

Lucas, Iris, Hagan, Aiden, and Sezuni traveled southbound alongside the citizens of Secar through Hravart Desert and into the valleys of the Jhar Mountains. With the assistance of the few remaining Cobras, they protected the migrating group from monster attacks throughout their journey to Valletal. Earlier that morning, Lucas used his restored healing abilities to rehabilitate Aiden's injured leg. While Lucas had suffered minor injuries during the ordeal with Kuraikaji, he decided against using his already limited conjuring supply on himself, knowing he would need to conserve his magic for the trek ahead. For that same reason, Sezuni rejected his aid in healing her arm.

It was nearly eleven hours before they completed their expedition, arriving in Valletal as night fell. The citizens of Secar were immensely thankful for the group's assistance, and profusely showed their gratitude upon arriving in their better, safer home. Once Lucas had thoroughly explained the situation with Kuraikaji to the leaders of Valletal, they welcomed Secar's people with open arms. As a reward for their bravery in freeing the town, Lucas and his companions were given free stays at Valletal's inn for the night as well as horses to benefit them in their future travels. In addition, they were awarded a generous sum of gold.

With Kuraikaji out of the picture and the people of Secar safe within the town of Valletal, Lucas granted the few remaining Cobras their freedom. Still, he advised them to stay out of trouble. Some of the men chose to remain in Valletal and seek work there, while the remainder ventured off into the night, their destinations unknown.

Later on, Lucas and his companions discussed their future plans in front of the town's inn. "After we get a good night's sleep," said Lucas, "we can start toward Cymbeline in the morning. It's going to take a few days to get there, even with the

horses, so we should probably restock the backpack first thing before setting out.”

“I’m glad you’ve been so successful thus far,” Sezuni interrupted, “but I will not be accompanying you further.”

“Why not?” Aiden remarked. “Ya too cool for us?”

She glared at him before looking back at Lucas. “I’ve already compromised having my identity revealed by cooperating in the migration. I can’t afford to risk being seen in a well-populated area such as Cymbeline.”

“Your identity?” Aiden queried. “So that’s why ya wear that whats-it on your face all the time? You musta done somethin’ pretty rotten to have to worry ‘bout that.”

Sezuni’s eyes cut into him. “I hardly owe any explanations to you. Keep in mind that while we can forgive our own past mistakes, the rest of the world is hesitant to offer such a courtesy. Consider if Lucas wasn’t as kind as he had been to you.” She glanced to the distance at a Knowm standing in front of a building down the road. “As for the rest of you, I suggest that you continue your discussion within the confines of the inn. It would be unfortunate if any Knowms were to overhear your plans.” She began walking away.

“You’re leaving already?!” Hagan blurted. “Come on, at least stay the night.” She turned back to them, prompting Hagan to grab his flask and shake it in her direction. “I still got a little whiskey!”

Sezuni’s lips formed a soft smile beneath her face’s concealment as she walked back toward the group. “That’s enticing. But I do not wish to spend more time than necessary in this city.”

“It’s been twenty years since all that stuff happened, right?” Hagan argued. “They probably forgot about it by now.”

“That’s doubtful,” Sezuni replied. “Regardless, I’ve already aided you far more than I originally intended. It’s time for me to resume my own business.”

“I suppose if you’re departing,” said Iris, “I would like to thank you once again for your generous support.”

“Me too,” Lucas added. “If it weren’t for you, we might have never made it out of Hravart Desert.”

“I did what I did for my own reasons,” Sezuni responded. “If you truly wish to thank me, don’t give up on your aspirations.” She briefly stopped talking before adding, “By the way, I’d like to make one simple request. If my daughter’s alignment conflicts with your plans, please spare her life.”

Lucas gave a nod. “You have my word.”

“Then I presume it’s time I made my departure,” Sezuni replied. “Be certain to visit Aalok Bonham before proceeding with your quest. After witnessing your struggle against Kuraikaji, I’m now absolutely confident that you are indeed destined to change Aria for the better.” She walked away. “I’m truly honored to have crossed your path.” After mounting her new horse, the group watched as Sezuni rode out of Valletal.

There was a brief pause before Hagan spoke up. “Well, there she goes. As suddenly as she showed up.”

“She has a daughter?!” Aiden blurted out, completely confused by the previous conversation.

Iris turned to him. “It’s a bit too much to explain right now.”

Aiden shook his head, “Whatever. It ain’t that important.”

“What about you, Aiden?” Lucas asked.

Aiden’s eyes darted. “Uh, what about me?”

“Are you going with us, or staying here?” Lucas elaborated.

Hagan crossed his arms as Aiden, surprised by the question, answered, “Ya know, I never really thought about it. Guess I’ll sleep on it and let ya know in the morning.”

“Sleep sounds pretty good right about now,” Hagan commented, walking toward the inn’s door. “I think I’ll grab a bite, finish off my flask, and hit the hay. We can talk more about what’s next in the morning.”

“Ya gonna share that whiskey?” Aiden suggested.

Hagan glanced back at him. “I only share with ladies.” He walked inside.

“Speakin’ of ladies,” Aiden remarked, “I think I’ll head over to the pub and see what I can find. Gotta test out the new eye patch.” He looked at Iris, wiggling his eyebrows. “Dead sexy, ain’t it?”

“I’ll refrain from annihilating your confidence,” she answered. Aiden shrugged before happily scampering down the road. “He’s quite a character,” Iris commented.

Lucas chuckled. “Yeah, really.” He looked up at the sky and marveled at the moon. “So what’s Aalok Bonham like?”

“He’s rather irascible,” she answered. “You should probably forget his first name and simply refer to him as Master Bonham from this moment forth.”

“Oh, that’s right,” said Lucas, remembering what she had told him the other day.

Iris’s eyes widened as she came to a realization. “It has just occurred to me that advanced Light magic allows one to read the thoughts of others.”

Lucas looked at her. “Whoa, that’s something else.”

“Indeed. The ability should aid us tremendously in deducing the location of both disk fragments.”

Lucas raised his eyebrows. “Oh, yeah? That’s great news! I just hope I become skilled enough to use advanced magic.”

“Don’t burden yourself with the thought,” she replied. “I was quite impressed with your expeditious progress while I was tutoring you. Just remember what I told you then: all you have to do is apply yourself.”

The pair had been gazing at the moon for a few moments, when Lucas looked at her. Initially, he’d turned his head because he had something to say. But suddenly, the words were gone. He watched as she continued to stare at the moon, her long silver hair flowing softly in the warm breeze.

Unexpectedly, she looked back at him, and was apparently a bit surprised by his gaze. “Are you okay?” she asked, slightly cocking her head to the side.

He quickly returned his attention to the moon. “Yeah. I zoned out for a second. I’m pretty tired.”

“As am I,” she replied. “The last few days have certainly been rigorous, to say the least.” Lucas nodded in agreement, continuing to focus on the moon. She lightly rubbed her arm, joining him in examining the beautiful night sky. Following a short silence, she spoke again. “It seems that you’ll at last be reunited with your grandfather shortly.” She looked at him. “How do you feel?”

“Anxious,” Lucas responded, glancing at her briefly. “I hope he’s alright. If the letter I wrote never made it, he’s probably pretty worried about me too.”

“I’m positive he’ll take great pride in your accomplishments since you’ve been away,” she answered. “I anticipate meeting him.” They quietly admired the heavens for a few more minutes. Iris yawned. “I believe I’m going to retire to my room. Good night, Lucas.”

“Good night,” he replied, watching as she walked toward the inn’s door.

She grabbed the knob before looking back at him. “It would be advisable to rest yourself as well. We have a considerable amount of traveling ahead of us before reaching Cymbeline.”

“I’ll be in shortly,” Lucas responded. With a soft smile, she gave a nod before proceeding into the inn.

Chapter 54: Javan's Incursion

Veronica and Laverick accompanied Lord Quinn as he marched ahead of a small army of red cloaked men through the In Between. As he examined the map Laverick had discovered during his infiltration of the Spades' base, Lord Quinn seldom spoke during the journey.

The chart proved to be far more valuable than any of them had initially suspected, containing the location of the current Spade base, as well as past bases and markings to indicate future bases in the event of another relocation. It also mapped the coordinates of every known gateway constructed by Spades and Quinn's men alike, along with their corresponding destination in Aria.

As they approached the large colorless rock wall which concealed the Spade headquarters, Lord Quinn ordered his men to halt. After taking a moment to examine the steep mountainside, he turned to them. "The Spade base lies directly before us." He took a purple crystal out of his pocket. "The moment the gate opens, our raid begins. I would like to make it indisputably clear that you are not to kill any female members you encounter until I have located my adopted daughter. As for the rest, you may do as you wish. The fragment we have sought for so long, so desperately, is at last within our grasp. Along with it comes a golden age of prosperity and luxury beyond your wildest dreams." Hearing those words, Laverick smiled widely.

"Not an army," Lord Quinn continued, "but the future nobility of Aria stands before me. In front of you, a king who will ensure your days of toil and struggle will forever come to an end. All that remains between us and this breathtaking prospect is the successful execution of the pending incursion." He turned to Laverick and handed him the crystal. "For your outstanding effort, I award you the honor of inaugurating these forthcoming events."

Laverick took the crystal. "Gee, thanks!!" An enormous grin was glued to his face as he gazed at the jewel.

Several seconds passed before he received a harsh nudge from Veronica. “Open the gate!” she sharply whispered.

“Oh yeah, whoops!” Laverick stammered, hastily dashing toward the wall-like mountainside. A few seconds passed as he attempted to relocate the small groove he’d used to access the base during his solo infiltration. When at last he did, he shoved the crystal into it. Immediately, the jewel glowed brightly as the cliff face thunderously formed an entrance to the Spade headquarters.

As the gate opened, Lord Quinn stepped aside and proclaimed, “The time has come! Retrieve the fragment!” Without hesitation, the army of red-cloaked men charged into the base.

“Go geddit!” Laverick cheered while the men rushed past him.

Once the final man had entered the base, Lord Quinn calmly proceeded inside, followed by Veronica. Pocketing the crystal, Laverick followed suit, the door loudly resuming its wall-like appearance just after he’d made his way into the headquarters’ main passage.

* * * *

Lord Quinn looked down at the empty chest which once held the disk fragment. “This is where you found it, correct?”

Laverick nodded. “Yep. It was locked up tight in that box.”

“They must have anticipated our arrival and relocated it,” Veronica suggested.

“The base’s general vacancy indicates that possibility,” Lord Quinn replied. “Still, even if we consider that the Spades have in fact relocated, I’m curious to know why certain members have remained behind.” He turned away from the chest. “No matter, as long as we possess the map, their days remain numbered.”

Just then, two of the red-cloaked men appeared in the doorway carrying a woman with blond hair and brown eyes by her

arms. “Let go of me, you bastards!” she demanded, trying with all of her might to escape the men’s grasp.

Lord Quinn’s brow crinkled. “Who do we have here?”

Seeing his face, the woman became petrified. “She’s the only female we found,” the man on her left reported. “We encountered a total of four Spades during the raid, three of which were killed on the spot. While we’re still in the process of searching the premises, it seems that the majority of the occupants have abandoned the base.”

Lord Quinn gave a nod. Gradually, he took a few steps toward the terrified woman. “Well, you’re certainly not the person I was looking for. Regardless, I feel that you may house valuable information that will benefit my efforts exceptionally. May I have your name?”

The quivering woman remained silent.

“If you treasure your life even in the slightest,” Lord Quinn warned calmly, “I would suggest that you answer my question.”

The woman’s lips trembled as she softly responded, “Amy. My name is Amy.”

Lord Quinn smiled. “Good. That wasn’t difficult at all, now was it, Amy?” His eyes moved to a small bead of sweat trickling down her face. He returned his focus to her panic-stricken eyes. “Well, Amy, it appears that I’ve indeed found the Spade headquarters, and yet there is an overwhelmingly obvious lack of Spades within it. Do you care to enlighten me?”

There was no reply.

Lord Quinn grew frustrated. “I’m not in the mood for games, Amy. If you do not willingly surrender the intelligence I seek, you can rest assured that I possess other methods with which to extract it.”

Amy hesitated. “I—”

Lord Quinn raised his eyebrows.

“I don’t understand,” she said.

“You don’t understand?” Lord Quinn repeated. “Am I not speaking clearly enough for you, Amy? Where are the Spades? What have they done with the fragment?”

Amy’s eyes widened, though she didn’t say a word.

“I see,” said Lord Quinn. “Apparently, you’re under the impression that my threats are mere tactics of interrogation and not to be taken seriously. If you honestly think that your resistance will hinder my progress, then I urge you, for your own sake, to reassess your beliefs.” He lifted his index and middle fingers of his right hand into the air. “Perhaps I should reinforce the reality of your current predicament. *Umbra fulgur sphaera.*” In a flash, a small, heavily concentrated ball of dark-purple lightning formed just beyond the tip of Lord Quinn’s fingers. “I will allow you one final chance to comply before taking matters into my own hands. Now tell me, Amy, where have the Spades gone and what have they done with the disk fragment?”

She shook her head. “I don’t understand!!” she stammered, frightened. “We thought you had it!”

Instantly, the small sphere Lord Quinn had conjured vanished. “Interesting,” he remarked, lowering his fingers. “And how exactly did you reach this conclusion?”

Caught in a whirlwind of terror and bewilderment, Amy didn’t answer.

She let out a shriek as Lord Quinn suddenly delivered a harsh slap across her face. “Uncooperative bitch!” He quickly turned to Veronica. “Read her. I want to know everything.”

Chapter 55: Home At Last

After washing themselves up and obtaining a full night's sleep, Lucas, Iris, and Hagan left Valletal's inn to make a few purchases for the journey ahead of them. Among the items bought: food, clothing, extra bottles, potions, arrows, and saddlebags for their new horses. While Lucas was eager to abandon the bulky backpack in lieu of the saddlebags, Iris preferred to retain her satchel.

"Why won't you just throw that stupid bag away?!" Hagan argued.

Iris glanced at him as she continued to stock her satchel with potions. "If you must know, I received it from my father as a gift on the day I left for college. I value it considerably." She closed the satchel and slung it over her shoulder.

"Has anyone seen Aiden today?" Lucas suddenly asked.

"Nope," Hagan replied. "Guess we're going without him," he said with a grin.

"He's likely sleeping," Iris suggested. "Shall we revisit the inn preceding our departure?"

* * * *

Lucas knocked on the bedroom door. "Aiden?" There was no reply. He knocked again. "Aiden? Are you in there?"

"Let's go already," Hagan said impatiently. "It's not like he's that much help anyway."

Just then, the door opened and a shirtless Aiden with messy hair emerged into view. He looked at Lucas with squinted eyes. "Hey," he slurred.

"What happened to you last night?" Hagan inquired.

“Beer and ladies,” Aiden replied, scratching his back. “Well, more beer than ladies, but ya know.”

Iris rolled her eyes. She turned to Lucas. “Perhaps we’re not in need of Aiden’s assistance.”

“No, wait!” Aiden interjected, his bloodshot eyes widening. “I wanna go. Just gimme a sec to get ready.”

Hagan crossed his arms. “I might have had a little to drink myself last night, but at least I know when to quit.” He looked at Lucas. “If he really wanted to go, he should have been up and ready on time like the rest of us. He’s a total mess. We’re better off without him.”

“I ain’t a mess!” Aiden protested before letting out an obnoxious burp.

Lucas looked at his companions’ faces. He didn’t need to read their emotions to tell that they were dissatisfied with Aiden’s lack of preparation. *We’re going to need all the help we can get taking down Lord Quinn.* He looked back at Aiden. *But I’m not so sure Aiden’s help is worth the trouble at this point.* “Maybe it’s better for both of us if you stay behind.”

“Come on, Lucas!” Aiden pleaded. “After all the stuff we’ve been through you’re just gonna throw me out?!”

“Pretty much,” Hagan quickly responded. He took a few steps down the hallway. “Let’s go. We’ve got a lot of traveling ahead of us.”

“Wait!” Aiden called.

Rolling his eyes, Hagan turned back to him. “We don’t need your help.”

“Yeah, I know ya don’t need my help,” Aiden answered. He turned to Lucas, who observed a look on Aiden’s face he’d never seen before. It insinuated sincerity. “Look, I ain’t got much goin’ on in my life. I spent years bein’ a real scumbag with a bunch of

guys I didn't trust. I ain't perfect, and yeah, I screw up a lot, okay? But you guys are the closest things to real friends I've ever had. I got nothin' here. I got nothin' nowhere. I need a purpose. If ya let me come along, I'll do everything I can to help." He looked at Hagan. "And I mean that."

Lucas glanced at his companions, apparently moved by what Aiden had to say. He scanned the emotions nearby. *Wow, even Hagan feels a little sorry for him.* He looked back at Aiden. A few seconds passed before he gave a nod. "Okay. Get your things together. And hurry."

Aiden smiled. "Thanks, buddy! I won't let ya down! Gimme a sec, I'll be right out!" He quickly shut the door and dressed himself with extraordinary speed.

"I hadn't the slightest clue our companionship was of such importance to him," Iris whispered to Hagan.

Hagan leaned back against the wall. "I guess he's not all bad."

It wasn't long before the four departed from Valletal on horseback. While the horses enabled the group to travel much farther in a shorter duration than on foot, the monsters still proved to be a restricting obstacle. They redirected their route and rode around the threats whenever possible, though other confrontations were unavoidable. To prevent spooking the horses, the group took down the beasts at a distance, conjuring from horseback. Hagan's bow was exceptionally useful for these encounters as well.

As the sun set, they stopped to rest in the town of Paddock on the western edge of the Jhar Mountains. Then, at sunrise, the group continued their journey to Cymbeline.

"She said that I have the potential to become an advanced mage," Lucas explained to Aiden as the group rode through a field later that day. "After that, she told me about Aalok—" He glanced at Iris, "I mean Master Bonham." Iris chuckled to herself. "She said

he would be able to help me reach my full potential. Apparently, I'll even be able to read people's thoughts."

"Holy crap, that's awesome," Aiden remarked. "Ya might wanna stay outta my head though, buddy. For your own sake. Heh..." He paused before adding, "So Sezuni's daughter. She still lives with Quinn, yeah?"

"We don't know," Lucas replied. "I'm guessing so."

Hagan took a swig from his flask. Resealing its cap, he commented, "That's got to be one messed up kid."

* * * *

The group entered Cymbeline's eastern border eleven grueling days after their departure from Valletal. While his companions were eager to spend some time in the royal city, Lucas insisted on proceeding further west.

"I'm riding home to check on Grandpa," Lucas told them. "I won't be able to relax until I know he's okay."

"How far is it?" Hagan asked.

"It's just west of town," Lucas answered. "I used to walk here on foot. It shouldn't take long at all on horseback."

"We'll go with you," said Hagan. "We haven't gone this far to have you eaten alive by monsters. But when we get back... I think I speak for all of us when I say we could use a little break."

Lucas gave a nod.

* * * *

Lucas dismounted his horse in front of the small house in the field west of Cymbeline. *I'm home; I can't believe it.* It was then that his eyes caught sight of the small mailbox, overflowing with letters. He quickly turned his attention to the front door, heavily damaged and partially ajar. "Grandpa!" Lucas bolted toward the

house, leaving his companions temporarily baffled as their horses caught up to his.

Hagan took note of the house's door. "Something bad happened here," he said, looking over at the other two.

"Oh no," Iris said softly. "Lucas."

Lucas burst into the house. "Grandpa!" His head darted around the room. The kitchen and dining area were a complete mess. Pots, pans, and utensils were scattered recklessly. Two of the chairs were flipped onto their side, far from the table. The iron pail rested near a wall, containing a rather sizeable dent.

He noticed several pieces of ripped parchment dispersed throughout the area. Worried, he collected one of them and observed it. *Grandpa's poetry...* looking down, he saw a bloodstain on the floor near the table. His eyes widened. "Grandpa!!"

He bolted into his grandfather's room. Once he entered, he froze.

* * * *

"Got him," Hagan proclaimed after his arrow sank into the imp. "Damn things. Not a moment of rest out here." He looked back at the other two. "Should we go inside?"

"He's comin' out," Aiden responded, pointing to the front door.

Lucas slowly approached his companions, who waited quietly. His red, watery eyes made the news to follow apparent. Yet when he came to a halt near the group, Lucas said nothing. He turned back to the house and stared at it.

Iris dismounted her horse and walked over to him. She placed her hand on his shoulder. "It's okay." He looked down at his feet as tears trickled down his cheeks. No one said a word.

The silence lasted for several minutes. Lucas looked over at the large oak tree in the distance. Slowly, he turned back toward his companions, his face stern.

“I don’t care what it takes. Javan Quinn is going to die.”

Postscript / Special Thanks

Thank you for reading *The Legend of Damiano's Disk*, the first book in the Tales of Aria series. If you've enjoyed my work, I urge you to visit the official Tales of Aria website at: <http://talesofaria.com>

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