Emory

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Prologue

I remember once when I was a child, playing in my father’s farmstead like most farm boys did. I was nine years old, and I spent nearly an hour finding myself the most perfect stick: straight with medium length. It was my sword, and with it I spent hours battling the hordes of invading outlanders. I protected my father’s farm valiantly, stabbing and slashing, gouging and swatting, parrying and riposting. The hero I most certainly was. All around me allies and enemies alike fell. I was soaked in blood and perspiration, but I persevered.

After a few hours of play, my father happened out into the yard. I had just dispatched an enemy lieutenant and was spinning to bring my stick in a downward arch to crush another’s skull when my father stopped me. He motioned for me to come kneel beside him.

“Emory,” he said, warm eyes gazing sadly upon me, “war is no game. There are no heroes in war, son.” He scratched the stubble at his jaw. “Life is far too valuable to be so eager to take and lose it. Remember this, Emory. Place others before you, and try your absolute best to avoid fighting anyone.”

“Yes, sir,” I said softly, dropping my blood stained stick. He smiled and returned to his work.

Fourteen years later I watched my home, my father’s farm, fall in flames. My father was still inside, refusing to fight for himself or his land; refusing to flee or give it all up. And it drove him to his death. Yet all I could do was watch the world burn, cloak battering in the wind beside the few men I considered friends. Corruption and decadence rules the world now; or maybe, these fourteen years later, I am capable of viewing it in a different light.

This is not the world I grew up knowing, loving. And I wonder often if my father had been a wise man or a tremendous fool.

Part I

A Devil and a Snake

“Now the snake was the most cunning animal that the Lord God had made.”

Genesis 3:1

One

I couldn’t say what the value of a life is. Perhaps, though, I can gander at what it is worth in the great realm of things. You see, a life is simple, really. Picture a flame. One lights a candle, and a slow spark catches wick. Birth. The flame, pulsating with heat, matures steadily. Every minute the candle grows smaller, the light booming from the flame dimmer. And eventually, the flame dies. You can kill it early, indeed. Or the elements, some unknown entity. Some call it the will of the gods. I call it a gentle breeze on a cool autumn night.

But who am I to say what a life is worth?

I have taken many a life, this is true. In that sense, I know more about life than many common folk. I have seen the flicker of flames in a man’s eyes disappear, dying as if the wind wished to cease its existence. My hands are stained red with the wax of those I’ve extinguished. So many fields before me have borne a new tint of crimson.

Someone decides what lives are worth. I simply follow them.

You might argue with me that the life of a man should be left to the gods, those who planned his life. I say show me your gods. If they are so mighty, why do they not save the dying pleading for mercy? Why not follow flesh and blood, rulers who can decide which man deserves to perish?

There need be no second thought.

Live. Kill. Die: Three simple words with which any man of any nation can live by; simple words that carry the weight of the world. Or, maybe, they carry the weight of life. But that brings me back to my initial conundrum of deciding the value of life. For if the value of life is nil, then those words appear to be empty. However, if the value of a life is, say, the most precious thing in our world, then those three words must weigh a fortune.

Let us face it: No one survives the burden of life.

With this thought, perhaps we can move a step closer to identifying the value of life. Can a life be bought with gold? Or should I say: Can a life be taken for the price of gold? Maybe those two questions are essentially the same.

No, I do not write this for any philosophical purpose. I have a story to tell. But in order to tell my story, we must define the worth of a life. Alas, I digress.

You see, I have reached a point in my life where I feel as if everything was worthless. My friends and family are dead. Well, most of them, anyway. Otherwise, the ones alive killed the ones that are dead. Survival of the strongest, maybe, or the treachery of betrayal. I must define the worth of a life to understand the whole of this godforsaken war.

It started with a stone. From the looks of it, the stone was nothing precious. At a quick glance, it was just another pebble lying amidst rubble. This led me to question how it ended up in a significant establishment like the Garden palace. Under constant guard, the stone obviously scared someone. Or maybe someone scared someone by what they could do with the stone. In any case, four guardsman stood watch every hour of every day. Six shifts of four hour periods were routine.

Where this stone originated from, I could not say. It simply appeared in the palace, encased by Malliser Garden, himself. The same day of the stones incasing behind a barrier of glass, Malliser rapped lightly on my chambers door. I was at work studying maps of the Kingdom of Torryn, familiarizing myself with the territory within the kingdom. As the head of the Garden king’s guard, I felt responsible for the ultimate protection of Malliser and his children. I made marks among highly forested areas around the Garden palace where troop placement could serve best.

“Emory?” Malliser said, his voice slipping quietly under my door.

“Come in,” I said, loud enough for the king to comprehend. The door creaked open. I could hear the rust eating away at the hinges, a scream of the dying whilst the door pushed open ever-so-painfully.

If I had a mind for peace, I would have had that fixed.

“Your Highness,” I said, rising, “how may I be of service to you?”

Malliser glanced at my maps before opening his mouth. Age ruled his face, etching deep crevices along his cheeks and brow. That fire that once raged behind his eyes was nothing more than a flicker of embers in a tired fire pit. His legs creaked nearly as loud as my door, though there was less of a chance I could replace his hinges. He winced before he spoke. “Sir Emory, I have an important… artifact I wish for you to see. I’m not sure what to make of it.”

I smiled. “So you request the aid of the young but handsome and intelligent Emory Warson?”

He ignored that, turning towards the entrance. “Come. The severity of this stone is great. Its power is awesome.” He was quiet for a moment and we padded down the hall. “If it falls in the wrong hands, I think, everything we know could die.”

“And death,” I replied, “is a nasty little thing no one usually survives.” I stifled a yawn as we trudged on through the thin hallway of the king’s guard quarters. For the work we did, one would assume a wider hallway would be in order. As it were, we lived inside a prison-like dormitory. “What sort of power could a *stone* possess anyway, Your Highness?”

“One of great magnitude, to be sure,” he replied, seemingly in spirit of my humor. “How valuable do you think life is?”

“It’s worth living for.”

“What about the lives of our enemies?”

“Those are worth killing.”

“What about the life of our kingdom?”

“Well,” I said slowly, “that’s worth dying for.”

Pain creased the elder’s brow. “I see. Then imagine this, if you will. The stone, if combined with others like it, could completely devastate everything we know. If you were to die for the life of our kingdom, this stone would rather destroy the kingdom with you in it.”  
 I shook my head, sighing. “Well, then, why not sink it in the ocean?”

“It is too valuable for that,” Malliser replied.

“So, then,” I said, “what is value of life?”

I never did receive an answer. Before Malliser could respond (or even contemplate an answer) we arrived at the encasing of this stone of awesome powers. From what I saw, it was nothing more than a river rock, rifting a current that just wanted to pass over it. As it were, I thought, the stone could rift existence. And, indeed, all existence wanted to do was, well, exist.

From what I had been told days later, this stone was much more powerful than a river rock. Apparently, before our continent of Westhaven had been divided by war (and other negative “things”), there were seven stones of immense power. The democracy that reigned over Westhaven separated and buried the stones throughout the continent, leaving knowledge of where they sunk to a delicate few. However, power corrupts, as I’m told. Public distrust of the democratic leaders was evident (since they disregarded sharing the locations of the stones with the masses). Eventually tyrants and dictators, rebels and heroes raised banners against the men wielding the hidden power of the stones. Seven nations emerged, but through long and devastating wars, only four remained.

Having discovered one of these evil stones, King Malliser wanted full protection over its preciousness. But, I thought, those who desire the stone are not afraid to take the life of those standing its vigil. Life is cheap if it’s not your own. We stood silently before the encasement, our reflections grim in the glass. From where I was standing, Malliser was swallowed whole by the stone. I, on the other hand, appeared delicately on the glass, standing alone, separated by even the guards who stood watch.

I looked at myself more carefully. My dirty blond hair fell just above my shoulders, curling wildly at the ends. Green eyes decorated with small, black diamonds stared back at me, eying myself as cautiously as I was. A blotch of red, probably the stones reflection, lie stretched across the left breast of my white tunic. I frowned. “Your Highness,” I said, “I don’t like the presence of this stone here. It will no doubt draw all sorts of trouble, sire.”

Malliser nodded in agreement. “I don’t like it much more than you do, Emory, but it needs to be kept safe here - ”

“Where we’ll be able to watch it, I know. If you won’t be needing me any further, Your Highness, I have important work to finish up.” When Malliser didn’t respond, I bowed and turned slowly. The tiled floor beneath my feet was smooth, allowing me to glide to the door. The ease of leaving the room did nothing to relax my uncomfortable instincts.

It all comes down to life, you know. And, to those in power, it was about more power and wealth. King Malliser, unfortunately, was no different. The stone stayed in the Garden palace, under heavy watch for the next month. Every day a creeping sensation filled me with dread. Every face seemed suspicious, to not only me but King Malliser himself. In fact, his paranoia ran so rampant, he threatened to throw his own son, Ellyas Garden, into prison. But, indeed, that is for later.

Like I was saying, it all comes to life.

But then again, does life really matter to those who lost theirs?

Two

When we are born into this world, the gods flip an hourglass to mark the end of our lives. Cynical, maybe, but it’s the truth. Born we are with an immediate death sentence, ordered to live out the rest of our lives in constant knowledge we will one day perish. In that sense, I suppose, it’s a cruel jape by those gods that are supposed to watch over us. The Order (of the gods) has us believe that whence we die, we end up in a heavenly place. Somewhere with grandiose archways and angels. Oh, and let’s not forget the gods. They’ll be there, too, I’m told. Apparently, the gods designed our mortal flaw in order to allow us into this place. It’s called Home. If that’s the case, that the gods created Home for us when we perish (and the Cellar for those of us who do evil deeds), why don’t they just create us at Home? Why let us suffer through a life of betrayal and pain instead of giving us the joy and love we (and I’m told this) deserve?

At the end of the first month of Garden’s possession of the stone, which had been identified as Phystalite, disruptions were already occurring in the city. Word of the stone’s presence in Garden palace caused an uproar. Small riots in the marketplace arose, and protestations against our keeping such a dangerous weapon also took place. Some civilians killed each other (the murderers were put to death); others simply wanted to see the stone. And, since money rules the realm of royalty, King Malliser’s advisors advised him to charge a fee to take in the horrific view of the Phystalite.

I argued, once again, against putting the Phystalite on display. I even had the support of Prince Ellyas, who vehemently rebuked his father for corrupting so easily. “Father,” he said, disheveled, “we simply cannot allow this stone in the palace any longer! The ramifications of our possessing this vile weapon are beyond the capabilities of your mind, obviously.” The king bristled at this remark, flushing beat red. “Let me draw it out in simple terms, so you can understand, father. When I was young, the scholars you so fervently wrought upon me instructed me on the potency of these stones, which happened to be a myth then. Anyway, they said in unison that the one whom bears the stones will cease to exist. In any sort of matter, father. Please,” he stopped, pointing towards his sisters, “if not for my sake, then for theirs. Mother died so long ago, and you’re all they have to rely upon. If you die, the responsibility will fall on me, father, and we both know how I am with emotions.”

King Malliser nodded. “They’re non-existent, it seems. Though it appears your insolence knows no bounds. If you weren’t my son, Ellyas, I would have you whipped and beaten for the manner in which you spoke to me. As it is, you’ll have a month of quarantine to your quarters, to think about how to approach me in the future.” He turned his angry eyes upon Ellyas’ sisters, Elena and Evelyn, and spoke: “Take no heed to your brother’s nonsense. You’ve seen the stone yourselves, my daughters, and has it even appeared to hold any power?

“Imagine,” he continued, “the sort of negotiation prowess this item bestows upon Torryn. None of our enemies would desire to lay siege to our kingdom in fear of the Phystalite’s wrath. We will prosper because of this stone.” His expression lightened the heavy brows which frowned upon Ellyas. “Look, children, your brother will be fine. I won’t keep him pent up for a month. He needs to learn to speak in the presence of royalty, so when it’s his time to rule, he becomes a wonderful speaker.”

With that, Malliser sent off Elena and Evelyn. Then his eyes turned to examine me, a curious frown upon his lips. “Please don’t persuade Ellyas of this nonsensical idea, Warson. I trust you as much as he does, indeed, and admire and respect your prowess in battle. Your stratagems and tactics are unsurpassed throughout Torryn, even Westhaven, but this is none of your concern, sir. I want to bring prosperity to Torryn, Emory, and with the Phystalite, I can do just that.”

I shook my head. “Your Highness, Prince Ellyas has the right of the situation. None in history have surpassed to live beyond months of possessing the Phystalite. And it’s not because of the power the stone contains; it’s because of those who would wish to destroy for and with it. As the head of your king’s guard, sire, I recommend that you bury the Phystalite as our ancestors did so long ago.”

Malliser’s eyes narrowed, deepening the crevices on his forehead into a menacing frown. “And I told you what happened to our ancestors. That’s what caused the war which split Westhaven, Emory. Who would dare strike me down for fear of what those in my stead would do to them, anyway, my dear Warson?” He held out his hand, examining the sagging flesh that clung to his bones. “These hands have brought prosperity to Torryn, Emory. And now, with the Phystalite, these hands will guarantee peace and usher in more wealth. Any leader, regardless of who they are, would not dare throw away such freedom.”

“Such power, you mean,” I said, licking my lips. “Your Highness, if I may take my leave.”

“Go.”

Slowly, I turned and faced the door exiting the throne room. It was an unsettlingly large door, made of a strong iron forged in nearby villages. Two guardsmen stood erect, non-blinking, pale armor reflecting the blisteringly hot sun into the eyes of those who dared glance at them. I had learned the hard way to avert my gaze from the soldiers as I exited. The door pushed easily open when I placed my mailed fists upon it, gliding forward much easier than the one in my chamber. I stepped through the ridiculously enormous exit into the open expanse of the Garden foyer.

Waiting patiently in the center of the room, watching the porcelain fountain dribble cool water endlessly was my captain of guards, Kwasi Thorradin. Now, I believe, would be an excellent time to interject that the king’s guard’s official title was the Freshwater Guard. Malliser and his ancestors, apparently, had an interest in water… that was fresh. I walked myself to his side, examining the same fountain, wondering what his fascination was. It was a fountain. Fountains, by nature, emptied water from tired lips into a bowl of varying sizes. That bowl cycled the water back to the lips, and the process repeated.

Apparently eternity was a new or exciting idea to Kwasi. I, on the other hand, believe eternity is rather dull.

“How did it go?” Kwasi asked, never removing his eyes from the foam bubbling in the bowl. A light mist splayed across his bare cheeks, perhaps the reason he chose to examine the fountain. Perhaps not. “Did King Garden take to heart any of your suggestions or warnings?”

I sighed.

“Is that so?”

Nodding, I said, “Indeed.” We stood in silence, allowing the echo of the water splashing to reverberate around the foyer. The room, essentially empty except for two large, rounded staircases leading to a second floor, was made up of stained glass windows in place of walls. Beauty over security, we always say. The light that managed through was contorted into shades of green and red, blues and oranges that danced across the pale tiles beneath our feet. “Will you be staring into monotony for much longer, or can we move away from this place?”

“That rough?” Kwasi was a man of few words.

“Define rough for me, please?”

He was silent. I pointed towards the legitimately sized entrance and exit of the Garden palace. Thorradin nodded, and we left perpetuity behind us. In retrospect, I suppose even that fountain could perish. Service at the gates presented us with an escape route, and we took it. The Garden’s garden stretched out before us, consuming the entire path from the entrance (or exit) of the Garden palace to the small village below. We paced ourselves on the walk through the pathway to reach that village. It was Daely, I believe, a small, tight-knit farming community that produced many crops for the Kingdom of Torryn yearly.

Trees fenced us is on our path, though we weren’t likely to stray the course. Outstretched branches the size of bodies hung over our heads, providing solace from the blistering sun above. Here and there, scattered at our feet, sprinkles of sunlight broke through the thick overhang. It was like it was raining sunshine, right there on our feet. I winced as the few speckles of sunlight reflected off my mailed boots, shining brightly in my eyes.

The garden itself was magnificent. Flowers bloomed on all sides, gracing the pathway from the palace’s entrance to the crossroads of Daely and Reggen Road. Vibrant purples and crimsons danced on either side of us, kept to tempo by the whistling wind. A few leaves fell from the trees above, fluttering side-to-side as they littered the walkway before us. It was truly a beautiful sight. I had feared, however, that with the public display of the Phystalite, the garden gracing Garden palace would be trampled, smothered. A place of beauty would die so that a little money could be made. Man sacrifices nature first.

At the crossroads, Thorradin and I stopped. Up ahead, in the close, yet distant proximity of Daely, soldiers fluttered across the landscape. I looked towards Kwasi, quizzically, but he shrugged. “What the hell are all these troops doing in a small town like Daely?” I asked.

“We’re about to see.”

And, indeed, we were. I picked up in a slight jog, aware of the now omnipresent sun that clung to my armor. A moving oven, I was, and with too much effort, a passed out soldier.

We reached Daely within minutes. I could taste the panic in the air; smell the sweat of those nervous townsfolk cautiously eying the intruding soldiers. All work had been halted, it seemed, when the soldiers had arrived. Behind a small, handmade podium stood a lieutenant of Garden’s armed forces. I didn’t recognize him, but he held his head high, looking down upon the citizens of Daely as he swept his surroundings. A contemptuous smile rested upon his lips, his cruel lips, before he raised his hands to ascertain the attention of the townsfolk.

“People of Daely,” he began, disapproval thick in his tone. “As you are all quite aware, I’m sure, the Garden palace has attained an item of immense… power. It is a beautiful stone, assuring the prosperity of our kingdom for many years to come!” The town remained silent. “Aren’t you all ready for an easier life? You’ll be able to farm less, rest more, people. This is what we’ve all been waiting for!

“Forget your burdens, everyone. King Malliser will bring about a new age in the book of Torryn. Why do you all look so sullen?”

An elderly woman, standing in the doorway of her modest home, spoke up. “Sir, we love our land. We can’t change our lives because of a stone. You must realize this also, good sir. We’re farmers, this is our life.”

Disdain colored the lieutenant’s eyes darkly. Other villagers surrounding the podium, those with courage, nodded and murmured in agreement. Motioning to two soldiers across from his podium, the lieutenant shook his head. “Listen to me,” he began again, softly, in order to make the villagers strain to listen. “Your cooperation is not simply requested, it is expected. Protesting King Garden’s plans for Daely is not just shouting your desires, it is treason.” By now, the two soldiers had clutched the woman who spoke out by the arms and cast her to the dirt. The lieutenant stepped down from the podium, right hand resting on his sword at his hip. He unsheathed it smoothly when he reached the prostrated woman. “And, my good people of Daely, this is what happens to those who commit treason!” Accentuating ‘treason,’ the lieutenant brought down his sword across the woman’s neck. A spurt of red danced across his tunic, smothering the Garden insignia. He wrenched his sword free of the woman’s neck, which was only half severed, and, despite her gurgled moans, struck again. This time the sword broke through flesh and bone, spraying the dirt with blood, the woman’s lifeless head rolling not too far away from her emptied body.

A cry of horror arose from the town of Daely, and some villagers fled in terror. “Long live King Garden!” the lieutenant cried, stained sword flailing in the sky. “Long live your king!”

I watched. The scene was sickening; I had never seen such abhorred use of power in my time in Garden’s military. Speechless, I turned towards Thorradin. His face was, as usual, blank, but his left eye twitched slightly. “Go whence we came and inform King Malliser of this, Kwasi. I shall deal with this lieutenant before reining him in to you. I’ll meet up with you soon.”

Eying my approach, the lieutenant smiled grimly. “I apologize you had to see that, sir Warson, but I’m sure you understand my position. Treason is treason, and the penalty is death, as you well know.” He cleaned the blade of his sword before returning it to its sheath.

“Treason is tried under court. King Malliser should rule over those trials, as you should well know, lieutenant.” He flinched as I finished. “Listen to me, you hound. You are under arrest for murdering an innocent civilian without the trial of court. I’m sure we can also try you for using your power to punish a civilian without just trial. And what would His Majesty say about your decision to exclude him from power? Hmmm, I wonder about that, sir…?”

The lieutenant growled, “Bosleigh. And, my good general, I am surprised His Majesty left you out of the loop on this one. Or,” he smiled, “perhaps he did so because of your foreseen hesitance to deal with traitors. His Highness has grand plans for Daely to become an industrial center for Torryn. The Phystalite will bring much power and wealth, as you know. Any treason, sir Warson, is to be punished immediately, based on my judgment, straight from King Malliser’s golden lips.”

Straight from Malliser’s lips, I thought to myself, shaken. For a moment, I stood silent, taking my first good glimpse of Daely. Small buildings and earnest homes lined one long, narrow road that led through the village. The podium Bosleigh used for his charming speech was centered directly in the middle of Daely, where an intersection cut east to west. I could barely make out the shape of a farm off to the west, assuming a few more like it were nestled further along the way. The town itself was dusty; the dirt road kicked up plenty of dust when the wind howled, caking a cozy layer upon the frames of the buildings. And there were few enough of those. A small pub commandeered a majority of the road north of the intersection; a sign hung from above the doorway that read “Madison’s.” To the left or right of the pub and perpetuated throughout Daely were, in all, about a dozen houses. Thatched roofs covered the modest one room homes, surrounded by four walls of compacted mud, solidified to shelter from the elements. I assumed the floors were the same. Frightened eyes, I saw, were peering through the sole windows of just about every house I could see.

“Regardless,” I said, after my studies, “I’m arresting you. If, when we speak with King Malliser, he validates your claims, you will be set free. If not, I’m sure we have more than enough rope to hang a son-of-a-bitch.” With a tight smile, I motioned towards the Garden Palace. Without further argument, Lieutenant Bosleigh bowed his head and stomped off; I followed four feet behind him, sword hand resting on the sheath of my weapon. The soldiers in his entourage followed closely behind me, but their integrity seemed well enough (in retrospect, they had just assisted in the poor woman’s murder, but I had hoped they would not kill the commander of the king’s guard).

The march back to Garden Palace was a blur. I hardly noticed the beautiful garden upon my return, but managed to order the guards at the entrance to open the gates. Our footsteps echoed in the halls of the palace, and I noticed Thorradin, again, in front of the porcelain fountain. The water tinkled its way down into the lower platform, bubbling softly. The echo sounded as if a creek were flowing down the center of the palace. I caught Thorradin’s eye and nodded towards the throne room. He took up position behind my troop, and the brass doors leading into the throne room were opened by two servants positioned on either side of the double doors.

Beyond, King Malliser was seated upon his golden throne, firmly resting on the crimson cushion beneath him. The back of the chair was raised two heads above him. Beginning from the armrests and up the sides of the throne, wonderful scrollwork of two roses intertwined to meet at the top. Metal thorns poked out here and there, occasionally brushing each other while the roses caressed their way to the top of the seat. And, when their path ended, blushed red petals bloomed.

“Emory Warson,” Malliser croaked, “what have you brought me? Captain Thorradin is a man of too few words, and I am irritated in having to wait for your arrival. What is this nonsense of a lieutenant’s treason?”

I glanced over my shoulder at Thorradin, and then placed my mailed hand upon Bosleigh’s shoulder. “Your Highness, Captain Thorradin and I witnessed Lieutenant Bosleigh here murder an innocent woman in the village of Daely. He claims her hesitance to be fully accepting of your plans for the village was treason, and beheaded her in front of the villagers. He also tells me, Your Highness, that the permission to deal with treason was left up to his discretion; Your Highness was not to be involved in any sort of fair trial.”

My last word echoed throughout the throne room, bouncing off the vaulted ceiling into the walls, and, finally, out the small air windows towards the top of the walls. The sun, setting, shone through the stained glass behind the throne, illuminating the room in a red and orange tint. Malliser regarded Lieutenant Bosleigh carefully for a few moments, allowing silence to settle upon our shoulders. Then, slowly, he turned to look directly upon me.

“Sir Warson,” he said, quietly, “I thank you for your efforts to keep the Garden name virtuous. I will deal with the lieutenant myself. If you have no further testimony to contribute, you are dismissed.” He motioned towards Thorradin, “You as well, captain. Thank you both for your assistance.”

Bowing, I excused myself and followed Thorradin out the doors. “Do you think there was anything strange in the manner King Malliser dealt with the situation?” Thorradin asked when we were out of reach of the servants’ hearing. We stood, unsurprisingly, in front of Thorradin’s cherished fountain. The trickling water stopped for a moment as he finished his question.

I eyed the fountain curiously, rewarded with a new flow, bursting from the lips spread throughout the porcelain. “I do not think so.” I turned to face my captain. “Indeed, it took His Majesty longer to think upon the crime, but he settled upon punishing Lieutenant Bosleigh. Besides,” I added, “King Malliser entrusts me with all of his procedures, and, I assure you, this was not one of them. I wonder what Bosleigh imagined he could get away with?”

“Murder,” Thorradin replied.

“E-excuse me,” a voice from the other side of the fountain squeaked. Hurriedly, the voice took the form of a small servant, anxiously walking around the fountain. “E-e-excuse me, s-s-sir Warson?”

“Yes?”

“I h-h-have a m-message for you, s-s-sir Warson,” the servant said, raising his voice.

“Out with it, man. Who is it from?”

Swallowing, the servant said, “Prince Ellyas.”

Sighing, I shook my head. “Are you going to be okay, sir? What does the prince ask of me?”

“P-prince Ellyas wishes for you to stop by his chambers, s-sir Warson.”

I closed my eyes. Patience of a saint, I said to myself, patience of a saint. “Did he give a frame of time for this visit, and did he also care to mention the reason for this visit? Who put you up to this, sir? My patience grows thinner each time you stutter.”

“W-w-within the h-hour, s-s-s-sir. P-p-prince Ellyas w-w-wants to s-speak with y-y-you about the, the ph-ph-physt-tal-lite.”

“Oh thank goodness, you’re done. Now, if you-”

“O-o-one more thing, s-sir Warson,” the servant cut in, stuttering like a fool. Perspiration beaded upon his forehead, and he loosened his collar before continuing. “P-p-please b-bring C-c-c-c-captain Th-Tho-Tho-Tho-”

“Thorradin,” I growled.

“H-h-him, y-yes. Th-th-thank you.”

I shook my head and dismissed the servant. “I don’t get paid enough to deal with this, Kwasi. Sometimes, I think King Malliser just wants me dead.”

Three

Prince Ellyas laughed gutturally when I entered his chambers. “Did you enjoy the company of Winslow, sir Warson?” Again, he laughed when I grimaced. “Oh, come now, he isn’t *that* bad.”

“If I had a copper for e-e-everytime he s-s-stuttered, I’d be a wealthy man, Prince Ellyas.” I sighed, heavily, taking a seat on the edge of the prince’s desk; Thorradin stood in front of the doorway. “So,” I said, “Our good friend said you wished to speak about the Phystalite. Is this so?”

Ellyas’ laughter ceased, his roguish grin vanishing. In its stead was a stern complexion, creasing his brows and darkening his features. “My father wants to level Daely and build an industrial town upon it. He thinks that, now, with the Phystalite in his hands, he can accomplish things no man has ever dreamed of since the Separation.” The Separation was, of course, when Westhaven was split because of the stones. “He wants to build Myst factories using some sort of old blueprints he discovered in the archives here. He wants to destroy those people’s lives.”

“So, Bosleigh wasn’t lying about some of that.”

“Wait,” Ellyas stopped. “What about Lieutenant Bosleigh? That man is a snake and a devil.”

“Perhaps those are one in the same,” I said. “Captain Thorradin and I, earlier, happened upon Bosleigh in Daely today. He was giving some sort of speech regarding King Malliser’s plans for Daely. A poor elderly woman voiced her concern, and he beheaded her. For treason!”

Ellyas paled. His auburn hair fell in his eyes; he bothered not to push it back, but thought in silence. I continued, “He then told me that your father had given him complete authority to deal with treason – without a trial. I arrested him and brought him to your father, who is dealing with him as we speak.” I glanced at Thorradin. “His Majesty did not appear pleased with Bosleigh.”

“Well, then I can take some comfort in knowing my father was not involved in the murder of innocents. But Lieutenant Bosleigh is swine. If more soldiers the likes of him appear, then we have a serious situation on our hands.” He brushed the hair out of his eyes, tucking it behind his ears. “I don’t understand this surprising burst of ambition from my father, Emory. I know he loves his people; he saved them from darkness and poverty. But destroying entire villages and towns, and there are more than just Daely on his list, for a ‘greater good,’ no matter the benefits, is wrong. How many people will be injured, homeless or die?”  
 Thorradin nodded. “It is an interesting concept.”

“What, the steam factories?” Ellyas asked and Thorradin nodded. “Sure. He wants to build airships. Warships! My father did not just find blueprints for factories, Emory. I was able to look at some of them. There are machines that someone… rides inside of, like a large, metal wagon, powered by steam energy, which is capable of destroying villages with one shot from something called a ‘cannon.’ I think the blueprint was entitled ‘tank.’ I also found these strange handheld weapons: Rifles and pistols, I believe. You hold the rifles with two hands, and you pull this ‘trigger,’ which launches a piece of metal at your implied target. I researched it a little. According to the blueprints, it can pierce our heaviest armor.

“It’s disgusting the power my father could have. This stone… it’s evil. He claims these ideas of his are for the good of Torryn, but Emory, I fear all he wants is power. We could kill the world with these weapons.”

I held up a hand. “Prince Ellyas, if you will allow me to speak. Why haven’t we attempted to build these factories or weapons or airships before if we’ve had the prints? Who’s to say that someone somewhere hasn’t already built these contraptions? It doesn’t seem plausible that no one has the ability to produce these weapons.”

Prince Ellyas nodded. “Indeed. I thought so, as well. It turns out this Phystalite of ours is the only thing capable of producing Myst.”

“Mist? Doesn’t, what, rain cause mist,” I asked.

“M-y-s-t, Emory. Not mist.” Ellyas frowned. “I used to think magic was just a myth, Emory. It always seemed so fanciful, and from before the Separation; who knows what is truth? Most of our records have been lost, anyway. But now, I’ve been smacked right in the face with this stone. It is terrifying.

“Oh,” he continued, closing his eyes. He made his way towards his bed, lying down. “Myst has its cons. Indeed, it will enable my father to make intensely powerful weapons. And by all intents and purposes, we will be safe. But, Emory, the Myst also creates monsters. It corrupts things. It can even turn the most kind human into a monster; Myst poisoning.

“I found documents in the archives from researchers and alchemists, and such. There are different forms of Myst poisoning, if I remember correctly. Hell, I’m sure simply Myst could be used as a weapon; poison your enemies, and they’ll destroy each other.”

“So, we stop your father,” I said, stirring a hopeless grunt from the prince.

“I have tried, Emory. My father threatened to imprison me. It was, at least, a special cell for royalty, but I am his son. With soldiers like Bosleigh climbing the ranks and aides as corrupt as those serving my father now, there may be no hope in keeping Torryn honorable, worthy of existence. If my father is able to complete his plans and see the Myst factories constructed, Torryn as we know it will perish. Beasts and demons, corruption and decadence will fill the streets.

“Emory Warson,” Ellyas said, concerned, bolting upright. “This is the beginning of the end of our world.”

Four

Myst machines were complex. Prince Ellyas had loaned me a few of the blueprints he had taken so I could study them. I also made a trip down to the archives to pull more information on the Phystalite, and those who had wished to use it before the Separation. As I leafed through the pages, intently studying anything in regards to the Phystalite and Myst machines, I became enamored in the endless possibilities these machines offered. However, as Prince Ellyas pointed out, minor research had been done in regards to Myst; the majority of the results were negative. The catch was - and I’m sure this is why King Malliser decided to begin construction on the Myst factory - no one had ever completed construction of a factory. The Phystalite had brought enough havoc upon Westhaven that the rulers, then, decided to bury it. Therefore, not one factory had ever stood; no testimony had been recorded based on the results of producing Myst.

I locked myself within my quarters for a few weeks, reading intently between my king’s guard duties. Throughout those two weeks, I made miniscule contact with King Malliser, or anyone else for that matter. A few days earlier, I had, however, received a brief notice from the king that Lieutenant Bosleigh had been dealt with; I assumed he had been killed, but the orderly delivering the message was not inclined to inform me. Dismissing him, I had re-seated myself at my desk. Its cherry finish isolated it within my quarters; my other furnishings were draped in white.

Myst machines, in theory, were fairly simple devices. They were considered ‘engines.’ The most common Myst engine consisted of cylinders arranged in a single bank line. It pumped, steadily, when ignited, a supply of Myst; one engine could export enough Myst to fill the Garden Palace. The factories that King Malliser intended upon building, each requiring a large amount of engines to function properly, could cover the continent of Westhaven easily. Each factory, in turn, could produce a significant amount of engines monthly. Within a short while, I assumed, the Kingdom of Torryn would have a full arsenal of Myst weapons, with factories sprouting up like crops.

Having a well educated knowledge of the true evil these machines could produce, I was terrified.

King Malliser, as with the keeping of the Phystalite, would hear none of my concerns. Hopelessness began to fill my body. But, I thought, how factual are these reports? If the machines and factories, weapons and ‘vehicles,’ as they were called, were never actually constructed, how far should we believe these reports?

During my musings, a light rapping echoed off my door. “Come in,” I breathed, watching the door creak open in response. I looked up from my research to view the intruder, nodding as they entered. The man’s blond hair fell past his shoulders, curling at the tips to fluff upon his back. His easy smile, always at the ready, denoted a blissfully ignorant air to him. I knew, however, that Lieutenant Evyn Love, of my king’s guard unit, was anything but ignorant; blissful, yes.

“Sir Warson,” he said, a small grin twitching at the corners of his lips, “you’ve been cooped up in here for weeks. With all due respect, sir, I haven’t seen you exit to eat; aren’t you hungry?”

I shook my head. “I’ve been so absorbed in this reading on Myst and the Separation, that I haven’t had much of an appetite. How much do you know about the Separation or Myst for that matter?”

Evyn stepped in and closed the door behind him. He made his way cautiously to a stool next to my bed, and asked, “May I?” When I nodded, he began. “Well, sir Warson, I know about as much as when I was educated. My father had me schooled back home, before I joined the king’s guard, and the scholars often spoke of the Separation lightly.” He laughed, mulling over his thoughts. “It’s no laughing matter, I know; look what it has brought us!

“Anyway, the Separation wasn’t solely an uprising in respect to the Phystalite, like historians would have us believe. You know what they say: Those who record history write it. I think they say that. Nonetheless, documents exist hinting at other reasons why a revolution erupted. It has to do, in fact, with your Myst.”

I glanced quickly at my papers, and then turned back to Evyn. “But, these papers specifically state that the Phystalite was never used; no Myst factory was ever built, never producing a Myst engine.”

“As I said,” Evyn replied coolly, “historians have smudged the records. Considering there isn’t a trace of Myst in existence, excluding the documents someone evidently found important in Garden history (and from what my father has in his vaults; he’s a collector, you remember) why should historians record the singularly most atrocious era - the Pre-Separation era? Of course, those in power were ‘kind’ and ‘gentle’ rulers; aren’t they all? It was, obviously, those damned civilians, busting their asses to make a living. They were,” he said, with a roguish grin, “the culprits. Things were just too perfect for them; they had to shake it up.

“And so, according to historians, when the peaceful rulers of Westhaven ‘discarded’ the Phystalite into the ocean, or whatever they did, those damnable citizens just would not let it go! Their ferocious greed drove them into rebellion! Pitchforks and hoes, shovels and picks were wielded, and they successfully fought Westhaven’s armed military forces. Cavalry were toppled by men riding jackasses, infantrymen were slaughtered by women and children with kitchen utensils. And Westhaven was split by a big ol’ earthquake.”

Evyn Love paused for a moment, licking his lips. His face was alight with humor, sparkling off his aqua eyes; it was almost contagious. What bothered me, however, was his satiric recitation of the Separation. On such a close, cynical examination of history, Evyn was, strangely, correct. But, I thought, won’t we repeat ourselves if we do not even know what we have done?

Love continued. “No, history is not the way it is written, sir Warson. Unfortunately, the power of the Phystalite and those who ruled with it was far beyond corruption. The Love estate, dating before the Separation, found the actions Westhaven’s democratic leaders continuously took ghastly. So, my ancestors and their scribes collected accurate accounts of the time. They stored these documents deep within the Love estate; obviously, if Westhaven discovered the documents, my family would have been slaughtered; I would not exist.

“So, let me tell you what did happen. Before the Separation, magic was used freely. Academies all around Westhaven, hell, all around the world, were established to train those magically gifted. Healers and mages walked freely in the streets of a united Westhaven. As the years rolled, those in power took a special interest in magic users. They sensed profit and power. And what else do those in power want besides more wealth and power?

“Research was begun in earnest by those who wished to exploit magic. Black hearted mages and fallen healers decided to assist these men of power. But not for profit, Emory, no, they wanted to influence these politicians, with malicious intentions. And so, after years of research, these mages and politicians created stones like our Phystalite; well, they did create the Phystalite, but there are others like it. With these stones, brilliant inventors created the Myst machines; engines, factories, and weapons.

“Airships were invented; warships. Guns, as I’m sure you’ve read. These factories were produced, in massed quantities, to produce, in mass quantities, these weapons and vehicles. And they were. The problem was, sir Warson, that the Myst created monsters. Fields of green corrupted into black, decayed. Animals, pets, developed into rabid beasts; demon hounds, for example. In extreme cases, people were poisoned by the Myst, turning into… I don’t know what to call them. They appeared to be hollow forms of themselves, but with incredible speed and powers. One infected man could slaughter an entire town. Luckily, those were extreme cases.”

I held up a hand to stop Lieutenant Love. It was true that his father’s estates held valuable documents and information from many years past. And Evyn’s knowledge regarding the Separation and Myst was, as far as I could tell, flawless. But the idea of how horrendous the Myst actually was terrified me. “I honestly don’t want to believe you, Evyn. I mean, this all seems so farfetched. Magic?”

Evyn sighed. He exhaled heavily, blowing falling hair out of his eyes. “I know you won’t believe this then, but magic still exists. Those like my ancestors, before the Separation, began to suspect Westhaven of evil. They began to plan some sort of retaliation, knowing these black mages had joined in Westhaven’s research. So, they began to work on protective wards, which would, in most part, significantly reduce the ability to use magic. Only those powerful enough to resist the wards could, in fact, use magic; and even then, they were affected. Those too weak simply couldn’t; thus, it was forgotten through the ages. But, the wards weren’t finished nor put into effect until years after these stones were produced. Myst was ravaging Westhaven.

“Small bands of rebels grouped together and fought losing battles. Even with the assistance of healers and mages, there was no possible way to defeat the democracy of Westhaven. And then, finally, the wards were set in place; the mages setting them expended their lives to do so. But, in the end, the power of magic was greatly reduced, the stones failed, and the Myst, eventually, ceased to exist. With the power that the rulers of Westhaven had lost, the rebellion was able to deal defeat after defeat. In the end, Westhaven was split into the continent it is today.

“But don’t think magic ceases to exist, Emory. There are those who can still wield it, were taught how by their ancestors strong enough to resist some of the wards. The fortunate part, for us, is that, as far as I can tell, no mages are employed in the Garden Palace. This means, simply, that King Malliser’s grand plans for the Myst factories will, in fact, fail. The problem with that is, since making the whereabouts of the Phystalite known, King Malliser and the whole of Garden Palace could and probably is being watched very carefully by someone powerful.”

Silence erupted once Evyn finished his lengthy speech. I felt numb at the revelation revealed before me, but simultaneously a wave of relief for King Malliser’s inability to wield such power. Even as that thought finished, a twinge of fear shook my body, for if such a powerful mage still exists and had us targeted, Garden Palace could be destroyed with relative ease.

“Lieutenant Love, we need to speak with King Malliser now. We need to warn him of the threat he faces. Do you have the documents you spoke of just now with you, Lieutenant?”

Evyn shook his head. “No, but when we reach King Malliser, I’ll ask for a messenger to be dispatched. It’ll take a couple of weeks, but if we can convince His Majesty of the threat, we should be fine. And once he’s educated, I’m sure he’ll wish to dispose of the Phystalite.”

Together, we hastily exited my quarters. We filed, singly, down the thin hallway, making our way to the throne room. The attendants smiled politely as they swung open the double doors. Side-by-side, Lieutenant Evyn and I marched before King Malliser. A few feet before the throne, we knelt, bowing our heads before the king. “Rise,” he said, softly, and we did.

“King Malliser,” I said, thoughts racing through my mind. “What we have to tell you is of the utmost importance, and, uh, I think Your Highness best…”

Evyn chuckled. “I believe what sir Warson is struggling to say is, we wish for Your Highness to rid yourself of the Phystalite.” King Malliser glared at me, then Evyn, but the lieutenant continued. “Sir, I have documents at my father’s estate that show the horrifying effects of the Physatlie and the Myst. By following through with the construction of the factories, Your Majesty, the Kingdom of Torryn will be destroyed. I know Your Highness’ intentions are for the good of your people; however, we plead with you to reconsider. There are plenty of other options we have to bring in more wealth and protection for the citizens of Torryn.”

“Documents, you say?” King Malliser eyed his advisors. “Lucius,” he said, to the nearest one, “please send for the documents at the Love estate. Make haste, as well, will you?” The advisor stood, bowed, and left quietly. King Malliser turned to face us again, a subtle smile resting nonchalantly on his lips. He appeared younger than before, when he came to me with word of the stone; his flesh no longer seemed to sag, clutching to his bones, but rather muscles materialized to shape his robes. The income he must be making from the Phystalite, I thought, is probably strengthening that man.

Lieutenant Evyn looked sidelong in my direction, then up at King Malliser. “Your Highness,” he asked, “may I accompany the men to my father’s estate? I understand your king’s guard will be missing a man, but I feel the need to explain to my father the importance of these documents. He keeps them well hidden, you see.”

King Malliser inclined his head towards me. “Your Highness, this sounds like a wonderful idea. I will send for Lieutenant Erhard to return from Tourmaline City. It should only take a number of days for him to return.”

“Alright, then, Lieutenant Love,” King Malliser said. “I will inform Lucius to send the advanced party to inform your father of your arrival; perhaps he will prepare the documents for you. When Lieutenant Erhard arrives, you will be free to leave whenever you feel necessary. I hope you understand my wish for tight security, Lieutenant.”

Evyn bowed. “I understand, Your Highness. If you’ll excuse me…” With a flick of Malliser’s wrist, Evyn spun and exited the throne room.

I peered out the wall window behind the throne. The sun was setting. King Malliser was absorbed in the glare, from my eyes; I, on the other hand, was illuminated for my king to see.

“Emory,” Malliser said, quietly, “I am growing tired. Lucius suggests that I may be becoming ill. This is why… I have been so sharp lately with you and with Ellyas. Please understand, the Phystalite terrifies me. But Lucius and my advisors wish me to keep it on display. So, with the knowledge of how much wealth I can bring in by creating those damned Myst factories, I acquiesced. If what you say is true, Emory, then I shall have to reconsider.

“The prospect of wealth,” he said, convincingly, “is enough to make even the wisest man foolish.”

Five

The days following my discussion with Lieutenant Evyn were filled with anxiety. King Malliser did not cease his plans with the Phystalite, as we had hoped, imagining the bare-boned story Lieutenant Evyn had recited as nothing more than myth. I couldn’t blame the king, for I was skeptical myself. Magic was a thing of fables; it didn’t exist. I grew up without any experience with magic; instructors laughed or scoffed at the idea of such fanciful concepts.

So, Lieutenant Evyn waited anxiously for Lieutenant Erhard to arrive from Tourmaline City. Five days after Lucius sent a small party to the Love Estate, Dean Erhard returned from his post. He arrived at my chambers, grunting at the open door. I looked up and smiled broadly.

Dean “the Destroyer” Erhard was a giant of a man. He spanned two and a half heads taller than me; his shaved head and scar that ran from above his right eyebrow diagonally across his nose to his left cheek at the jawbone could intimidate a bear. Strapped to his back was a gigantic war axe. The double bladed weapon was the size of a normal man, and when on the battlefield the Destroyer wielded it, men fled in terror at its sight.

“I have returned,” he said gruffly.

“Lieutenant Erhard,” I laughed, “it’s good to have you back. Did you discover anything with the time spent in Tourmaline City?”

The Destroyer shook his head, scratching his bear arm. “No, sir. There have been no rumors from across the sea. It seems the Duke of Elenor is idle. The mercenaries have been dead in business, as of late. Apparently our repulsions of his mercenary advances were costly. Name me one man in power who wants to give up his wealth in a futile attempt?”

“No one, it seems,” I replied. “Did you discover why the duke decided to range in Torryn territory? What have we of value that he wanted?”

Dean the Destroyer shrugged. “Land, I’m sure. His island of Elenor is not the largest pieces of property, sir. He’ll have to try elsewhere. By the way, sir Warson,” he said, edging in closer, “I heard rumors about a powerful stone in Tourmaline City. What is this?”

I spent the next few minutes explaining the severity of our situation to the lieutenant. He sniffed. “I see. And King Malliser will not stop? That damned man. Has he no sense?”

“You have a way with words, Erhard. Look,” I said, “we’ve warned King Malliser about the potential threats, and he doesn’t believe us. Not until Lieutenant Love returns with the documents. Hell, I’m not even sure if I believe all of what Lieutenant Love says to be true. What do you know about magic, Erhard?”

“Not much. Though, in Tourmaline City, I saw and heard very strange things, sir.” He took a seat at my stool. It looked silly; he dwarfed the seat. I imagined that he probably had the weight to crush it. Distribute yourself evenly, I thought. “In the Citadel of Tourmaline, it is rumored, there is magic. I have never seen such a thing called magic. But there are strange people there, sir.”

The Citadel of Tourmaline was infamous for a ludicrous death clan. They served the god of death, Senestar. It was common knowledge that a wealthy nobleman or royalty would hire one of these clansmen as an assassin. That magic would be at the core of the citadel surprised me. They were a clan full of crazy, suicidal assassins. I was curious as to how they had existed throughout history. Then again, I thought, what is reality in history anyway?

“When Lieutenant Love returns from his father’s estate, I shall go back to Tourmaline City and investigate. There was something not right about the atmosphere there, sir.”

The thing I most liked about the Destroyer was that he blended in so well in a city filled with mercenaries. And, to add to that effect, no one wished to anger him; not a soul alive would have the courage enough to suspect Erhard of espionage. Besides, to be brutally honest, he appeared to lack the wit to pull anything off correctly. But, I thought, I knew him much better.

“Yes, Dean,” I replied. “When Lieutenant Love returns, I will send you back. However, at this moment, I need you to organize a number of messengers to pull the rest of the king’s guard back. Send note to Captain Thorradin to see me immediately, then dispatch for the rest.”

He saluted, rolling his right hand into a fist, and slamming it against his left breastplate. He spun on his heels gracefully for a man of his size and exited. I listened to his plate boots clatter down the hallway, sounding like a stack of plates banging together. When it finally faded, I sat upon my bed. My head raced with thoughts of the Phystalite and King Mallister’s intentions with the Myst.

The Duke of Elenor’s ranging into the Kingdom of Torryn also concerned me. I was certain it was, like Dean had said, a quest for more land, in a sense. If he had attacked a small enough region that did not belong to King Malliser, I’m sure it would have gone unnoticed. But he struck near Tourmaline City, where he easily hired enough mercenaries to do the job. In response to the attacks, I sent the Destroyer to the city in an effort to uncover the duke’s reasoning. The best idea, so far, was land.

But with Erhard’s mentioning of the rumors of magic inside the Citadel of Tourmaline, I began to ponder deeper into the duke’s ranging. Were his attacks on our land simply a distraction whilst he investigated the citadel? Or was he hiring an assassin from the citadel to murder King Malliser in order to filch the Phystalite from his safe keeping? I was sure he had heard rumors of the Phystalite in Tourmaline City, perhaps while he was in the process of putting together a company of mercs.

Still, I couldn’t quite puzzle out why the duke had chosen his course of actions. I stuck with the Destroyer’s initial statement, though I kept it in the recess of my thoughts. I leaned back upon my bed, watching the light on my candles flicker cozily. The orange hue of the flames danced upon my walls as I closed my eyes.

Sleep took me then. I dreamt of the murder in Daely, shortly after Bosleigh had beheaded that poor woman. In my dream, I had unsheathed my sword. I took the lieutenant by surprise and slid my blade across his neck. A thin line appeared where my sword had been, and his eyes were wide in horror. Then, suddenly, a fountain of crimson cascaded from the wound. As he fell, the woman’s head began coughing. I turned to face it.

Her eyes were rolled into the back of her skull, revealing bloodshot white corneas. Bloody teardrops rolled from them as she coughed. “Fire!” She shouted, her fresh blood squirting from the severed stump of her head. “They have lit my house on fire!” She screamed again. I rushed to her lifeless body and watched her head, settled upon a bed of dirt and dust.

“Woman, no house here is on fire. You… You have been killed by this traitor of a man. I am truly sorry I was unable to stop him.”

Again, the woman shouted, “Fire! They have burned my house to the ground, Emory!”

I blinked in horror. “How do you know my name?”

“Emory!” She cried again.

This time, a low, quiet voice shook me. “Emory?”

\*

I awoke slowly, rubbing at my forehead. A head ache ruled my body, then, sending arches of pain down my arms. Kwasi Thorradin stood above me, shaking my body as I thrashed in my sleep. “Emory?” he said again, this time standing back as I opened my eyes. “You were talking in your sleep. Are you alright?”

“I have a monstrous head ache, Kwasi,” I said, rubbing at my temples. I had heard somewhere that it helped to rub your temples. Probably from Evyn, I thought. “It was the scene at Daely, but I killed Lieutenant Bosleigh. But, then, once he died, the woman’s head began screaming at me.”

“What did she say?”

“I don’t know. It didn’t make sense. She said, ‘They have burned my house to the ground, Emory.’ I don’t know what she meant. Nothing was burning in my dream, Thorradin. What do you think?”

He shrugged and helped me out of bed. “Erhard sent for the others. I expect them to arrive within a week. I informed him of our misadventure in Daely. It appears he recognized Lieutenant Bosleigh from his trip in Tourmaline City. I imagined you’d want to ask him about that. He’ll be waiting in the dining hall in a couple hours. He said you wanted to see me.”

I nodded and waved to the door. “Let us walk,” I said. We vacated my quarters and squeezed our way down the king’s guard hall. Soon enough, I thought, these halls will be aflutter with the rest of my men. Lieutenant Kingsley Redworth, Lieutenant Cyrus Reynold, and Lieutenant Thayer Leilani; all recalled back to Garden Palace in a dire time, indeed. I wondered, at that, how long it would take for Benjamin Reed, Cleon Kennedy and Wright Locke to return from their missions. I chose not to send for them, particularly, because their task at hand was vital to Torryn’s health. There was time.

As our footsteps bounced across the giant walls of the palace, Thorradin and I once again passed the porcelain fountain. The fall of the water, sprouting from the lips that were brought together in semi-arching columns, splashed now fervently in the bowl below. I imagined rain cascading upon puddles, closing my eyes, smiling. Perhaps perpetuity was not so bad after all, I had thought. If history repeats itself, I thought, then why haven’t we gone extinct? Because, I countered, like this fountain, we spout peacefulness between bouts of tyranny.

Maybe, then, those times of peace were what kept us going. As a soldier, one forgets the idea of peace, even though it is one’s purpose to protect and keep the peace. I could hardly find the amusement in such a thought; it really was a bitter job.

I opened my eyes again, peering into the bubbling of the fountain, finding my smile strangled into a scowl. Thorradin cleared his throat from next to me. “I believe you wanted to walk.”

“Right,” I said. We pushed through the brass doors, stepping out into the beautiful garden. I inhaled the intoxicating scent of my surroundings. The crisp air flirted with my hair, brushing it into my eyes, blanketing my vision for a moment. Pushing it aside slowly, relishing in the wind, I grinned. “Now this is what I live for, Thorradin. These trees, this garden; this world, my friend. I wish King Malliser would understand what the ramifications of his actions are…”

Thorradin shrugged. “There is no point in worrying, Sir. We are completely unable to muster any sort of argument against a man who is deaf in one ear and is filled with poison in the other.”

“You’ve got that right.” As we strolled down the garden, twigs snapping beneath our feet, crackling throughout the wooded area surrounding the garden, green leaves bowing over our heads, I cursed. The small, dusty town of Daely could be made out in the not-so-far distance, looming closer with every step we took. At the bottom of the garden, the green of our surroundings abruptly ceased, giving way to a sandy dune. There was no gradual fading of color, it simply was no more.

Turning, I took in full view of the Garden palace. The stained glass exquisiteness of the façade was stunning. I drew in my breath as the sun reflected off the purples and reds on either side of the huge brass entranceway. It was a grand display, sparkling in the light and lingering in the air above the trees. I knew, from the inside, it was even more magnificent. If you timed your arrival perfectly in the foyer, when the sun hit the stained glass perfectly, the hall would dance with colors. The room would be illuminated in ever changing fluorescents, designed to simulate the beauty of a garden. In my personal opinion, the stained glass was in a category of its own.

Digression, it seems, I have a natural talent for.

Reluctantly looking away from the marvel, I turned towards Daely. “Perhaps I’ll send the Destroyer to check in on the poor townsfolk, to make sure no one is harassing them, again. No one wants to start a fight with Dean, I’m sure.”

“That’s possible. But if they’re there under orders from King Malliser, then maybe they could do some damage to him. And I don’t mean physically; politically.” Thorradin shook his head sheepishly; he had been speaking quite a bit since the return of Erhard. Once the rest of the Freshwater Guard returned, I thought, maybe he wouldn’t be able to be contained. “Then I’ll send Captain Bryce Dempsey along to keep watch and collect the facts.” Captain Bryce Dempsey was of the Freshwater City Guard, the troops that patrolled throughout the Kingdom of Torryn; he was second in command only to Lord Preston Paige, the Lord of the guards.

“We’d best return, sir,” Thorradin spoke up. “Night falls soon, and we are to meet with Lieutenant Erhard within the hour.” He watched the fading sun. “I will inform Captain Dempsey of your request. I’ll return to the dining hall when I finish.”

Six

I sat alone at a table in the dining hall, secluded in a corner towards the rear of the area. The dining hall for the king’s guard and soldiers was mediocre, at best. Ebony glazed rubber wood tables decorated the hall, a total of thirty, running in two rows parallel of each other. They weren’t so much tables as benches, but they served their purposes. At maximum capacity, the benches could hold, perhaps, twenty people, ten on each end.

Patiently I awaited Captain Thorradin and Captain Dempsey. In short order the two men arrived. Captain Dempsey bowed once before seating himself, auburn hair tumbling into his eyes. He smiled after taking his seat, a lingering look of worry in his eyes. “Is everything all right, Colonel Warson?” I examined the captain carefully; he was, after all, employed by King Malliser, and I was unsure as to how far I could trust him. As far as I could throw him, I thought, until proven otherwise.

“I’ll be quite direct,” I said, leveling my eyes to meet Dempsey’s. “How much has King Malliser spoken with you in regards to the Phystalite, and the course of action he plans to take with it?”

Dempsey’s brows furled together, a wave of confusion seemingly washing over his face. “As I’m sure you’re aware, Colonel Warson, what comes to me through Lord Paige is filtered. As far as I know, sir Warson, King Malliser simply wishes to keep the stone on display for profit.”

“While this is true,” I said, slowly, “it is not the full extent of His Majesty’s arrangements.” Dempsey arched a brow, wrinkling his forehead.

“I do not understand, sir Warson?”

I looked to Thorradin, who shrugged. “Captain Dempsey, King Malliser wishes to construct Myst factories in order to bring prosperity to Torryn.” Nothing sparked behind the captain’s eyes. I shrugged. “In other words, King Malliser wishes to raise cities like Daely in order to build these factories. Not to mention the intense danger Myst factories present.

“We’ve spoken to King Malliser and raised concerns in regards to all of this, but he seems intent on pursuing his own ends. I’ve sent Lieutenant Love back to his home estate in order to retrieve some dated documents with evidence proving the detrimental nature of the Myst factories.”

*That* sparked recognition behind Captain Dempsey’s eyes. “Yes, I know of Love’s expedition. Lord Paige sent a squad of soldiers to pre-empt Love on his journey. I’m not sure why His Highness would waste members of the watch so carelessly. Lieutenant Love can hold his own, and one man would easily make quicker time than a squad. I wouldn’t be surprised if Love reached the estate before Lord Paige’s troops.” He glanced between Thorradin and myself.

“Did Lord Paige happen to hint at the reasoning behind sending the excess troops?”

Dempsey shook his head, lifting one shoulder in a shrug. “He said something regarding protection for the king. I figured he wanted safe escort of the documents Love was returning with.”

I nodded. “Makes sense, I suppose. Anyway, I called you here for your assistance. I’m not sure if you were informed, but a Lieutenant Bosleigh happened to murder a woman in Daely, for not wanting her land destroyed. I plan on sending the Destroyer down to Daely in order to keep the peace and check on the townsfolk.”

Recoiling, Dempsey nodded. “No one wants to bruise with the beast.”

“Right,” I replied. “But, as Captain Thorradin pointed out to me earlier, Dean might not be exposed to physical scraps. If he gets into political trouble, then there’s no helping him.”

Dempsey nodded. “Absolutely. And not even the Destroyer’s intimidating strength will save him from that. So, why did you bother to call me here and tell me this, sir Warson?”

“Because,” I said, licking my lips, “I need you to assist Lieutenant Erhard with his inspection. You need to watch his back, though, with your presence, I’m not sure any of the soldiers in Daely would dare raise a finger against Dean.”

“I see,” Dempsey said. He looked down, examining his hands, which he had folded upon the bench. “Should I inform Lord Paige of this?”

“Captain Dempsey,” I said quietly, afraid of anyone overhearing my conversation. What I was asking could, if misinterpreted, be considered treason; even if it was heard correctly. “I need you to not inform Lord Preston Paige. If things start to go awry, return with the Destroyer; if Lord Paige discovers your presence in Daely, I will explain the situation. I’m unsure if I can trust Lord Paige, if you can understand.”

Nodding slowly, Dempsey acquiesced. “Here is Lieutenant Erhard now,” he said, lifting his hand to beckon the king’s guard.

Trudging his way over, the Destroyer rested outstretched arms on the tabletop, looming heavily over myself and the good Captain Dempsey. His shadow covered the width of the bench. “I apologize for my tardiness. I was gearing up a stead to take to Daely.”

I motioned towards Captain Dempsey. “Lieutenant, Captain Dempsey will be accompanying you on your liaison to Daely, to make sure you don’t fall prey to any of His Highness’ advisors’ schemes. When you’ve gathered enough information, send it back along with Captain Dempsey. From Daely, continue on to Tourmaline City and find out what you can about the Citadel of Tourmaline. And,” I continued, “look for Lieutenant Bosleigh. I need to know if he is alive or not, and why if he remains breathing.”

Lieutenant Erhard grunted his acknowledgement. “I will go ready a second horse for the captain.” He saluted with his fist banging, then spun and exited the dining hall. I turned to chance a glance at Thorradin, who shrugged in response.

“You heard the lieutenant, Captain,” I said through a tight smile. “I’m sorry to put you through this, but it’ll only be for a day or so. Please keep my soldier safe, for the integrity of the Garden Palace and Torryn as well.”

Rising carefully, Captain Dempsey emulated the Destroyer’s salute. He kept his fist balled, however, when he spoke through clenched teeth. “If Lord Paige and King Malliser are plotting something as sinister as what you suspect, I wouldn’t be so sure if the Kingdom of Torryn *had* any integrity left. I will do as you command me, General Warson.”

As his footsteps faded, I looked again towards Thorradin. “Kwasi,” I said, “since when did it become so damn difficult to keep my faith in my people? If it weren’t for men like Captain Dempsey, I’m not sure I *could* continue in service for something that stinks so much of corruption.”

Thorradin shrugged. “Perhaps. We still aren’t certain of King Malliser’s true intentions, are we?”

I lifted my right shoulder in a shrug. “I guess not. Still, something just simply isn’t right. Love is still a ways out, and Lieutenant Erhard’s report will only supply us with a timeframe of His Highness’ intentions.” I slid my legs out from underneath the table and stood, stretching my arms above my head. My mouth opened in a tired yawn, and I motioned towards the exit. “So, we’re stuck at sea during a ferocious squall, then? I always said I loved the rain, but when you’re surrounded by water, the downpour seems a bit much.”

Hesitating, Thorradin asked, “I beg your pardon?”

“Let me rephrase that,” I said, halting before the exit of the mess hall. I felt my cloak fall against my back, brush against my neck. “This is the calm before the storm, and we haven’t sheltered ourselves.”

He was quiet.

I grunted. “The noose is wrapped around our necks, and we’re waiting for the jury?”

Thorradin drew in a deep breath a few steps behind me.

“We are, potentially, in a very dire and serious situation.” I exited the hall without bothering to check for understanding.

Seven

I spent the evening and the early portion of the next morning thumbing through maps I had attained from Prince Ellyas. He had highlighted small towns the likes of Daely in which he believed his father might consider destroying to construct Myst factories. At least thirty locations on the maps had been marked, and a few had been circled; they were the ones with which King Malliser had already begun his work. Daely, Trinton, and Llyette were the unfortunate choices. What concerned me most about his particular choices was that they all were immediately surrounding the Garden Palace; Trinton lie west of the Garden Palace, southwest of Daely, while Fyette lie to the southwest of the Garden Palace, south of the Fai’Lyette cross, south of Daely. If the reports (and Love’s documents) were anywhere near accurate, the Garden Palace, upon construction of the Myst factories (assuming King Malliser was able to produce Myst), would be invaded by Myst.

It baffled me significantly that King Malliser would not simply put his people in direct danger, but put himself in the heart of darkness. I wondered if his ambition and greed had finally driven him mad, swallowed him whole.

Then I considered what Malliser had entrusted to me. The information Lucius had provided the king in regards to his health could explain why he would subject himself to the dangers of the Myst eagerly. If he truly wished to benefit his kingdom, albeit in a maddened sort of fashion, I could almost understand his choice of actions; sacrifice himself for the good of his people.

Lucius, I thought. I asked myself how much I knew of King Malliser’s advisor and was surprised to find out that I, in fact, knew quite little. I tried to grasp at the length in which he served King Malliser and could not. It seemed as if he had been there for as long as I remembered, which was plausible. When my father had given up his attempts to persuade me out of serving King Malliser, I was only twenty.

My father had always preached pacifism. He swore that every person living deserved an equal opportunity in life. As a result, he wanted to believe that everyone else living was just like himself. I did not join the king’s guard to kill. I joined to protect. For my home, my father, my king, my friends. For myself, I joined. And so I donned the white cloak of the Freshwater Guard.

But Lucius’ whereabouts were vague in my memory. I could have sworn he was at the knighting ritual, but couldn’t place him in my memories. And again, when I was promoted to the rank of general, commander of the Freshwater Guard, I was sure Lucius had been near King Malliser. But again, I failed to picture him in the scene. How had I forgotten his existence?

It didn’t matter to me, then. What mattered were King Malliser’s plans to build these Myst factories, and the potential poison Lucius whispered in his ears. I continued to gaze at the maps before me.

Lieutenant Erhard and Captain Dempsey had departed earlier in the morning, leaving me anxious for reports I knew would not come for at least a day. I had seen them off, watching the two follow a trail to the rear of the palace. Peasants from not-so-local villages and towns had begun to form lines outside the palace in order to take view of the Phystalite. It appeared, at least, that King Malliser was, indeed, going to raise profits from the stone.

As the forms of the two disappeared, I walked slowly along the pathway leading to the front of the palace; it was a narrow path, laid with old, square stones and nearly forgotten. When I made my way through the brush, I squinted at the line of bodies waiting purposefully outside the main gates. The brilliance of King Malliser’s business plan was evident in the vast array of civilians packed upon the path between the gardens. Every peasant could afford to view the stone; King Malliser wished it that way. What he did not make from a few wealthy noblemen, he made from the mass of peasants and farmers.

Many of Lord Preston Paige’s watchmen stood before and around the crowd, barricading access to the garden and keeping in check unruly men and women. I walked up the small pathway until I stood behind one of the watchmen and looked over his shoulder. I noticed whole families waiting eagerly in line, eyes wide in anticipation and mouths wet with interest. Toddlers bounced upon their fathers’ shoulders, infants were cradled in their mothers’ arms. Adolescents and young adults pushed each other playfully, careful not to overstep the boundary of the watchmen. I grunted in amusement, but worry creased my brow.

I startled the watchmen I stood behind. He spun hastily, hand clutching the hilt of his sword, and began to shout a warning. The crowd behind him hushed at the sound of his raised voice. He stuttered. “Sir Warson! What in the name of the gods are you doing there?”

Shrugging, I smiled. “Why, standing, it seems. And, may I ask, what are *you* doing *there*?”

He glanced around uneasily. By now, the rest of the watchmen had their eyes upon us, bemused grins upon their faces; the mass of Torrynites still watched in fear. “Protecting the people and the garden, sir. Y-you startled me when you came up from behind.”

“So, you weren’t paying very close attention, now were you, my good soldier?”

“Sir, with all due respect, sir, I thought there was no possible way to enter the garden unless you passed me.”

Shaking my head, I said, “It appears you were wrong.”

“It appears so, sir.”

I laughed. “Relax, soldier. I’m not going to court-martial you or anything so grand. Just remain alert. Carry on.”

He saluted me sharply as I pushed my way through the crowd to the main entrance. I recognized Winslow standing as a doorman, anxiously awaiting the signal from the inside to allow the next group of observers through. I grimly approached the stuttering fool.

“S-s-sir W-Warson! W-w-w-what are y-you doing-g h-here?” His eyes grew wider, pupils dilating in the brightness of the sun.

I patted him not-so-gently upon the shoulders. “Going inside, Winslow. Now let me through.”

“S-sorry, s-s-sir W-Warson. I h-have been i-instructed t-t-t-to bar p-passage to a-anyone, sir.”

Grinding my teeth, I grabbed the door and swung it open. Inside the large foyer I could hardly hear the pattering of the perpetual fountain. All around me in an organized fashion were bodies and bodies of interested observers. I had grossly underestimated the potential this stone possessed.

Without further incident, I managed my way back to my quarters. In the serenity of my own chambers, I pulled out my maps and examined the villages King Malliser had slated for destruction. I wondered just how many of those eager to view the Phystalite lived in one of the thirty doomed locations. And, consecutively, I pondered how many of those understood just what sort of horrific end this stone held for them. They were to lose what they loved, regardless of whether Lieutenant Love’s documents were accurate or not; if King Malliser were to build the Myst factories, these people would lose everything dear to them.

How many would fight for their homes?

I continued to lament over these people when Captain Thorradin rapped his knuckles upon my door. I glanced up, examining the noise. Memories of King Malliser introducing me to the Phystalite flooded my head. “Come in,” I called.

Thorradin opened the door with Captain Dempsey in close pursuit. He laid down a sheet of parchment he had apparently stolen from somewhere in Daely. His hair was pasted to his brow in sweat. “General Warson, you were correct, sir. King Malliser has already begun to decimate the village of Daely. I took a copy of the blueprints for the new ‘city’ they plan to construct there.” He motioned towards the parchment. “The pub known as Madison’s has already been burned to the ground; it seems King Malliser sent soldiers to procure the pub, and from what I saw, no one was injured.”

“Well, there’s some sort of relief,” I muttered, glancing at the parchment. It showed the small, one room homes and the pub all erased from the intersection of Daely and Reggen Road. In their place stood one large Myst factory, dominating what once was the village of Daely. In fact, where the intersection once was, the factory now sat. Scrawled upon the parchment was a new, circular pavement encircling the factory. “What did you do with Erhard?”

“He went on to Tourmaline City,” he said. “With King Malliser already beginning construction of the Myst factory, we felt that he should spirit himself away to Tourmaline City with haste. If Lieutenant Bosleigh, as I was told, in fact, is there -and if he is in search of the Phystalite - that would imply King Malliser has something sinister in mind.” He chewed his lower lip for a moment, considering what he was to say next. “I fear if this is case, sir Warson, then Lord Preston Paige has been withholding information from me; it would seem King Malliser has done the same to you.”

I nodded. “Perhaps Lucius has advised His Majesty to do so.” I blinked. “Captain Dempsey, could you check into something for me?”

“Yes sir. What is it?”

“First,” I said, “I want you to look into exactly when Lucius began advising King Malliser. It’s strange. I feel like he’s been here as far back as I can remember, but I can’t actually remember his presence anywhere.”

Dempsey nodded, and Thorradin said, “Now that you mention it, I feel the same way.”

“Right,” I continued, looking from Thorradin to Dempsey. “Secondly, see if you can locate King Malliser’s plans for Trinton and Lyette next, please. I’d like to know when they’ll be going down to judge how much time I have until I must stall him. Lieutenant Love must be returning within the month. Lastly,” I breathed, examining the maps once more, “Poke around Lord Paige and see if you can uncover anything in regards to Lieutenant Bosleigh.”

“Yes sir,” Dempsey repeated. He offered a quick salute and exited my quarters. I watched him exit, and then turned to face Thorradin. His short cropped, black hair seemed in disarray, in sync with the uncertainty ruling his hazel eyes. I shrugged helplessly.

“Things seem to be spinning out of control, Kwasi. I certainly hope Lieutenant Love returns soon with good news. I’m not sure how much more of this destruction and corruption I can handle.”

Eight

The following couple of weeks were tense with paranoia and uncertainty. Captain Dempsey provided me with the knowledge that the village of Daely had been completely raised and, under Lucius’ supervision, a Garden taskforce began constructing the Myst factory. He projected it would be finished within a time frame of three months. The prolonged length in which it would take to construct the factories gave me some, if little, comfort.

With Lucius’ influence lacking in the Garden Palace, King Malliser seemed to become more edgy. Intense verbal battles between Prince Ellyas and his father would rage on for hours, usually ending with Prince Ellyas threatened to quarantine. It was never enforced.

King Malliser’s behavior without Lucius befuddled me. I had imagined that if Lucius was poisoning the king’s integrity, that his absence would provide some sort of temporary antidote. The simple fact that my liege progressively became more and more paranoid with, well, everything, and more vicious towards his own children had me rightly confused. Perhaps my judgment had been incorrect in accusing Lucius of whispering venom in the ear of the king.

However, my suspicions towards Lucius were still stewing. Captain Dempsey persisted on discovering any information he could possibly find on the advisor. Yet all he could muster through those two weeks were recent files and documents he had signed off on. No information concerning Lucius could be found in any other regard. I grew more and more confused with each passing moment.

On the second day of the third week Lieutenant Erhard returned, slick with sweat and breathing heavily from exertion. “General Warson,” he sucked in breath heavily as he rushed in to my quarters. “Lieutenant Bosleigh is alive and well. Unfortunately. I found him frequenting the Citadel of Tourmaline often, sir. I stayed long enough to make certain it was him. It was.”

I grimaced. So King Malliser intended on filching the Phystalite from Tourmaline City, as well. Erhard continued, “Sir, I suggest we ride to Tourmaline City.” He seated himself upon my spare stool and watched me.

“Lieutenant Erhard,” I mumbled, “I cannot leave here until Lieutenant Love has returned.” Erhard guffawed. “I know you don’t approve, but I’m the one in charge. Lieutenant Love has guaranteed documents depicting the evil that are these Myst factories. It is absolutely vital that I am here to welcome him in order to present the documents to King Malliser as soon as humanly possible. Can you understand the situation?”

Erhard nodded. “Sir. But what will you do when Bosleigh brings back a second Phystalite? What happens when Malliser has the power of two?”

“Dammit,” I spat, “I hadn’t thought of that. Let me… Give me time to think, and I’ll send for you when I’ve reached a decision.”

“Sir.”

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The next morning I was awoken to the batter of a mailed fist upon my chambers door. I stood in my breeches and tunic and padded towards the door, and creaked it open. The light illuminated the man’s face, bathing him in a pale light that dramatized his gaunt cheeks. I glanced at his breastplate, which reflected a sergeant’s insignia of Lord Pagie’s watchmen. “General Warson?” he whispered.

“Sir? What hour is it?” I muttered, groggily.

“Sir, I have news from Lieutenant Love. Would you like me to come back later?”

At the mention of any news from Love, I immediately shook myself out of my haze. “Spit it out, soldier. Let’s hear it.”

He bowed his head. “I came from the… advance squad, sir. Lieutenant Love’s parents have… passed away, sir. He will not be able to return for quite some time.” He stared towards the tiled floor at our feet.

Silence bounded across the walls of my room. It resonated in my head, and shook my insides. I felt my vision sway, rocked violently from the silent assault. “How did they die?”

“Murdered, sir.”

“By whom?”

“Lieutenant Love is… looking into that, sir. We are not certain when he will return.”

“Gods damn it. Gods damn it! Did you bring back the documents, soldier? The ones you were sent to retrieve?”

The soldier, fear in his eyes, shook his head. “N-no sir. Lieutenant Love’s parents… were dead when we arrived. They have their vault sealed so only they could open it. None of us are able to do so.”

“Gods damn it. Did Lieutenant Love open it for you, soldier?”

“No, sir. He was… wrought with grief.”

I cussed again, colorfully straining my vocabulary. “Notify Lieutenant Erhard to meet here at once. I must speak with him. And send word to Lieutenant Love to take care, if you will. Have Captain Dempsey send a messenger, chosen himself.” I curled my fist into a tight ball, digging my nails into the flesh of my palm.

“Yes, sir,” the soldier said, saluting. He swung his body around to the right and clattered down the hall. I watched him fade into the shadows of the guards’ dormitory, and then stepped back in to my room. I slammed shut my door, and screamed a curse. “Whoever the hell is responsible for this… I swear I will carve a smile in their throat, from ear to ear.”

Heart pounding, I lifted a tunic over my head and slid into it. I knew I’d need traveling clothes for the next few days while I fuddled through my belongings. Finding a cloak, I threw it around my shoulders and tied the clasp shut at my neck. How would I explain this to King Malliser?

Erhard opened my door without warning and closed it quickly. His face was a mix of concern and anger, turned to relief etched with concern. “Will we leave for Tourmaline City, then?”

“Evyn’s parents were murdered. He won’t be returning any time soon with those documents, Dean. So in order to prevent all of this shit from collapsing on us at once, we must make haste to Tourmaline City and prevent Bosleigh from stealing that damned stone.” I picked up my sword belt and buckled it to my waist. I walked to the wall beside my desk and clutched my long sword, carefully. I tied the scabbard to my belt, sliding home my weapon with the ease of a professional.

The relief that had been spread across the Destroyer’s face was erased, leaving in its stead pure fury. “I will murder whoever is responsible! Who?” He balled his hands into fists, and pounded once at my wall. Dust and old paint exploded on impact, scattering across the floor of my quarters.

“We’re not sure, Dean,” I said, pulling on a pair of boiled leather gloves. I sat on the edge of my bed and began to tug on a pair of boiled leather boots; they would make riding in haste much easier than my plated mail. “I was told Evyn was looking into the whole mess. To make matters worse, the returning squad of soldiers weren’t even carrying those documents.”

Erhard snorted. “They couldn’t protect the Love estate. They couldn’t secure the documents. They can’t protect Torryn.” He fidgeted with the harness housing his giant axe as I took one last glance around my surroundings. “Will it just be the two of us, General?”

“Have any of the other guardsmen returned, Dean?”

Before the lieutenant could respond, a polite knock, barely audible, resounded off my door. “Come in,” I said, watching the handle turn as whomever gripped it pushed forward. When the door, hissing in protest, finally creaked open, the face of Lieutenant Thayer Leilani pushed itself in.

“Well, Emory Warson,” he muttered, amusement in his eyes, “why the hell are there so many people in the foyer?” He shook his head and extended a hand to me. “And that son-of-a-bitch doorman – Winston, was it? No, Winslow– hassled with me for about an hour!” I took his hand in my own and squeezed firmly, pumping twice before releasing. “Now, what the hell are all the long faces for?”

Erhard took the opportunity to explain. “Trouble.”

“Trouble, you say?” Leilani grinned. “We leave you for a matter of months, and you let shit get out of hand? And you, Emory Warson – the general of the Freshwater Guard – you, let shit get out of hand?” He shook his head in amusement. “What the hell did you fellows do?”

Opening his mouth to begin another explanation, Dean stopped when I held up my hand. “Allow me,” I said, then, to Thayer: “King Malliser has produced a stone called a Phystalite. According to him and… legends, with the use of those capable of wielding magic, he can construct Myst factories. With those, he can build mounds of weapons that no one can defend against.”

Thayer nodded, expecting more. “And where does the bad shit come in?”

“The bad ‘shit,’” I said, “comes in here. These factories produce excess Myst that will spread like a contagion and corrupt and infect almost everything it touches. Worst case, everyone and everything dies. Best case, almost everything dies.”

Color faded from the guardsman’s face. His smile curled into a snarl. “Has that son-of-a-bitch really lost his mind?”

“Apparently,” Dean replied.

“Damn it. And, Emory, why the hell haven’t we stopped him yet?”

“We,” I answered, “have been busy hunting down evidence that not even King Malliser can deny. Love went to his father’s estate to retrieve some documents fully detailing the evil these things create, but someone killed his family. And now we don’t have the documents or Love. Secondly, I’m pretty certain that King Malliser is attempting to steal a second Phystalite – the stone – from the City of Tourmaline.”

“Shit.”

“Shit is right, Lieutenant Leilani. And you get to be lucky guest number three. I hope you didn’t unpack your bags because we’re leaving here shortly.”

Grumbling, Thayer said, “Not really. Kingsley might be all settled in.”

“Lieutenant Redworth is back, also?”

“Yeah. He got here shortly after I returned.” He scratched at his brow, shaking his head. “Apparently I broke the doorman into allowing the Freshwater Guard through.” He smirked, and I had to smile. “Well, don’t leave without me. How much time do we have before departure?”

I glanced at Erhard. “A few hours. I need to speak with Prince Ellyas about our exodus, so take care of whatever you feel necessary. Ask Lieutenant Redworth to meet me outside Prince Ellyas’ chambers in an hour.”

Thayer nodded. “I’m going to get myself a nice, warm bath. Sir, it was good seeing you again. I’m sure we’ll have plenty of time to catch up on our vacation to Tourmaline City.”

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Prince Ellyas appeared exhausted. His usually lively eyes were sunken into pale sockets. Perspiration soaked his face, stuffing his quarters with a rank scent of mold. I coughed as I entered, attempting to breathe only through my mouth; it partially worked. “Prince Ellyas, I have a plan.”

Slowly, Ellyas raised his eyes from what he was studying. “Emory?”

“Yes, Prince Ellyas? Is all well?”

“No,” he whispered, “no. I do not quite think that… all is well. Can all be well in a man-made hell? Can anyone dance in the flames we’ve made, the flames we’ve stoked, the flames we raised?”

“Prince Ellyas?”

“No, you can’t dance in the flames we’ve made, for then you will burn alive. And as you fall, as dust you’ll fall, to settle across the coals of hell, you realize that once you land, there’s no place to dance in the flames of hell; no, not all is well.”

I stepped closer and put a hand upon Ellyas’ shoulder. He shuddered, and his head snapped to the left. His eyes – which I then noticed had been completely glazed rolled back into focus. “Sir Warson? What… what the hell just happened?” He wrinkled his nose at the smell. “Oh my gods, is that… me?”

Nodding apologetically, I said, “Yes, Your Highness. I came in here to ask for your assistance.”

“I must bathe. I am sorry to make you suffer through this.”

“It is no trouble. I must be leaving very soon, Prince Ellyas, so it’s very important that we discuss what I have in mind.” He motioned for me to continue. “Lieutenant Erhard, Lieutenant Leilani, Captain Thorradin, and I must make haste towards Tourmaline City. Lieutenant Bosleigh has been sighted hunting for a rumored Phystalite in the Citadel of Tourmaline. Lieutenant Love’s parents have been murdered, so we’re trying to cut our losses and stop Bos-”

Prince Ellyas interrupted me. “What happened to Love?”

I sighed. “I was informed that his parents were murdered and that he is looking in to the matter. Anyway, I need you to think of something to explain to your father about why the four of us need to make our way out of the Garden Palace.”

“What would I say to convince him?”

“Oh,” I said, blinking, “the Duke of Elenor!” Prince Ellyas squinted, mulling over his thoughts. “Report to your father that the Duke of Elenor has been ranging in Torryn again, and the four of us are travelling to find out just what the hell is going on.” Ellyas nodded.

“As for you,” I continued, “I would suggest a scalding hot bath from one of the pretty serving girls before you speak with His Majesty.”

Ellyas smiled weakly. “Oh, which one?”

“Meghan?”

“Too freckly. Phaylene?”

“Too exotic. Carulyn?”

“Too fat! Rosalyn?”

“How many ‘lyns’ are there? Elena?”

“That’s my sister, not a serving girl, Emory! I should have you whipped for that, you jester.” He licked his lips, deep in thought. “What about Rosary, she’s very attractive?”

“Oh, I don’t know,” I replied, “she’s sort of promiscuous. I wonder how many of Captain Dempsey’s guardsmen have had a turn with her. She’s like a bed; every night you use it for your own good; sometimes you use it during the day for a quickie.” I laughed. “Errin?”

Prince Ellyas considered for a moment. “Errin is a sweetheart *and* attractive. But I am feeling somewhat ill…”

“Garden Palace has some of the most capable medical physicians in Westhaven. If you’re contagious and Errin gets whatever you have, call upon the physician. Right, Your Highness?”

“I suppose you’re right. I just hope I don’t infect her with anything, and she’s like Rosary – the whole palace would be infected within days!”

I laughed. “No doubt, Prince Ellyas. So, will you relay the false message to your Lord Father?”

Prince Ellyas nodded. “After a bath and ‘massage’ from Errin, I will do as we’ve discussed.” He was silent for a moment and smiled. “Thank you for waking me from my reverie. I really don’t know what has gotten into me, Emory. But, please, find a way to solve this soon.”

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When Ellyas’ chambers door clicked closed behind me, I turned to stare into the face of Lieutenant Kingsley Redworth. “’Ello, General!” He said, raising a crooked salute. The man was an unusual character. His flame-red hair and matching freckles created a unique visage; his hazel eyes and flat nose did nothing to dispel that image. Being Welkees (from the nation of Wellkain that lies due west of Torryn), he spoke with an accent that seemed to leave out important consonants.

“Appen to run inta Laylay, di’ ya’?”

I placed my arm around Kingsley’s neck and began to walk down the enormous corridor. Across from Ellyas’ quarters hung a large, rectangular portrait of a feast. There were thirteen seats at the table; nine filled with white robes, one a golden coat of arms, one a silver crown with black tinting, and one with a black dress coat draped around it. The thirteenth chair, in the direct middle of the rest (six on each end) was empty, pushed back from the table. On the empty seat a few words, in a tongue long dead, were written: “*Lasviour osufal; Feamnstoer tebord.”* Or, in the common tongue, “Savior of us all; Monster to be feared.”

“General? Wha’re ‘ou lookin’ a’?”

Chuckling, I looked back at Kingsley. “You’ve really let your discipline in speaking slide, haven’t you, Lieutenant Redworth?”

“Ah ‘uess ah ‘ave. You’re ‘ongue is so ‘echnical.”

“Indeed,” I said, glancing behind me at the portrait. I took the time, as we walked the bronze hallway from Prince Ellyas’ quarters, to explain the situation up to that point. Kingsley sniffled.

“An’ ‘ou’re ‘eavin’ me ‘ere? Without a trans’ator?”

Smiling, I nodded. “Yes, Lieutenant. I need someone here that I can trust, and you and Captain Dempsey are really the only two I can spare.” We turned down a corridor, dimly lit by amber candles hanging upon silver sconces overhead. “I am entrusting the protection of Garden Palace to you, sir, so please, take care.”

Kingsley winked and shrugged out from beneath my shoulder. He saluted once more before turning down a different corridor saying, “’Ou’ve g’ot nathin’ ta’ worr’ ‘bout, General.”

I saluted in return and continued down the hallway. A soft thudding marked my passage, as my leather boots padded across the tiled floor beneath me. Within minutes, I reached the Freshwater Guard’s dormitory, squeezing my way down the slim hall, ducking beneath the low, bronze sconces that scarcely lit the walk. “What a damn prison,” I muttered.

Captain Thorradin’s quarters was closed, as I had anticipated, so I knocked twice. I heard a shuffling from the other side of doorway, and sniggered. It was still early in the morning, I knew, though from the hallway of the dormitory, no light crept in. The faint glimmering of the few sconces that hung about cast a dark haze across the hall; it gave me the impression of an ever constant night.

Within a couple minutes Thorradin had the door opened. He gazed out with tired eyes, brown sacks forming beneath them, and snarled. “It’s early.”

“Right,” I said, “and I’ve been up longer. We’ve got to leave within a few hours, Kwasi. We’re going to Tourmaline City.”

He squinted, shaking his head. “Tourmaline City? Has Lieutenant Love returned with his documents?”

“Evyn’s parents were murdered, Kwasi. He’ll be gone for a while longer. We need to get to Tourmaline City and stop Lieutenant Bosleigh before he can procure a second Phystalite for King Malliser. Pack you gear, Thorradin.” He nodded. “We leave in a few hours. The ride’ll take about a week and a half. I’m not sure how long we’ll be there. Pack accordingly.”

I spun to leave, but he grasped my shoulder and spun me back. “Emory,” he said, a strain in his voice, “this is ridiculous.”

I laughed. “I know. Now, I need to ready four steeds for us by the time we’re all prepared.”

“Four?”

“Lieutenant Leilani is riding with us.”

Thorradin puffed his cheeks, exhaling. “So he’s back.”

“With Lieutenant Redworth.”

“Still incomprehensible?”

“Quite so. Perhaps even more so.”

“Fantastic. I’ll meet you at the stable yard in two hours.”

“Sure. Bring Erhard and Leilani with you.”

Thorradin confirmed and closed his door. I made my way once more to my own quarters, grabbed my pack, slung it over my shoulder, cast one more glance around my room, and exited, closing the door behind me softly, locking it, and then making my way down the hall. I reached the immensely large foyer and frowned at the excess of people, so strong so early. It was really a terrifying thought.

I exited through the large double doors and nodded to Winslow, who bowed thrice as I passed. “G-good d-d-day, G-general,” he stuttered, about to say more, but I stepped with all haste out of his line of sight.

At the stables I chose four steeds (a large one for the Destroyer), and slung my pack around one of the animals.

If only I had known what I had thrust myself in to.

Nine

When traveling, you get lost in your thoughts. And they’re not the thoughts that plague you daily; no, I was not concerned about King Malliser and his cursed Phystalite at that moment. Nor was I overly concerned about Lucius, Myst factories or Lieutenant Bosleigh for that matter. I simply pondered, like I do often, about seemingly everything. But as opposed to now, where I write out of necessity, and in the daylight (for it is far too dark when the sun fades), in an attempt to understand everything that has come before and why what is done is done, I was yet still innocent of the truly vile this world was capable of creating.

Nature and the trees consumed me. We had skirted eastward around Daely; from a distance, certainly, we could make out the construct of the factory, the skeleton, but we wished to remain out of sight of Lucius. And in doing so, we immersed ourselves in a thickly forested path. Lieutenant Erhard knew the way, as he had often ranged out in these parts for me, and the three of us followed his steed. But, oh, the trees. How I long to see them again! Their green foliage blocked out all but speckles of sunlight, dotting the muddy pathway with gold. The constant breeze brushed through them, composing an ever-present symphony sounding much like a whispering caress from a lover.

I took in the fresh air in gulps. The scent – oh, but how difficult it is to explain – was liberating. It smelled of summer, when I was a child, before a rain storm. When I would play in our yard whilst my father worked to feed us. After my mother had passed away, I spent a lot of time outdoors; my father worked his hands to the bone to keep her far enough out of mind.

And this smell, the smell of the world, of trees swaying overhead and grass crunching beneath the hooves of our mounts, brought with it strong nostalgia. I closed my eyes and let the breeze perpetually tug my hair, scratching my face and constantly swirling about me.

We were still only about a day into the journey, nearing sundown, when Lieutenant Erhard called us to a rest. “We all had an early morning,” Dean said, sliding off his saddle, tugging on his pack, “so we’ll rest tonight. Don’t expect an easy pace the rest of the way.”

“Right, boss,” I muttered, sardonically. We unsettled, unpacked our mounts and tied them safely to trees overlooking a fresh patch of greens. I unrolled a pack to sleep upon, laid it flat across the dusty path that Dean had picked out for us, and lie down on it. The breeze had picked up now, pushing the rhythm of the branches to a faster tempo. From where I lay, I could catch glimpses of the stars above through the quick parting of the treetops.

The freedom of traveling, of living out of doors, upon the tough, gritty natural road is something to cherish. It is something I (and I’m sure we, as people) took so much for granted. On my back, arms tucked behind my head, I was free; sure, I was constricted in King Malliser’s plot, but I was *free*. To be able to roll again upon the dirt beneath a thick patch of foliage would be worth my life, I think.

And yet, now I know not whether those same trees are still standing. But such thoughts imprison my mind; and that, at least, I need free.

Thayer, perched up on his side using one of his elbows, breathed heavily. He observed each of us carefully, from Dean, to Thorradin, and lingering on me. “General Warson,” he said, voice suspiciously quiet (for a man like Leilani), “there were some pretty unsettling rumors when I was in Kroy’wen.”

I swore. “It has nothing to do with any sort of spectacular stone, does it, Thayer?”

He chuckled and flopped onto his back. “No, sir. Not quite on that level of unsettling. No,” he said again. “As you know, Kroy’wen sits almost directly in the middle of the Kingdom of Torryn. To the northwest lie Draper, the southwest Polad, and south by southeast Midtown.”

“Yeah, Thayer,” Thorradin snorted, “we’re aware. Thanks for the cartography lesson.”

Leilani paused, considering. “Is cartography what I’m doing?”

“Technically?” Thorradin asked.

“Yeah, technically?”

I grunted. “It doesn’t matter if you’re cartographers or farmers. Continue with your story, Thayer.”

“Right, sir,” he said, and I could hear a smile in his voice. “Being one of the wealthiest and most well known cities in Torryn, Kroy’wen receives a lot of ‘runners,’ if you will, with news from all over. Even Trinton and Lyette, on occasion, send runners to Kroy’wen, based on the significance of the information.

“Anyway, Kroy’wen usually averages about no more than ten runners per month, carrying information of varying significance. Usually the prosperity of the towns they’re from, any sort of troubles they may be having, but nothing incredible. Well, being stationed in any particular place for a very long time, you start to distance yourself from these runners. The information was essentially the same; instead of two thieves this month, Draper put away just one. You know?

“Well, not too long ago, the numbers of runners doubled to twenty, and then increased to thirty. At first, the reports were pretty much the same; a runner or two would slip away to speak with someone in private, but this was not unusual (shady dealings were fairly commonplace). Before I left to venture back to Garden Palace, the number had increased to about forty-five.

“So, noting such a drastic increase, I happened to peek in with the constabularies and find out why Kroy’wen was bustling with runners.” He stopped to catch his breath. Dean had kindled a fire with the help of Thorradin, and the flames sketched outlines of our faces. “So hear this. Apparently, farmers’ livestock were being slaughtered overnight. You have ten cows when you go to bed, and three carcasses when you awaken, nearly skinned raw.

“At first, they thought it was an increase of predators, and that with watchdogs, the numbers would slim. They soon discovered the next day that they would find another three cow carcasses with a couple of dead dogs. Or missing dogs, which was strange.” He inhaled smoke and coughed, glaring at the Destroyer. “Smoke is blowing in my face, man.”

Dean shrugged, sitting up against a stump. “Blame the wind. Or your own positioning.”

“Fah. Fine. Anyway, the slaughtering continued, without ceasing. So more runners were sent to Kroy’wen to ask for assistance. None came. As time continued, the situation spiraled downwards. Nearly all livestock was killed by whatever was coming in the nights. Farmers claimed demons were mauling their animals, but that didn’t explain the missing dogs.

“Eventually, I imagine, there was no more livestock to slaughter. So whatever it was doing the killing got hungry. Farmers stopped showing up to complain about their murdered animals, so the towns began to assume the situation was correcting itself. They were wrong, so said the runners. Within weeks, small towns were being massacred, and stragglers were making their way towards Polad, Draper, and Midtown, who, in turn, sent runners to Kroy’wen, hoping for soldiers.

“Confused as to the massive amounts of bleeding inhabitants lying around town, the city officials began to call together the councils. You know politics gentlemen,” Thayer said, and I grumbled in agreement, “so you know how they play. Nothing was taken care of. Not until the first attack upon Polad. Well, screams were heard throughout the town, but by the time anyone (and I know, Polad’s a large town, where was everyone?) reached the screams, all they found were trails of blood. So, they stocked up on defense, waited, and watched. Nights went by, they claimed, without any sort of activity. But they kept on. They sent runners to report the happenings and continued the watch they had set up. Manmade barricades were stationed around the city (and, from what I heard in Kroy’wen, Draper and Midtown were responding similarly), but still nothing was coming.

“Frustrated and, well, normal (you see, many had to rise early to work, so they were anxious to end their long nights on watch) people do what frustrated and, well, normal people do. They got tired of watching for nothing, so they set a few snares between the barricades and went to sleep. Two nights later, something struck again; the town responded equally as slowly as it had the previous time, following the trails of blood outside the city.

“However, their snares had proven useful. Caught in only one of the many snares was some sort of twisted, vile, dog. Or what was left of a dog. They said the jaws were completely rotted, revealing decayed but sharp canines. The skin was pockmarked and bloody, but the horrific part was the leg caught in the snare. It had snapped, and was twisting in every direction as the civilians got closer. It continued to snap its jaws at them, howling and snarling. One overly terrified man killed the beastie, took his hand axe and cut its head clean off. No sooner had the life drained out of the beast than it completely dissolved.”

I yawned and blinked. “What?”

“Dissolved, sir. Like… snow in the sun. Just melted away,” Thayer said, scratching at the stubble on his jaw. “Anyway, that’s when the excess numbers were sent to Kroy’wen. They were scared shitless, and I can’t blame them one bit, if even a portion of their stories were true. And that, my friends, is pretty twisted.” He shook his head and looked around. “Not even a, ‘da-a-amn?”

“No,” I replied, “Winslow isn’t here to stutter for you.” I rolled onto my side, tucking my right arm beneath my head and looked out into the darkness. It took a moment for my eyes to focus from staring at the light off the fire, but eventually they grew accompanied to the dark. It is strange, now, that I see so well in the dark, for I spend most my days in it. Even during the light, when I write this, I barely receive enough to see what I am putting on paper. But when I looked out, I caught a glimpse of a fluffy tailed squirrel, scurrying about, an acorn in mouth.

“Damn,” Erhard said, poking at the fire.

“A-ha!” Thayer nearly shouted, grin spread across his face, as he sat up.

“Damn fire is going out,” Erhard said, throwing down his stick in futility. Thayer mumbled to himself about no respect for a good story, but I was caught up in my thoughts. Seeing the squirrel fumble around with an acorn had me thinking about the poor folks in Daely, Lyette and Trinton. What would happen to this squirrel if I were to take away his home, this forest? He would die, I thought. And so, then, in my theory, the citizens of these towns would die.

Granted, that’s a poor theory, but in essence, they lost their lives. How many years had they labored over that land? How many generations were born and grew old and died there? How many children were killed or removed from homes? How many people were out of jobs? How many people lost all their belongings? King Malliser, I thought, cared nothing about these people.

The light outside fades away now, and my handwriting is poor enough as it is. But as the night fell out there, on that first night from Garden Palace, I felt for the first time true fear; for not only myself, but for the people of Torryn; no, the people of Westhaven.

Ambition is a deadly thing. Poisonous influence is even worse. Encouragement, however, can kill thousands upon thousands.

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I awoke the next morning to the sound of Lieutenant Erhard shuffling about camp, packing up his belongings and half-heartedly cooking breakfast for the four of us. Thayer and Thorradin were both still fast asleep, so I bothered not to speak up and lie atop my bedroll. The morning air was cooler than that of the previous one, nipping at my cheeks. I realized then that I had fallen asleep without covering myself, and shivered for lack of warmth.

The sun was not yet stretched out over the trees, so I was unable to feel its warm rays across my body. Well, I thought, the only way to keep warm now is to get a-moving. I spent one extra second lying there, staring at the foliage above, wishing that the sun would peek through at me, before rolling onto my belly and pushing myself up to my knees. I stood and rolled up the bedroll, lifted it onto my right shoulder, and carried it to where my mount was tethered. I replaced it back upon the mount and stretched, feeling the cracks of my elbows as I extended my arms.

I was, at least, refreshed. But what Thayer had spoken of the night before bothered me still. Diseased predators that only struck at night. That dissolved when you killed them, as well. Shaking my head, I cursed, tugged once more at the bedroll to make sure it was snugly in place, and turned.

Dean was behind me, eying me curiously. “Cussing,” he said, a hint of amusement in his rough voice. “From what Leilani said last night, is it?”

I nodded. “You have a way of understanding, Dean,” I said, sarcastically, heading back towards the tired fire pit. The Destroyer followed closely behind me, muttering about the breakfast he was cooking and the rough sleep he had the night before. I sniffed. “What are you making?”

“Meat. I happened to take some from the kitchen.”

I chuckled, “You stole from the Garden Palace?”

“They don’t feed us enough. Anyway, they’ve lied to us. What’s to stop us from taking a little back?”

Shrugging, I said, “Fair enough. Well, is it finished yet?”

“Wake up the other two. You’ll find out then.”

I set out, toeing Thorradin and Leilani, earning grunts and mumbles of disdain. When I was satisfied with their level of awareness, I made my way back to the Destroyer, placing myself across the flames from him, and eyed the few sticks he was roasting. I sniffed. “Well?”

Dean shrugged. “Pork. It was lying around, waiting to be stolen.”

As Leilani and Thorradin dragged themselves over, I saw Thayer’s eyes brighten at the recognition of a meal. A tired grin spread across his face, replaced by a stifled yawn. “Oh, thank the gods,” he said behind his fist. “Erhard, you crafty son-of-a-bitch, where did you get that?”

“Stole it,” I said.

“Stole it?” Thayer repeated.

“Indeed,” Dean answered.

“Someone’s going to be pissed,” Thayer muttered, lifting his shoulder in a shrug. “I certainly am not.”

We ate the morning’s meal with idle conversation, savoring the sweet taste of the pork. As the morning sun began to pierce the foliage above, we began to pack our bedrolls and layer them upon our horses. I un-tethered the mounts, tossing the reins to each rider in turn, and, after re-saddling the steed, swung myself up onto the beast. I patted his neck soothingly, and he whinnied in return.

Stretching, I examined the other three soldiers as they mounted. As Thayer was carefully swinging himself over the side of his horse, Dean tugged on the reins of his own and turned in to the direction we were heading. “Let’s go,” he said, over his shoulder.

Cursing, Thayer half-hopped onto his saddle, glaring at the back of the Destroyer. He turned to me and said, “I still don’t know – after all these years, and that one time I saved his life, remember? – why that man hates me so. I mean,” he said, allowing a smile to split his lips, “who wouldn’t like me?”

I glanced over my shoulder at the struggling lieutenant. “Perhaps your way with words. You’re so charming that the Destroyer feels threatened by your wit. Hell, I almost feel threatened by your wit, and I’m Emory Warson.”

“Your dry as a desert sense of humor isn’t wit, Warson, and I feel like I’ve just been rubbed with sand paper.” He grumbled more after that, but it was inaudible, and, by then, I had already turned my attention back to the path ahead.

The pace we set that morning was much quicker than that of the day before. Still, we were only just beginning day two of our journey, and we were all fully aware that there were still a number of days left to come before we reached Tourmaline City. My mind wandered, then, to that city of decadence, our destination. I had been there on occasion, as was fit to my station as General of the Freshwater Guard. And, based upon those few visits, I kept the Destroyer stationed there often, even with its close proximity to Garden Palace.

Tourmaline City was a grandiose place, streets littered with the bodies of intoxicated pedestrians. The homeless lined the streets; there was not so much a wealthy class living in Tourmaline City; if there was, I imagined, they were most likely to have been overthrown and torn to pieces.

Brothels could be found at every corner, sometimes two to a street. They weren’t so much brothels as shacks, a series of one-room buildings next to each other. Strange music could be heard around these prostitution shacks, unfamiliar music. Instruments that no orchestra normally maintained were key in its production. I hadn’t heard this music (for I am not one to indulge in prostitution, therefore limiting my time near these brothels), but was told it was dangerous. The relaxed progression and improvisation employed in its creation was unusual, and, I supposed, was what was viewed as anarchic.

The music was insultingly named after a method in which the prostitutes cleaned themselves, probably in an effort for the political leaders to dissuade those from its practice. From where I sit now, writing in the ever-fleeting light, it almost makes sense for them to feel threatened by a new music, created in the slums of Tourmaline City, in use by brothels.

But then, as I rode on towards Tourmaline City, I was unaware of the reasons behind the political hatred towards this music. I simply followed orders, like a soldier is made to do, and questioned not. Oh, but how foolish I had been. At times when I write, when I reminisce this, I come to hold a small, if fleeing, sensation of gratitude for the discovery of the Phystalite. Because if it wasn’t for that stone, I would never have had my eyes forced open. I was living the life of a blind man, using his senses to guide himself through life. But when the power of that stone was impressed upon King Malliser, my eyes opened, I faltered from that one dimensional path, and asked a question: Why?

“Why?” led me onwards, pushed me forward. It was followed by: How? How could King Malliser, regardless of the ends, justify his means? My ignorance of that time, in retrospect, pains me. It embarrasses me. I’m sure you, as the reader, have seen what I did not, when I should have. But please, remember, King Malliser gave me the opportunity to serve for him, and was a kind and gentle ruler. When I was fourteen, I joined his household staff, befriending Prince Ellyas in the process; as we aged, I was given the chance to become a member of the Freshwater Guard. And from there, I served to maintain peace throughout Torryn, protect the Garden family, and keep myself (and, in my nobility, all of Torryn) virtuous.

How could I argue with that? How could I turn my back upon the man who had given me everything? When Ellyas first began questioning his father, I suggested meeting with the king to discuss our concerns. And Ellyas trusted me. Where has this led me?

Traveling to Tourmaline City had me thinking, just as the memory of travel has me remembering. But we pushed on, the days feeling only slightly quicker than the ones before. On the fifth day of our travels, the city of Tourmaline rising before us, we came across a small band of travelers. They looked bedraggled, cuts and bruises colorfully disfiguring them; their clothes – more like rags – were torn about their bodies. As we approached, I realized they weren’t travelers but refugees.

But from where?

I called out to Dean to head towards the refugees, but when they saw us coming, they began to run. I kicked my horse into a fast trot, so as to be unthreatening but the people were terrified. One, overly large man spun around with a fairly long walking stick and made to swipe me from my saddle. Lucky for me, he swung high, and I just managed to duck beneath the blow.

“Stop!” I shouted, reining up my horse slowly, so as not to injure it or unhorse myself. “Stop! Why are you running?” And to the man with the stick, I said, “And why in the name of the gods are you swinging that thing at me?”

Warily, not lowering his stick, the large man stepped a few feet closer. I had over run the group when I trotted past, and they were cautiously, if slowly, making their way towards my mount. They looked at me in hesitant recognition, then, at the lowering of the large man’s stick, sorrowful expectation. “You serve in King Malliser’s guard, right?” It was my assailant.

“Aye,” I said, wiping sweat from my brow. “And you are? And why are you swinging at my face?”

The big man scratched his neck sheepishly. “You’re a good man. I remember you when that lieutenant killed m’mother.” Recognition dawned upon me, and I cursed. “Was he put to death?”

I bit my lower lip. “No, good sir. I took him to the king in order to try him for treason and was dismissed. I had imagined he was put to death, but I was just informed by my lieutenant that he was relocated in Tourmaline City.”

“Damn me. That’s where we’re headed,” the large man said. “If I see that murdering son-o-bitch, I’m goin’ to kill him.”

Shaking my head, I muttered, “Not if I get to him first.” Louder, so the people of Daely (I assumed they were all from there) could hear me, I asked, “Why are you all so savagely beaten?”

“That man came to our village,” a small child, who I saw was hiding behind the large man, said, his blond hair falling into his eyes. “And he hit us…” I looked more carefully at the child, seeing one eye swelling shut, swollen lips, and yellow bruises on his arms.

The large man spoke again, “Lucius. If we didn’t want to move, he moved us anyway.”

“I was told he procured the town. I assumed he paid for it.”

“Oh, he procured the place, that’s fer sure.” He spat, and, having reached me, extended his hand, “I’m Madison. He torched the pub, an’ everyone in it. Some of us escaped. This is all that’s left of Daely.”

I counted about fifteen. “What?”

Madison spat again, wiping his mouth with his arm, struggling to keep his composure. “He murdered us all. Even those who willingly gave over their property, he butchered. Them first.” He looked up at me before continuing. “We all held out in my tavern, watching through cracked windows, when that man had his soldiers light the place aflame. Them bastards took my own alcohol, stuffed rags in them, and lit them on fire, then tossed them around my place. Alcohol is everywhere in there, and it went up in flames as soon as the first bottle exploded.

“Those of us near the front were burned to death. The fire spread too quickly for us all, and we clustered at the rear entrance. About twenty of us made it out. Three were too injured to walk, two stayed to help them. As we took off,” he said, stamping his stick in the ground, “them soldiers slaughtered them like cows.”

I swallowed hard, dismounting, patting my horse on the neck to calm him. “Are you certain the man’s name was Lucius?”

“He announced himself, sir.”

By this time, the rest of my group had joined the conversation. Dean swore, and Thorradin sat silently. It was Thayer who spoke up. “Ah, shit,” he said, before eying the youngster. “Oh, my apologies. I get back from one bad situation and am thrust right into the next. I don’t even know who this Lucius son-of-a-bi… man is, but he sounds like trouble.”

“He certainly is trouble, Thayer,” I mumbled, then, to Madison, said, “I am absolutely sorry about your loss, and would like to – what, Thayer? You don’t know who Lucius is?”

Leilani shook his head and shrugged. “No, sir. Never heard of ‘im. Should I?”

Dean spoke up, “I would think so. He’s been King Malliser’s advisor for as long as I can remember.”

Thorradin nodded and I said, “Me as well.”

Leilani shook his head again. “No, no he hasn’t.”

“How not?” I asked.

“How not? I’ll tell you how. I left Garden Palace for, what, half a year at most? When I left there was no one there, especially not an advisor, named Lucius.” He folded his arms across his chest. “If Kingsley were here, I’m certain he’d agree with me. What kind of joke are you trying to pull?”

I grunted. “Like we planned on Daely being devastated to set you up for a good joke.”

Thayer shrugged and said, “It would have been a good one.”

“Indeed,” Thorradin agreed.

I waved off the two. “Are you absolutely certain that Lucius wasn’t King Malliser’s adviser when you left?”

Chewing on his lower lip, Thayer shook his head. We, on horseback, formed a circle of sorts around the village folk of Daely; they looked up at us expectantly. Thayer wiped sweat from his forehead and lifted his shoulder in a shrug. “Absolutely, sir. I believe – and correct me if I’m wrong – old Riane was King Malliser’s advisor when I left. Maybe he finally threw in his coins with Senestar?”

“I remember old Riane,” I said, lips pursed in thought, “but vaguely. The memories of him seem so long ago that I’m not sure they ever existed.”

An eerie quiet claimed us then, sticking to our flesh like the perspiration from a long journey beneath the warm sun. The four of us and the group of Daely refugees all seemed to be pondering the same thing; who was Lucius, and why was Thayer Leilani the only one who hadn’t heard of him?

Leilani, if he was, indeed, accurate in his memory, would have explained why neither Captain Dempsey nor I could find any documents in regards to Lucius. I said as much. Thorradin nodded in agreement, and kicked his horse into a slow walk towards Tourmaline City.

“Makes sense,” he said.

I followed his suit, motioning for the people of Daely to follow. Thayer pulled up the child that hid behind Madison to ride second. “But that doesn’t explain how he did it. There’s no logical explanation.”

“What about an illogical explanation, then?” Thayer asked, and I could hear the grin on his face.

The Destroyer, who had been mostly quiet, said, “Drugs?”

I scoffed. “Drugs? I don’t think so. I haven’t felt any cravings for anything unusual, Dean. Thorradin?” Kwasi shook his head in front of me. “What have you been doing in Tourmaline, Dean?”

“You asked for a reason, sir.”

“So I did.” I sighed and pushed on. We continued on in silence; the journey, in theory, was short; maybe a week at most; however, when you actually travel that week, it wears on you; it feels as if you’ve been traveling for a month; especially when you’re escorting a group of injured refugees to their destination.

I remember hearing once when I sat in on one of Prince Ellyas’ lessons. He was learning grammar that day, and his scholar had said, “Your Highness, the semi-colon is a useless punctuator. It does nothing, symbolizes nothing. It extends sentences, sure; so do commas and hyphens, but otherwise, they are useless.” I find humor in the fact that, when I transcribed his lecture, it utilized a semi-colon. My point, however, is that everything, no matter the size or significance, has some meaning. You, as the reader, are able to construct your own ideas based on what is written.

Certainly you are aware of the world around you. I wonder, though, when I write, as the fleeting sun becomes ever-more distant, whether or not anyone will actually read this. Will it make it out of this room in tact? Will it ever be published? Or, most importantly, will anyone care? A second thought follows on the heels of the first: How long, if ever, will it be read? Five years from now? Ten? Twenty? One hundred? In a sense, this is a historical account of the rise and fall of the Kingdom of Torryn. But it is also the auto-biography of Emory Warson, former General of the Garden Palace’s Kings Guard.

In either case, I assume my manuscript will be read. This is why I feel it necessary to be an artist, a writer, and not simply a scribe. I’m sure you’ve asked yourself many a time: “Why has he digressed to discuss the beauty of the trees?” Or, at other times: “Doesn’t it feel like Emory left out something important?” You might even consider: “This nearly seems too fast paced to be plausible. These characters are overly dramatic; what motivates them to make irrational decisions?”

The answer is simple. I am not a writer, nor an artist, nor even a scribe. I don’t have the proper skills necessary to successfully author a piece of literature. I began this story as a means to explain to myself why I have ended up where I have, and why so many people are left dead (I am still struggling to find the answer to that question). But it has evolved into something more than that. I find it comforting to remember the beauty that once graced the landscape of Torryn. The garden encircling Garden Palace, or even the stained glass windows that decorated the halls were more than charming. If Kwasi Thorradin was beside me, looking over my shoulder as I wrote, he would suggest the monotonous fountain that he so adored. In writing this manuscript, I have found myself reminiscing upon these things; details so commonly known daily that they, in essence, are unknown to each of us and feel significant in retrospect. The merit of decisions can be examined, questioned, confirmed or laughed upon (albeit my situation is far from mirthful). And the deceit of others - that I am certain you have quickly seen through -that I was unfortunate enough to have believed also exposes itself upon this parchment. But why do I now feel like I am justifying my reasons for writing?

If I don’t, I will go mad.

But let me explain the process in which I write. Where I am at – which I will not tell you just yet, as to keep with the writing of a ‘good’ story – I am unable to write every day, or even often. I am certain I am an inconsistent author; have you ever attempted to write your own auto-biography? Can you remember every detail as it was? What would you pay attention to? But none of that, really, is important to me. All I ask is your forgiveness if there are flaws in my writing. I am yet an amateur.

So, I write:

We sat in silence, again, slowly gaining ground on our destination, when Thayer mumbled, “Magic…”

No one said anything in response. I’m sure no one heard it. About a minute later, my ears perked up and I sat up (for I was slouched) in my saddle. “What did you just say, Thayer?”

“Nothing, sir,” he replied.

“No, you said something… a minute or so ago.”

“Which would not be categorized as ‘just.’ But,” he said, “I said, ‘magic.’”

I cursed. He spoke from behind me, a hint of curiosity in his voice. “What? Are you entertaining the idea of magic, sir?”

“I am.” I cast my gaze to the dusty road beneath me. The wind tugged at my clothing and gently tossed dust around our mounts. “Lieutenant Love returned to his father’s estate to retrieve documents proving not only the Phystalites awful power but that magic existed… and still does.”

Thorradin raised his right hand and dismissed the thought. “Magic? Then why haven’t we seen it?”

“Ah, now I sound like a damn conspiracy theorist,” I murmured. I explained to the traveling group exactly what Evyn had explained to me the night before his departure. I cared not, at this point, whether the survivors of Daely overheard, for I was beginning to grow weary of King Malliser, and most definitely of Lucius.

At the closing of my recitation no one spoke. We rode on in silence, the city of Tourmaline growing closer and closer.

A few nights later we had reached the gates of Tourmaline City and halted. A small crowd, mostly civilians on foot, stood outside the swinging doorway, waiting their turn to be inspected by the Tourmaline guards. I glanced at the soldiers inspecting the newcomers. They wore green leather jerkins studded with what I assumed to be tourmalines; from my vantage point, they appeared to be more for show than battle. They boasted matching green gloves with a faded green pair of leather trousers. One had a long sword sheathed at his belt, while the other slung a longbow across his back, quiver of arrows hanging over his right shoulder.

Tourmaline City was surrounded by a black brick wall of moderate height. The bricks were faded and cracked, humble compared to the foundation of Garden Palace. I couldn’t see much of anything past the guardsmen or the gates, so I sat, contentedly devouring my surroundings.

The lined moved slowly, but we eventually made our way to the guardsmen. They examined us with a curious light to their eyes, and the bowmen patted my horses neck as he looked up at me. “Big company you’ve got here, soldier.” He motioned towards the village people of Daely behind my mounted party.

“They were forced to leave their town due to unexpected circumstances.”

The guardsman arched his eyebrow. “Where did they come from?”

I hooked my thumb over my shoulder and said, “Daely. I am General Emory Warson from Garden Palace; will you please let us enter?”

Understanding sparked behind the soldier’s eyes and he backed away from my mount. “Oh, General Warson, I apologize. I didn’t recognize you, sir. Can we send a runner to anywhere in particular?”

“Just point us to the pub, sir,” I said, and we followed his directions.

Ten

We sat, the Garden king’s guard huddled around a round table, including Madison and the small child, whose name we discovered was Attalus; the rest of the Daely villagers took comfort at a nearby table; I had informed the server waiting on our table that we would take care of those folk. The five of us sipped at the house ale. I allowed the bitter taste to swash around my mouth; after days and days of travel, it was a welcome experience. Attalus was given a cup of watered down wine, which he gulped thankfully.

“So, Madison,” I asked, “what do you and Attalus here plan to do now, in Tourmaline City?”

Madison shrugged and wrapped his hands around his ale thoughtfully. “Not sure, Emory. May I call you that?” I nodded. “Right now, I just want to enjoy some respite with this here cup o’ale. But, this pub here might desire my skills, and Attalus can sure tag along.”

“That’s fair. But be careful,” I said, smiling, “this city can be dirty. And, if our intelligence has served us correctly –“Dean grunted. “– then you may wish to keep low profile, for something serious may be afoot.”

“What’re you thinking?” Madison asked.

I sipped my ale, contemplating. Of course it was obvious to me; but it was such a thing that, in retrospect, was difficult to discuss. And not for fear of the wrong ears overhearing. There were still many things I couldn’t explain: Why Leilani had no recollection of Lucius? Why King Malliser – although I was beginning to feel a creeping suspicion – would kill the townsfolk of Daely (I had already overcome the distaste of raising the city)? “Well, Madison, let’s look at it this way: Someone wanted you to be dead already. If you go around a city like this looking like you’re a peasant from a small town – and most likely one from nearby – someone might notice. And then, my friend, you’ll end up like your friends and family in Daely.”

Thayer snorted. “Even if he changed his face, and King Malliser wanted him dead, the Garden soldiers would have no trouble finding him. You should know firsthand, Emory, what sort of resources King Malliser has in his vault.”

“Are you speaking of Bosleigh?”

“No, but now that you mention it, you also know firsthand the kind of lowlifes King Malliser enlists. And promotes. I was thinking,” he said, taking a sip from his ale, “more along the lines of his extensive ‘black’ network.”

I arched my eyebrow. “’Black’ network? What does that even mean?”

Dean spoke up. “It is a rumor. Thayer has no evidence it exists.”

Thayer shook his head. “Oh, it certainly was a rumor. Emory, it’s a part of Garden’s forces no one really knows about. How have you not even heard of it?”

I sought confirmation in Thorradin. “Kwasi?”

“Never heard of them,” he affirmed.

Mouth agape, Thayer tapped his fingers on the tabletop. “Gentleman, one day – and I mean soon – we need to have a sit down and discuss the goings on of Westhaven. The ‘black’ network is said to be employed by King Malliser and run by the dirty dancer – that’s our liege – himself. When the ‘monster’ attacks were happening where I was stationed, talk of the ‘black’ network – what I learned was called Widow – continued to grow.

“Widow is said to be a small network of Garden forces specially trained in espionage. They’re rumored to be wielders of black magic, but I’ve never seen any evidence that magic exists. However, these forces are said to cause all sorts of uprisings throughout Westhaven; coups, rebellions, massacres. You name it, Widow has probably done it.” Thayer picked up his ale and held it to his lips for a long while. He seemed to be mulling over his thoughts, enjoying the aroma wafting from his cup.

We waited for Thayer to continue. He looked around the table at us and shrugged. “What?”

“That’s it?” I asked.

“Yeah,” he replied, sipping his ale, “that’s it. What, were you expecting more?”

I nodded, scratching my neck. “I was, actually. You sounded as if you had sound knowledge of this Widow organization. What did they do about the ‘monster’ attacks in Kroy’wen?”

“If I told you, they’d have to kill me, right?” Thayer shrugged. “Look,” he said, “it’s hard to explain. When the attacks started becoming a problem is when I first saw evidence of Widow. Naturally, I was sticking my nose into whatever I could, hoping to find something interesting. But suddenly the constabularies in Kroy’wen were not very forthcoming with information as they had been. In fact, I only discovered as much information about these attacks as I did from walking the streets.

“I started to notice richly dressed men talking with the wrong crowds. It’s something that, as you’re walking past, you wouldn’t necessarily notice, you know? But I was looking for something, anything. So, I started to observe these men, and found them interrogating the peasants whose farms were ravaged by these beasts. Eventually, while I poked around, I started to investigate the constabulary in Kroy’wen, trying to maybe find a potential weak point. I did.”

Thayer smiled, finishing the last of his ale. He frowned down into his cup. “Dammit,” he said, waving over the barmaid. “Honey, I’m fresh out. Could you be a doll and bring me another mug?” He winked, and she flushed, smiling shyly. Within a minute she returned with a cup of ale, foam spilling over the side. “Thank you dearly, miss.” With a roguish grin, he slipped her a silver coin.

“Where was I?”

I shrugged. “Weak points in Kroy’wen constabularies. Richly dressed men speaking to ravaged farmers. Beasts and boredom.”

Nodding, Thayer continued. “Right. So, I spoke with this ‘weak point’ and pressed about these oddly placed men. He was easily bribed; I bought him a mug or two of spiced wine, and he was as open as a book.” Thayer mulled over his analogy, appearing most pleased with himself. “I should have been a poet,” he said. “Anyway, what I found out was this: There are only a few members of Widow. They are led by one man, but I couldn’t coax the name out of this guy (though I’m not sure he even knew).”

“So,” I said, “were they there to mediate the situation?”

“No,” Thayer responded, tapping his forehead. “That’s what I had assumed. From what this constable told me, these men were interested in researching the beasts.”

Shrugging, I said, “At least they didn’t create them.”

Thorradin, who had been mostly silent throughout Thayer’s story, spoke up. “Perhaps. But who’s to say they didn’t create them to research them? Maybe Garden is making new weapons, and he needs some place to test them.”

“I hope to the gods that you’re wrong, Kwasi,” I mumbled.

A sudden silence commandeered the table we sat at. Madison stood, then, patting Attalus upon the back and motioning towards the exit. “Well, gentlemen, we greatly appreciate all you’ve done for us. But I’m thinking it’s time for us to part ways. If you’re saying we’re in danger, hangin’ around you fellas is probably bad news for us all.” I nodded. “Thanks, Emory. Good luck here in Tourmaline.”

“You, too, Madison. Take care, Attalus,” I said.

We needed much more than luck.

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Dean led us to an inn he knew well. The owner was a short man of middle years, round of belly with a pleasant grin. “Mayer here,” Dean said, indicating the innkeeper, “runs an honest inn. He keeps the rats out; your Widows, I suppose, Thayer.” Erhard nodded to Mayer and lowered his voice. “He believes me a mercenary, as most here do. You three are part of my company. Refer to me as only the Destroyer. Mayer won’t pry into our backgrounds or business, so relax. Play your roles.”

“Yes, ‘only the Destroyer,’” Thayer said, swallowing a grin. Dean grunted and approached the innkeeper.

I stood far enough behind Dean that I couldn’t make out his words. The portly innkeeper nodded and bowed constantly, smile never flickering for even a moment. Then, Dean was in front of me.

“Let’s follow Mayer to the rooms,” he said.

Mayer led us up a stairwell and down a slim hallway, stopping before the last rooms. He pointed towards a door on our left and the one opposite. “These are yours, Destroyer. Hope you have pleasant stay.” With that, the innkeeper bowed once more and disappeared down the stairwell.

Pushing open the door on the left, Dean stepped in. Thorradin followed in close pursuit while Thayer and I inspected the other room. I opened the door and looked in. The floor beneath our feet was wooden, scuffed and never polished. Scattered across the room were warped planks, bowing slightly. The two cots were not much more impressive. Hay poked out from inside the mattresses, and the sheets appeared to have been overused and never washed. One small, rotting dresser was aligned opposite the cots; a musty odor seeped from the drawers. Thayer crossed the room with haste to open the window, grunting when the wood splintered in his hand.

“Damn me to hell,” he mumbled. “The Destroyer sure knows how to pick ‘em good, huh?” He focused, the tip of his tongue splitting pursed lips, and pulled the splinter free. “Not today, little guy.” He placed his hands gingerly upon the frame and again pulled. This time the window opened, but only an arms span. “Son of a…”

I smiled. “Relax, Thayer. It’s open enough to circulate air. We need to decide upon some course of action before heading out. Let’s see if the Destroyer’s room is any better.”

When we reached the other doorway, Thayer cursed.

Inside, Thorradin sat upon a freshly dressed bed. It appeared to be silk (Thayer later felt the material and confirmed my thoughts). Dean’s bed matched, and the dresser was not just a dressed but more of a wardrobe. And there were two of them. The floor was freshly cleaned and polished, and I could see my face clearly in the sparkling surface. And, alas, to top it off, the window was steel framed and opened fully.

“How well do you know this innkeep?” Thayer asked.

Dean shrugged, taking a seat at the edge of his bed. “I don’t know. Been here often. Tip well. Nice room.”

“Room, yes,” Thayer said. “Note that you didn’t say ‘rooms.’ Have you seen ours? I think someone died in there, decomposed, and rotted into the wood.”

“Tip well.”

“Ah, hell.”

I held up a hand. “That’s not really our concern at the moment, gentlemen. There are four of us in the Freshwater livery. We have two objectives: Find Bosleigh, and find the Phystalite. Thayer, you and the Destroyer will seek out the Phystalite. We’re fairly certain it’s in the Citadel. Thorradin and I will search for Bosleigh. If either of you happen to find Bosleigh near the Citadel, stop him. I need to have a word.”

Nodding, Dean said, “Check the merc post first. Saw Bosleigh there once or twice.”

“Thanks,” I said. “Shall we?”

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Standing outside of the merc post, Thorradin and I checked our gear. We had tethered our horses at the station near the post and wrapped recently purchased patched cloaks around our shoulders. We pulled the hoods over our heads and pushed open the swinging doors.

I stepped inside.

To say the least, it wasn’t what I expected. The post was a one room building, but it was huge. A large, circular bar was located in the center of the room, where many patrons (presumably mercenaries) sat. Dimly lit wall sconces seemed to be positioned too high, not projecting enough light into the room. A layer of thick conversation hovered over the men and women.

Tables were scattered across the room, so Thorradin and I seated ourselves to the right of the entrance. It was dark enough to cover us in shadows and light enough at the entrance for us to glimpse anyone who entered.

“Think we’ll find him here?”

“Who knows?” I said.

Men and women of all sorts of shapes and sizes entered and exited the post; some looking for work, some looking for a drink, some looking for a fight. None were looking like Bosleigh. And so we waited patiently, and, Thorradin, impatiently. I stood and walked to the center bar, eying the men and women seated around it cautiously. The barkeep coughed and stared at me.

“Um,” I said.

He continued to stare, not speaking.

“Um,” I said again. “Two… of your… strongest.”

The barkeep ceased his staring and chuckled. “You sure, pretty boy?”

Shaking my head, I said, “No, but give it to me anyway. I can’t be sitting here without a drink, now can I?”

“I s’pose not, boy.” He reached behind the bar and pulled out two old fashioned glasses. He dropped a couple cubes of ice into each glass, pulling out a bottle of something. I couldn’t make out the name. He filled each glass about halfway and, with a wink, said, “If it’s to yer liking, you bring it back, and I’ll refill ‘em. If it’s not, well… Ye’ll be kissing the floor soon enough. Take these on the house,” he said, still chuckling.

“Thank you, I think,” I said and turned to make my way back to Thorradin. I placed a glass in front of him. “Bosleigh?”

“Emory.”

“Thorradin.”

He looked up from the doorway and nodded. Then he looked at the glass. “What is this?”

I shrugged. “Hell if I know. I asked for the strongest stuff.”

He took a tentative swallow and closed his eyes. “The strongest stuff at a mercenary post. Do you have any idea what their weakest stuff is? It’s stronger than the strongest at Garden Palace.”

I coughed as I took a sip. The liquid burned its way down my throat, causing my eyes to water. I closed them and fought back another cough. Slamming my fist down onto the table, I said, “That is horrid.”

Thorradin took another swallow of his and returned his gaze to the entrance of the post. I did the same, though I slid my glass to the center of the table. An hour or so passed without any sign of Bosleigh.

The doors swung open then, and I recognized the man walking through. He swept the room with his gaze, looking intently for something. He turned his head to the right, and we locked eyes. It was Thayer, but he was early. With a quick stride, he walked toward our table.

Apparently we weren’t hidden well enough, for Thayer found us easily.

“We spotted Bosleigh leaving the Citadel,” Thayer said, eying my glass. He picked it up, took a sip and spat it back out. “Disgusting. The Destroyer is trailing him; hopefully, he’ll lead us to where he’s staying.”

“How kind,” I said and stood. “Well, where is the Destroyer supposed to meet us?”

Thayer rolled his eyes. “In our room at the inn.”

“Best head in that direction, then, eh?”

Thorradin and I stood, and the three of us made our way to the exit of the post. Thayer nodded to a woman leaning against the door. She was stunningly attractive for a merc; her long brown hair just reached her shoulders, emphasizing strikingly dark green eyes. She was dressed in black leather trousers and a tight, black leather tunic with the sleeves cut. She looked away in mock disgust.

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An hour passed before Dean walked into my room.

“Took you long enough,” Thayer mumbled from atop his bed. “Where are they camping out?”

Dean shrugged. “I wouldn’t call it camping. I think he’s alone. At an inn up the road.”

“Alone?” Thayer said. “Why would he be alone trying to heist the Phystalite?”

I looked from Dean to Thayer, and said,” Maybe it was his punishment for being so foolish in Daely? I’m sure if, somehow, it was King Malliser’s intent to kill anyone who spoke against his plans for Daely, he wouldn’t want the head of his personal guard to witness the brutality.” I sat back down on the edge of my bed before continuing. “King Malliser obviously knows it’s in Tourmaline, and he probably knows where it is located exactly. Since you two saw Bosleigh leaving the Citadel, I’m sure it’s most likely there. And as for sending Bosleigh alone… Well, like I said. He’s expendable. With all the confirmed knowledge King Malliser has, he either gets the stone with Bosleigh alive, or loses Bosleigh and sends more men to retrieve the Phystalite.”

“Makes sense,” Thayer said.

Thorradin nodded. “So what’s the plan?”

I sat silently for a moment, tossing ideas around in my head. “You said you followed him to an inn, right Destroyer?”

“Yes. The Fawn tavern.”

“A tavern? Good. Why don’t we wait for him there? The Destroyer and I will take a seat at a table. Thayer will watch the room hall – hopefully he can see any possible stairs from his position – and grab Bosleigh as he’s coming down. Thorradin, stay at the doorway. You both take tables in those positions. Now,” I said, brushing a strand of hair out of my face, “I haven’t seen this place. This plan may not work, but it’s the best we’ve got to go on. Any arguments?”

No one spoke. I stood once more. “Then let’s get this over with, gentlemen.”

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The Fawn tavern was a fairly ritzy place for being located in the center of a slumsy city. The establishment, owned by a thin, middle-aged man who always seemed to wear a conniving expression, was three floors high. There was, luckily, only one stairway leading up and a table nearby. Thayer took his position there, and Thorradin seated himself near the entrance.

Then we waited.

Eleven

Not knowing what lies ahead is natural. Not knowing what will come tomorrow or what will come in an hour, a minute or even a second is how we live our lives. The uncertain rules our days. One minute, I could be riding a horse; the next, I could be catapulted from the mount and killed. In battle, an arrow meant for a man a distance in front of me could strike me yet with the aid of the wind. These things aren’t questioned at the end of a day, the end of a life. They just happen; they just are.

A fool may try to control his life. To him – and I know, we haven’t solved my question – his life is invaluable. He will do his absolute best to plan accordingly and encompass as many different possibilities his life may present him. That’s fine. Try as you might, you cannot defeat chaos.

That fool will wish to defend, say, his wealth. Perhaps he will bury it within his bed. Maybe he will lock it away in a safe (if he could afford such a thing). This man may even invest in a treasury. A thief, when attempting to steal the fool’s wealth, may not be capable of doing so because of such thoughtfulness. But such thoughtfulness could also turn upon the fool. When a fire strikes his home, and his possessions are burning, what will he do? If he buried his wealth in his bed, would he have time to dig or cut it out? What if he sealed it away? And the safe would certainly take too much time to open in heat of flames; it is too heavy to carry. The investment would have been, in that case, the wisest choice; however, what happens when bandits raid the establishment housing the wealth?

There is no way around everything. There is, I believe, a failure in every plan. Nothing is perfect.

The table we sat at was directly in the middle of the tavern. Our plan, we thought, was fairly solid. It wasn’t long before Bosleigh descended the staircase and came into view. Thayer rose from his chair casually, throwing his arm around Bosleigh’s shoulder when the lieutenant passed his table. He whispered something in the lieutenant’s ear, who stiffened, and guided him toward the table I sat at.

Thayer pulled out a chair at the table and seated Bosleigh. “Gentlemen, look who I found! I knew you hadn’t spoken in quite some time, so I decided to show him to you.” Thayer grinned, nudging Bosleigh into a seat and turned away. “You two catch up on the old days!”

The cloak Bosleigh wore was loose and thick. He growled at me as I motioned for the waitress. Her long hazel hair extended a little past her shoulders. She headed in our direction. “You son of a bitch, Warson. You have no idea what’s going on here, do you?”

I shook my head. “Not a clue. Why don’t you tell me why you’re not dead?”

“Why don’t you drop dead?”

“Classy,” I said. The waitress had approached our table, forest green eyes examining me curiously. “Whatever your house ale is, ma’am, for the three of us.” The waitress nodded and walked off. “Now, where were we? Oh, right. The matter of you breathing. You know what? Let’s forget about that. Why are you here? What catches your fancy?”

Bosleigh shrugged. “The whores. Why else? I’m a mercenary now.”

“A mercenary? Pretty luxurious place for a mercenary. There are three floors here, did you know?”

“I’m on the third,” Bosleigh said, sniffing.

I smiled. “So you do know. Then would you mind telling me where a mercenary gets this kind of coin? I’d like to join.”

“Your precious ass is dedicated to the Garden Palace, Emory. You wouldn’t betray that place for your life.”  
 “Probably not,” I said. The waitress approached and I handed her two silvers; it was well over what the drinks were worth. “I’ll die in this uniform, I assume. But still, a little extra coin on the side couldn’t hurt. Right, Destroyer?”

Dean grunted.

“Right,” I said. “So, again, tell me. Where is this pay coming from? Are you a thieving mercenary? Or is help really that desperate? ‘Cause the last time I checked, you were in the business of murdering helpless, elderly women prostrated by two soldiers. And, if I recall, it took you two swings of the sword to behead her. You obviously aren’t a headsman.”

“I always hated you, Warson,” Bosleigh spat.

“I try my best.”

Silence consumed the table for a moment. Dean looked to me, and I looked to Bosleigh. The Garden lieutenant sat close to my right, directly across from Dean. Thayer and Thorradin both waited at their tables.

“So,” I said,” why have you been lurking around the Citadel?”

Smiling, Bosleigh said, “I was wondering when you’d ask that. Your man here is fairly noticeable. He towers over everyone in the city. How do you know I don’t have this place filled with other troopers?”

“You’ve been alone.”

“I could go out by myself.”

“And what would happen if you were killed out there?”

“If I didn’t report back within a certain time, they’d send for Garden.”

I shrugged. “Makes sense. But I would know if troops were here. And I didn’t receive any notice.”

“You also thought I was dead.”

“I also came here to find you.”

I did, however, glance around the room. No one in particular seemed interested in the three of us conversing. Thayer made no movements at his table; I assumed no one was in the stairwell or the room hall. The waitress fluttered around the tavern, which boomed with light conversation, refilling mugs here and there. Nothing was unusual.

“I’m calling your bluff,” I said.

I heard a click from under the table. “Good call,” Bosleigh said.

“You wouldn’t,” I hoped.

A loud thwack sounded from beneath the table, and the Destroyer lurched backwards. I rose and tackled Bosleigh, knocking over the table we sat at. From the corner of my eyes, I saw Dean rising, bolt protruding from his stomach. I heard a click again and reached into my cloak for a dagger when the second thwack sounded, taking Dean in his right breast. He staggered backwards and crashed into a wall, slumping.

When I finally freed my dagger, I drove it through Bosleigh’s right wrist, pinning it to the ground and effectively discarding his repeating crossbow. He cursed in pain. I pulled out one more dagger from my belt (for I had tucked two in there before we left our room) and held it to Bosleigh’s throat.

“You motherfucker,” I whispered. “You stupid motherfucker.”

Laughing, Bosleigh said, “What? I’m supposed to be dead.”

“Oh, you’ll be dead,” I said, “and you’ll feel it the whole gods damned way.”

A flash of fear crossed Bosleigh’s eyes. “The information,” he said, “I’ll give it all to you.” I could feel him squirm beneath me. “The Phystalite… I-it’s in the center of the Citadel. It’s heavily guarded by at least five members of the cult. Take my crossbow… Y-you’ll need it to take out the guards. Then… you’ll have… only a few minutes to escape.”

I smiled. “Was that so hard?”

“Please don’t hurt me,” he pleaded.

“Oh,” I said. “Well, can you heal Dean?” When his eyes grew wide, I shook my head one last time. I took Bosleigh’s left hand and, with my free dagger, pressed the blade against his pointer finger. “This is for the Destroyer.” I put pressure on the blade and felt it bite through flesh and, eventually, bone. Bosleigh screamed. I put the blade up to his middle finger and said, “This is for the woman in Daely.” As I sawed through that finger, Bosleigh’s voice was hoarse.

I heard noise around me and hands on my tunic, but I shook them off. “Since you’ve lost a lot of blood,” I said, “you’ll probably pass out soon. So, I’ll end this quickly, while you’re awake.” I raised the crimson tinted weapon from his severed fingers to his throat.

“P-please,” he said, “… you need to know… about....” I drove the blade into his throat. His eyes went wide and lifeless, and a last breath escaped his open lips. He had said something, but I did not hear it.

Then, I blacked out.

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When I awoke, I was in my bed at Mayer’s inn. Thorradin was looking out the window sill, and Thayer was hovering over me. I couldn’t find Dean. “The Destroyer,” I mumbled.

“Dead,” Thorradin muttered.

“The fuck is going on here?” Thayer yelled. “I… I don’t even understand what happened. How did I not see his weapon?”

Thorradin shook his head. “Concealed under that cloak. I told you, Thayer, it’s not your fault.”

“Fuck me!” Thayer paced back and forth in front of the bed. “And you, Emory… that finger thing was classy. ‘For the Destroyer.’” He sat down a put his head in his hands. He was trembling, and I could tell it wasn’t from amusement.

“Thayer,” I said, sitting up. I noticed, for the first time, a cold washcloth on my forehead. “None of us knew. Not until he shot Dean. And there was no time to react. He drew his crossbow and shot. It could have been me, eh…”

Thorradin walked to the bed and examined me. “I thought you’d snapped there, Emory.”

“I think I did. What did I do? I can’t remember all that well.”

Thayer spoke up. “You cut that bastard’s two fingers off. Then drove a dagger into his throat. I wish I had a chance, but Thorradin and I were keeping the patrons off your ass. I’m sure this will get to the Palace by the end of the day. If we want to take the Phystalite, we have to do it now. How do you feel?”

I tested my ability to stand. “I’m… capable. Did either of you… pick up that crossbow?”

“I did,” Thorradin said, motioning towards the small table. Upon it sat Bosleigh’s repeating crossbow with the spare bolts. There were only three spare bolts.

“Aren’t there… five guards?”

“We’ll buy more.”

Thayer nodded and said, “The merc post should be selling. Hey, did you hear what he said about Lucius?”

I shook my head. “No, I don’t remember much toward the end.”

Thorradin shook his head. “We’ll discuss it on the ride back.”

“If there is a ride back,” Thayer snorted.

Stretching an aching body, I said, “Let’s go.”

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The three of us stood outside the great steps leading to the Citadel. Many citizens walked up and down the looming stairway. The Citadel of Tourmaline housed the cult of Senestar, the god of death. That was, I assumed, where the masses of people were heading. The cult was known to render services for many different deeds – depending on the price offered. I had heard that the priest’s of Senestar led funerals and sat with the dying. The acolytes, on the other hand, if the wage was right, would carry out death wishes. The engineers would create that perfect mixture of poison or antidote to fight a nasty snakebite.

To say the least, the cult of Senestar offered colorful services.

“Let’s go over the plan one more time,” I said, feeling my strength coming back to me, if slowly. “Thayer?”

“Yeah,” he said slowly. “The three of us are in need of a funeral service for our recently departed comrade…” He swallowed hard before continuing. “Gods bless him. Once inside, we find a priest willing to help. Thorradin and I deal with the priest while you go snatch the Phystalite.” He paused, blotting his forehead in the sun. “Good luck finding that thing. When you are far enough out, Thorradin will head back to the inn; I will mingle around the marketplace and trail you back. If you’re being followed, I’ll know.”

“Okay,” I said. “Let’s do this.” I had elected, before we reached the Citadel, to ditch the crossbow. It was too bulky, and I was fairly certain Bosleigh’s information was intentionally inaccurate.

We mounted the stairs. The climb was much higher than I had imagined. In the heat of the sun, I was sweating heavily. But, I reflected, without my cloak (we removed them in order to ‘sell’ our story – since we wore the Freshwater armor), I was much cooler. After a couple dozen large, stone stairs we reached the entrance of the Citadel. Two acolytes stood guard at the small, single doorway. They were both swathed in a deep black robe. A hood was pulled over their heads, but beyond that I could make out a white mask that covered the eyes and nose. It was outlined in a blood red. Each guard carried in his right hand a pole arm that was a head or two taller than he was. In his left, he held a longknife, hilt outward, blade pointed down.

Neither even moved to stop us from entering. Once we pushed through the door, one at a time, we stood silently for a moment. Beautiful marble tiles lined the floor of deep purples and dark blues. The ceiling was a black stained glass, and with the sun pounding through cast a gray across the room. I looked around at the mass of people filling the front foyer. “At least,” I said to Thayer, “we sort of blend in. There are so many people even I feel lost.”

He muttered something in return, too softly for me to hear. I glanced at him, worried. Unusually quiet since the brush at the tavern, Thayer was struggling with the loss of Dean. I had thought we all were; I was, indeed, but the fate of the Phystalite was far more significant at the moment. “It’ll be okay, Thayer. Nothing you or any of us could have done would have saved Dean.”

Thayer closed his eyes.

I put my gloved hand upon his shoulder, feeling the soft tunic he wore. The Freshwater livery we donned was not that of our armor, which we wore solely on duty, but that of leisure… almost. “Dean wouldn’t want any of us to sulk over his loss. Do you know what he’d say?”

“He’d probably just grunt,” Thayer suggested.

“Absolutely right.”

Thayer chuckled ever-so-slightly. It was progress.

I pushed us through the surge of people and nudged my way to one of the many podiums that were set up along the rotunda foyer. Each podium was set up close to the back wall; there were six in total, with a single passageway in the center of the room. I led us to the podium left of the passageway.

I glanced over my shoulder as I reached the acolyte manning the stand. A black banister hung over the entranceway to the Citadel, and, when I turned back around, I noticed black flags hanging over each acolyte. And, I duly noted, each acolyte was dressed in the same black robe as the guardsmen, but these wore purple masks, edged in white. The acolyte did not speak but waited.

Thayer cleared his throat. “Sir, we’d like to see a priest in regards to a recently killed comrade of ours. He was a close friend and a brave man, and we want to see him properly put to rest.”

The acolyte nodded without speaking. He turned from his stand and walked to the passageway and motioned for us to follow him. We headed down the passageway. The marble tiles abruptly ended as soon as we stepped out of the rotunda to be replaced with a modest stone walkway. The passageway was slim, allowing for only two to walk side-by-side. Sconces were scattered sparsely, casting yawning shadows that often left us in the dark. There were no doors or other hallways on the sides. We simply walked to the end of the narrow passageway.

When we reached the end of the passageway, the acolyte stepped through the open doorway and into the next room. He rested against the wall to the left as we entered. The room was grand, but not as decorative as the rotunda. It was a circular room with three passageways leading out, not including the one we had just entered from. Above each was a symbol depicting where it led; the far left passageway held a rose (signifying the priests); the center passageway held a skull (signifying the acolytes); and the far right passageway held what looked to be a fang (signifying the engineers). Each had a story behind it, but I chose not to question our guide. The floor was of a fine white tile, unblemished. A flame in the center about twenty feet in diameter cast enough light to fill the room.

I was curious enough to ask what the flame was for.

“It is the eternal flame of Senestar,” the acolyte said. “Never once has it died since the building of the Citadel. It is said that Senestar himself birthed the flame.”

We entered the passageway leading towards the priests. It was identical to the original one we had traversed but was much shorter. As we stepped through into the adjoining room, I raised my eyebrows. It appeared as though we were in a labyrinth. “This place is huge,” I said, looking warily at Thorradin.

The room we had entered into was, again, round, but instead of three passageways, there were eight. Nothing was notched above them like the others. Numerous sconces were placed around the room to give enough light to whoever entered. The acolyte, seemingly at random, picked the second hallway on the left and walked down the narrow corridor. As we walked, I noticed that, at the center of the hallway floor was a thin light, running in front of and behind us. “What’s this light?” I asked.

The acolyte did not look back nor down. “It is connected to the eternal flame. If one gets lost in the depths of the Citadel, one can follow it to the flame.”

Convenient, I thought. As the passageway ended, we entered a larger room. The floor was of the same unblemished white tile as the previous ones but consisted of many rooms. Straight ahead of where we entered was another passageway, but only one. The acolyte took us to one of the rooms and knocked. Within a few moments, the door opened to reveal what I assumed was a priest.

The priest also wore a full black robe, but his hood was pulled back. Instead of the simple mask the acolytes wore, the priest wore a full skull mask. The mask itself was a black that matched the color of his robe, and a single white stripe ran from between the eye holes to the base of his neck. Where the mouth should have been was a cage, and behind the cage there appeared to be a black cloth, but I wasn’t about to venture in for a closer look.

“Welcome,” the priest said, if muffled. He dismissed the acolyte with a nod and waited for the door to click before continuing. “What can I assist you three with?”

Neither of us spoke for a moment. I examined the small room. The priest had seated himself behind a bland wooden desk, which was quite warped from age. Only a few papers littered the desk, and a small candle was lit upon the table. Two wall sconces were posted on either side of the doorway.

“We seek a proper funeral for our recently fallen comrade,” Thayer said, struggling to keep his composure. He lifted a gloved finger to his eye. “He was killed earlier today.”

The priest lifted his head slightly. “Ah. Quick to the Citadel. Senestar be blessed, he would approve.” He opened a drawer behind his desk and removed a single sheet of paper. Characters of a foreign language were scrawled upon the page; I was unable to recognize them. The priest picked up an ink pen, which he dipped in a decanter of ink (that I had, surprisingly, not seen on the empty desk). He made a few marks on the page and looked up.

“Name of the deceased?”

Thayer clenched his jaws. “Dean Erhard.”

“How was he killed?”

“Crossbow bolts. Two.”

“Two?” I thought I sensed a note of interest in the priest’s muffled metallic voice. “Two,” the priest repeated. He scribbled a few more words in the foreign scripts before looking back up.

He asked Thayer a few more questions before I stood. “Sir,” I said, unsure of what formality to bestow upon a priest of Senestar, “I… am still struggling with the loss of my soldier. Is there a room where I can… think?”

The priest tilted his head to the right, examining me behind the metallic mask. “Exit this room. Follow the hallway with which you did not come from. In the next rotunda, take the left hand tunnel, for there will be three, and you will come to a room of mourning. I hope this will suffice.”

I nodded and turned to leave. “Thank you, sir.”

Hurriedly, I opened the door, exited, and closed it shut behind me. I glanced around the room, suspecting the acolyte to be waiting, but he was not. I headed towards the passageway. When I reached the next room, I saw the hallway the priest had directed me to. Debating, I wondered which hall to take. Figuring I was somewhere in the western portion of the Citadel, I decided to take the far right passageway.

It led me to an open room with only two corridors.

I went again to the corridor which I felt would lead me closer to the center of the building. In the next room I stopped, heart sinking. Like all the other rooms before it, it was a rotunda. But unlike all the rooms before it, it was completely filled with passageways. There were eleven hallways exiting the room, not including the one I had just exited.

“Damn it all,” I said and sat down. “I’m sorry, Dean, it looks like I’ve failed.” I closed my eyes and put my head in my hands. I thought about the Phystalite and King Malliser; about the journey to Tourmaline and the run in with the Daely townsfolk; about Bosleigh and Dean; about the loss of a close comrade and a good friend. I wept, then, allowing my body to shake with each gasp.

I opened my eyes to wipe away the tears when I saw the light beneath the floor. “At least I can find my way back,” I said. Standing, I decided I’d choose the next room with what I best believed to be the right direction. Looking back at the light, I stepped towards the eighth door from the left. But then I stopped. Something unusual had caught my eye, and I took a step back to examine the room.

The tiles were the same, the sconces were the same, the ceiling was the same and the passageways were the same. The light on the floor was the same, leading to and from each passageway… That was it! The flame did not follow into the seventh passageway from where I entered. “What the hell?” I muttered. “Let’s try it.”

As far as following unusual trails, I would normally hesitate. They are much like an eager vendor, overzealous to sell his gear or goods. Such over anxiousness betrays goodwill and makes a person suspicious. And, even one less than satisfied dealing with one of those vendors will instill a permanent paranoia in the future. Thus it is with an unusual trail.

But, I thought, I have nothing better to follow. And I only have one chance at this. So I pushed on.

This particular passageway was unlike the rest; it was unnaturally dark, and a light fog crowded the hall. The sconces overhead did not do much to bring light to the hall, but they intensified the fog as I progressed deeper. After seemingly an eternity (which couldn’t have been more than ten or fifteen minutes), I reached the end of the corridor. I looked behind me as I exited into the room, but I couldn’t see ten feet back. So I turned around.

I wiped my brow. So intense was the fog that it left moisture over the entirety of my body. It was almost as if a mist was splaying across my face. About a handful of sconces were built high above me, offering just enough light so I didn’t fall. I wondered how Thayer and Thorradin were handling themselves.

Slowly, so slowly, I approached the center of the room. The flame of Senestar did not extend into this chamber. The deeper within I made it, the more the fog thickened, until eventually, I thought, I was in the center of the room. The light from the sconces was barely enough for me to see my hands, but I felt around and squinted in the dark. And then I touched it.

My hands came across a moist pedestal. I centered my body in front of it and waited for my eyes to focus. When they had, I examined what was in front of me. A lone violet stone sat upon the pedestal, emitting a soft glow. Anxiously, I picked it up and slid it into my trousers pocket. I turned to exit the room when I heard a faint rushing sound.

Behind me, the pedestal crumbled. Whatever device held the stone, it appeared, was made to fall apart when the stone was lifted. I only hoped nothing would happen. Unfortunately, that sort of hope is for the naïve.

I eased my way toward the passageway whence I came when I saw a light growing down the length of it. “Shit,” I said, imagining the black robe of an acolyte approaching, carrying that devilish looking longknife. But as the flame neared, I realized it wasn’t an acolyte… or a person for that matter.

It was the flame of Senestar, come to claim the room. The flame rushed in and lit the center of the room with a light glow. The fog dissipated almost instantly, and I had to blink away the brightness. “If this isn’t noticeable,” I muttered, “then the gods only know what is.”

With that, I sprinted down the hallway. I followed what I thought were the same passages I used to retrace my steps. After the third passageway, I stopped quickly. I was in the rotunda where Thayer and Thorradin and I had met with the priest. Were they finished? I didn’t notice any of the acolytes running around in disarray, so I wasn’t sure if anyone knew the Phystalite was missing. Holding my breath, I re-approached the room which I left and knocked on the door.

It opened quickly, and Thorradin peered out. “Feeling better?” he asked.

I slipped inside and sat down between Thayer and Thorradin. “Much. Thank you, sir, for allowing me to leave.”

The priest turned his head slowly and faced me. He said nothing for a while, head tilted to the right. Then he straightened up and turned toward Thayer. “How do you wish to fund the funeral?”

Thayer reached into his tunic and pulled out a bag of coins. “I have about five gold pieces.”

The priest lifted his head, and then shook it. “That is far beyond what we charge.”

“Then make it a damned good funeral because I won’t be able to attend. It’s my fault he’s dead. Take the rest, and donate it to whatever cause you must. Just give my friend the burial he deserves.”

Bowing in his chair, the priest said, “Thank you for your graciousness. It will be put to good use. Your comrade, Dean Erhard, will be put to rest and immortalized in the halls of Senestar. If he is as great a warrior as you specified, he will find it a most welcome place. The glory to Senestar.”

“The glory to Senestar,” I said, silently thanking the god of death. Presently, an acolyte knocked on the priest’s door and led us back to the rotunda. With a bow and farewell, the three of us exited the Citadel.

Thayer looked sidelong at me. “That was quick, Emory. I was worried about having to fight our way out of that maze.”

“It’s quite easy once you understand the flame.”

Thorradin said, “Did you get it?”

“Of course. I’ll show you when we get to the room. You know, something strange happened. I found it only because the eternal flame of Senestar did not reach into the corridor leading to the Phystalite or the room it was housed in. As soon as I removed the stone from its pedestal, the flame awakened and rushed inward.” We walked through the busy streets and into the marketplace. “It was as if Senestar was unable to fight the Phystalite.”

Thayer shrugged. “It’s tough to say. None can prove the gods exist, either.” He pointed towards a vendor with a few tables scattered around her cart. We approached her, and she smiled warmly. I found her turquoise eyes very pretty, and her chestnut hair hung just below her ears. “What’ve we got here?” Thayer asked.

The woman’s smiled broadened. In a soft, husky voice, she said, “All sorts of things. It’s all different types of bread stuffed with different types of meat. Some with fish. Most if it’s smuggled in from Elenor.”

I raised an eyebrow. “The Duke of Elenor is smuggling in… meats?”

She shook her head. “No, sir. Bread.”

We ordered (I asked for a beef filled wheat bun) and sat at a nearby table. The waitress bowed, head bobbing, chestnut curls bouncing around her ears. I watched her take her leave towards the cart before casting my gaze back in the direction of Thayer and Thorradin.

I opened my mouth and pushed out a sigh. “Dean…” I mumbled.

Thayer shook his head. “Damn it all. Emory, I will kill King Malliser if I make it back to Garden alive.”

Shaking my head, I said, “No, Thayer. What if it wasn’t him?”

“Then that Lucius fellow you three were babbling about.”

Shrugging, I glanced again at our waitress. She was busy readying our meals, so I said, “We don’t know what exactly is going on. Let’s play this one low. We have a second Phystalite, and we can use that towards our advantage. I’m sure word of Bosleigh’s death has reached the Garden Palace, or it will shortly. Either way, no one knows that we have the Phystalite, seeing as the Citadel hasn’t sent anyone to murder us, yet.”

Thayer gave me level look. “Fine. But someone will die for Dean.”

“Someone did,” I replied. Our waitress had approached the table and placed our meat buns in front of us. Smiling, she retreated. “No one else needs to die, Thayer. Let’s settle things.”

As we completed our meals, we stood and headed back towards Mayer’s inn.

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We began to pack with haste, hoping to head out within the hour. Thayer and I were gathering our belongings when we heard a thump from Thorradin’s room. I lifted my head, glancing quizzically at Leilani. He shrugged and turned back to his work. “Perhaps I’ll go check on him,” I said.

But I couldn’t stand.

From where I sat at the edge of my bed, I attempted to brace myself against the mattress and push upwards. But I couldn’t. My arms felt like they were strained beyond their maximum capability, but I wasn’t even flinching. “Tha…yer…” I mumbled and fell forward onto the hardwood floor. It creaked beneath the weight of my body. I tried to focus on Thayer.

He cursed as I heard glass shattering from downstairs and booted footsteps pounding towards the rooms. I heard another thud from inside my room and saw Thayer’s hand extend limply from behind his bed. “What… is… happening…?” As the footsteps reached our rooms, I heard a woman’s voice.

“Dammit,” it said, “the one in here is missing.”

“No matter,” another, husky voice responded. “We have the two in here.” Her voice grew louder, and I saw booted feet walk through the doorway. My eyes were losing focus, blurring and clearing in uneven intervals. She stopped a foot away from me and knelt.

I saw pretty turquoise eyes and chestnut curls before everything went black.

Part Two

An Assassin and a Thief

“A man feared that he might find an assassin;

Another that he might find a victim.

One was more wise than the other.”

Stephen Crane, A Man Feared That He Might Find an Assassin

Twelve

“Check,” Thayer said, licking dried lips.

I glanced at the board between us and muttered to myself. His bishop was perilously close to my king; I only had a few remaining moves. Nothing appeared all too favorable, and, in fact, I believed that the end was near. My king had cornered himself, with only a knight to stand in the way of Thayer’s bishop. I took my only move, placing the knight in the path of the bishop. If the knight was to fall, the bishop would drop soon after.

The hull creaked beneath us, and with it brought a swirl of distorted memories. They were fragments, really. I remembered blacking out, but I couldn’t put a face to my abductor. I remembered a few feverish awakenings, lying haphazardly in a pile of rough straw, vision swaying with the rocking of what I imagined was some sort of vessel. Well, I wasn’t imagining things.

Thayer picked up a rook and claimed my last remaining pawn. I squinted in the dimly lit hold, allowing the gentle rock of the vessel to push my thoughts.

I was not bound when I awoke with full consciousness. Struggling to sit up, I had still been upon the bed of straw, Thayer not far from me. Torches were lit high above us, proffering just enough light for me to glimpse my surroundings. My thoughts swayed to Thorradin, wondering where my captain had gone. Was he killed by our abductors? I had heard something before losing consciousness, but I couldn’t make sense of it. The boots came after…

“Make your move, Emory. No time for napping,” Thayer said. I opened my eyes and frowned.

“Sure.” I picked up my own rook, my last piece besides my knight and king, and claimed his rook. He vastly outnumbered me. Nodding, his glance grazed the board.

But who, I thought, came for us? I remembered our bloody brawl with Bosleigh; I remembered Dean’s death. It pained me still, remembering the bolts protruding from his lifeless body. And my anger, my rage, that drove me to slowly kill Bosleigh. I shuddered at the images. The dim lights of the Citadel surrounded me next, and I recalled the flame of Senestar.

And with that flame, I remembered the Phystalite.

The Phystalite!

I thrust my hand into my pocket, and –

“Check,” Thayer said, claiming my knight.

* It was gone!

“And mate,” Thayer said.

I stood and thrust my hands around my pockets. “What is it?” Thayer asked.

“The Phystalite is gone,” I murmured, re-checking all my pockets. After all my efforts, I slouched back into my chair.

Visibly paling, Thayer said, “Of course. Why else would someone take us?” He chewed the inside of his cheek. “You ruin my victory, of course, with this news. The problem is: How did anyone know we had the Phystalite?” He was replacing the pieces on the board as he was speaking, and I watched in silence. Slowly, Thayer repopulated the terrain.

“Good question,” I said. I worked my neck in a circular motion as I thought, attempting – in vain – to remember any more details from our abduction. “Someone had to be inside the Citadel of Tourmaline, right? There could have been no other way. But I’m sure no one watched me…”

Thayer motioned for me to make the first move on the refreshed board. “You did say the Light of Senestar spread to the Phystalite’s room once you left, right? So is it all that difficult for someone to realize what happened?”

“I suppose you’re right,” I said, lifting a pawn and moving it two spaces forward. “I still don’t know how they would have followed us.”

Shrugging, Thayer lifted his knight and held it above the board, pondering his move. “Maybe. Then again, maybe we were the only ones who sent someone unattended?”

My mind raced back to the Citadel. I remembered, slowly, the walk from Senestar’s home, towards a vendor. The three of us had seated…

“Your move, Emory,” Thayer said, pointing at my pieces.

The color green stuck in my head, but I could not reason why. “Do you remember anything about our abductors?”

“Besides the fact that she was damn pretty?”

Green? “Green…”

Thayer grunted, “Yeah, she had green eyes. And brown hair. She was a real beauty, but quite the bitch.”

My jaw dropped. “She was the vendor,” I said, recalling the woman who served us. “And she said she was a smuggler from Elenor.” I scratched at the nape of my neck for a moment. “Do you suppose she’s really from Elenor?”

Shrugging, Thayer said, “She sure could be. But, still, how would she know we had the damned stone? And it’s still your turn.”

I carelessly picked up another pawn and moved it forwards, sorting through my thoughts in great detail. And then it hit me with enough force to snap my head to the left. My eyes closed and muttered a curse. In my memories, I pictured Mayer’s inn; Thayer was near the stairwell and Thorradin at the door; Dean sat at my table. Bosleigh, escorted by Thayer, took a seat at the table. But the detail I had been forgetting until then were those beautiful green eyes; the waitress.

“The waitress,” I said.

Eying his next move, Thayer said, “What?”

“The waitress,” I said again. “The one at Mayer’s. She’s the one who heard us. Think about her uncanny similarities with our abductor, the vendor. Think of how easily they got to us at Mayer’s. Were they just waiting for someone – anyone – to make a move for the Phystalite? Or were we expected?”

By now, Thayer had ceased examining the chess board. He stared intently at me instead. “That would mean, then, that there’s a snitch at Garden.”

I snorted. “Would that surprise you much?”

“Nope. It’d lower my expectations a bit, though.”

“But who? Dempsey and Ellyas knew. I don’t think we told anyone else… I didn’t even tell Kingsley.”

Thayer chuckled, “Not that that foreign son-o-bitch would’ve understood you. Or have been understood when telling another.” He shrugged, and then said, continuing, “But the duke of Elenor has been ranging here for years. Considering we’ve recently discovered the Phystalite, is it not so much a coincidence for them to be stationed around here?”

I stood up from the chess board slowly. It was then I realized that I still wore my plating and grunted in confusion. Why would any abductor leave his or her abductees with their armor? I patted my chest plate and sent a questioning look towards Thayer, who lifted his shoulder in a shrug. “One would think,” I said, “that one would notice still wearing armor. It appears, however, that I have not. Why, in the good name of the gods, are we still armored?”

In response, Thayer shook his head and examined himself. “Maybe they’ll meet up with another vessel, abandon ship, and put a big hole in this one. With our armor on, we’ll sink for sure.”

“And the chess board?”

“To keep us from thinking too much, of course.”

“I don’t know,” I said. “Think about the game of chess in general. It’s a game of thinking and thinking, right? They ultimately gave us more than enough time to think. It keeps us occupied and awake; if we’re lost in our thoughts without a catalyst, we’ll fall asleep.”

Thayer mumbled, “Speak for yourself.”

I sighed heavily. “Well, if they don’t decide to drown us, then we’ll see what we can find out when we arrive in Elenor. If that’s our destination.” I re-seated myself at the chessboard and looked toward Thayer. “If not, well, ‘why’ is the least of our worries.”

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I have heard it spoken that Time is a tangible entity. The passage of time, the flow, the speed, is all controlled by Time; as I said, an entity. Praying to this being to speed up or slow down time will, depending on your level of despair, of need, possibly be answered. So I’ve been told that when it appears the passage of time has sped up, it is, in fact, Time himself hastening the day. Likewise, when a day has laggard qualities, that is, also, Time, lengthening the days. This belief has been passed down since the beginning of the world (I would have, indeed, said since the beginning of time; however, I feel that is an unnecessary pun that, in my current situation, would appear quite perverse). Nevertheless, if this is all true, Time has abandoned me where I am now, in the hours of m y need. I wonder, sometimes, if I scratched seconds or minutes or hours or days upon the mortared walls here in the daylight if I could feel the flow of time. Would I, given enough practice, become in sync with the rhythm of Time? Because if there is a controller and I dance with him, would I not, over time, become acquainted with his movements? Do not great dancing duos exercise for hours upon hours, days upon days, weeks upon weeks and so forth to become one with each other? For even a fatal miscalculation could end in disaster; in fact, the idea is to spend so much time in practice that, when it comes to perform, there need be no thoughts. The moves simply flow together. And thus, I assume, would it be for me if I spent my life here keeping records of Time.

But then, in the dank hold of the vessel Thayer and I were prisoners in, our prayers were not answered. Another multitude of games of chess were played and completed, yet we weren’t sure what time of day it was, or even if the day was still the same. We weren’t given food with which we could judge our time of day. Not even a sliver of light was allowed us from the outside; the torches above flickered and danced, mocking the true light that thrived out-of-doors.

And Time – this tangible yet elusive Time – never once heard our pleas. And so we traveled, devoid of time, for (let us say) a while. Eventually hunger pangs thrashed our stomachs, and before long our games of chess were through. Neither of us had the energy to speak, much less play. The vessel creaked and swayed, and I had slumped to the deck, facing upwards. The lullaby of the tides sang me sweetly, entangling with the noise of the vessel to push me off into a heavy sleep. I was hungry. I was a captive. But more so than anything, I was far away from home.

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The next time I awoke I could smell the faint scent of freshly cooked meat nearby. In an attempt to push myself up off the wooden floor (an attempt that, in fact, failed, landing me heavily upon my face), I stirred the slumbering, nearly comatose, Leilani. After resting for a moment in my sprawled position, I began to crawl my way towards the scent. I discovered thereafter that, whilst in our sound state of sleep, someone had left two generous meals upon the stairwell leading to the upper deck. Slowly, cautiously, I climbed the stairwell to reach the platters.

“Is it real?” Thayer mumbled from the base of the stairs.

“Smells that way,” I replied, clutching at the meat and bringing it close enough to my face to observe. “Chicken,” I said, barely containing the saliva that had, instantaneously, begun to saturate my mouth; this in itself was a pleasant refreshment, as I had begun to succumb to incredibly an incredibly dry and chapped pallet. Without ceremony, I took a large bite from the piece of meat. I allowed myself a small groan of satisfaction. I handed the platter to Thayer, who quickly devoured his portion.

We made short work of the meal.

With our stomachs satisfied, the two of us drifted off into long but comfortable slumbers.

Thirteen

I could not, at the time, even guess at the length of the voyage. But eventually, after a routine of hours without food followed by restless sleep (which was then, in turn, followed up by a much needed meal), the door to the hold was thrown wide open. A fresh breeze of the sea engulfed the large space, bringing with it a cleansing scent that was most welcome. As quickly as the burst of light and scent invaded the hold, a slight shadow commandeered the entrance.

The shadow belonged to a woman. Her hands, folded in fists, rested upon her hips as she examined us. Long hazel hair fell quite past her shoulders, disappearing in the slender bulk of her back. With the sunlight pounding around her, I could not make out her exact features; I’m sure, however, that she could see the bedraggled state Thayer and I were in. She, stepping out of the sunlight and into the hold, moved towards us, hands never leaving her hips. I was able to study her more closely now. In fact, I saw, her hands rested upon a sword belt; in the sheath at her left side was an exotic cutlass. The curved blade entangled with the sheath like lovers in the midst of night, wrapped in the linen of a shared bed. Large, brown eyes stared back at me curiously, strikingly – the hazel backdrop of her hair seemed to supplement power to those eyes.

“See something you like, soldier boy?” she asked, mocking eyes observing.

I smiled. “Always when a beautiful lady stands before me. Particularly,” I said, “when I’ve been imprisoned in the hold of a ship for gods know how long. You could have been two feet taller and a hundred pounds heavier, and I would have thought you were the goddess of beauty herself.”

A gloved fist made sweet with my cheek, snapping my head around sharply.

“I will have none of your nonsense, soldier boy,” she spat, slowly twisting her assailing hand (which happened to be her right), producing loud cracks in rotation. “If it weren’t for the fact that you were porting around this Phystalite, the two of you would be long dead by now – and sunk in the middle of the Arith Ocean.”

“Instead,” I replied, “we’re alive, and we’ve been given the luxury of a chess board.”

Before the woman could strike me again, Thayer said, “And that makes all the difference.”

She halted, fist a mere inch away from my sore cheek. She spun, jerkily, and eyed Thayer with extreme interest. “Oh, they left you alive, did they?”

“What’s that supposed to mean, lass?”

I watched as she formed a fist and lashed out at his face. The force of the blow knocked him backwards, and he landed upon his back. “Don’t call me lass, you son-of-a-bitch. And you’re lucky,” she said, rubbing his knuckles, “because if it was up to me, you’d be long dead in the middle –“

“Of the Arith Ocean, I know. So you said,” Thayer replied harshly, sitting forward. From the moment of hesitation, I believed the woman was debating whether or not to throw another punch at Thayer. The way she cradled her fist made me, soon after, think otherwise.

“So where are we?” I asked.

The woman turned again to glare at me. “No questions, soldier boy. But I’ll let you know. We are in the Port of Bayes on the coast of Elenor.” I groaned. “That’s right, soldier boy; you’re right at the edge of Illirianos.”

“Two questions,” I said quickly. “Is this why you were ranging in Torryn? And why do you call me soldier boy?”

Sighing, the woman took at seat at the bottom of the first step leading out of the hold. “I said… No. Questions.”

Licking my lips, I said, “Please.”

“No.”

“Pretty please?”

“No.”

“Pretty please, pretty lady?”

“Don’t call me ‘pretty lady.’”

I laughed. “Don’t call me ‘soldier boy.’”

A thin smile – a crease, more like it – cracked her lips. “I just might like you, soldier boy,” she said and stood. She turned around (I will not lie; I was impressed). Her hair fell just above her buttocks, which, in her leather leggings, was quite salient; I coughed. “Follow me,” she said, ascending. “I’ll take you to your new homes.”

“Damn it,” Thayer mumbled, pulling himself up to his feet. “I was hoping we’d be going back to Torryn.”

A throaty chuckle left the woman’s lips; I smiled. “Consider this your new permanent residency.”

Thayer and I followed her up the steps.

“At least,” she continued, “until we decide what to do with you two.”

As I reached the opening, I had to shield my eyes. After so long spent in the darkness beneath the deck, my eyes were not accustomed to the bright, effulgent blast of sunlight. Slowly, almost imperceptibly, my eyesight righted itself. The shape of our abductor formed before me, and I once again re-examined her body.

She looked at me and shook her head, a rueful grin settling across her face. “What are you looking so pleased about, soldier boy?”

“Where to begin?” I said. As the rest of my vision refocused, grew accustomed to the light, I took in my surroundings. The Arith Ocean was, at the moment, to my back, but the brilliance of the blue, sparkling mass was not lost upon me; I could catch glimpses of it from my peripheral vision. What really grabbed my attention, however, was the city before me. Enormous stone buildings several stories tall packed the streets of Illirianos. Windows dotted each beige building like flies on old bread. The bustle of the port before us was intense; in fact, I thought, it was potentially busier than Tourmaline City; however, I never did get a good glimpse at the port of Tourmaline.

“Well?” the woman questioned.

By now my smile had faded, leaving a stunned, open-mouthed expression in its wake. “Beautiful,” was all I could muster.

“Me? Soldier boy, I’m your captor.” When silence greeted her, she grunted. “Hah, I know; it’s a helluva sight, isn’t it?” She walked to the railing of the vessel; by now, I noticed, there was no one on board. I wondered how long after the ship had been docked Thayer and I had been left in the hold. Perhaps, I mused, that we were nearly forgotten, left to rot.

“You,” I said. Blinking, I shook my head. “I-I’m sorry.” I could feel my cheeks heating, feel the flush race across my face. From the woman’s expression and reddening, I could tell she was experiencing the same thing. “If I may ask, ma’am, what is it we should call you?”

Straightening the cutlass at her side, the woman said, “Call me Leftenant Jensen.”

“Well, then, Leftenant Jensen,” I said, coyly, “Do you have a first name?”

She scoffed. “I do. But that’s not for you to know, soldier boy.” She began to walk towards the ramp leading to the pier.

“Wait,” I said, quickly, “my name is Emory. Emory Warson.”

She laughed. “Oh, I know, soldier boy.”

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When we had stepped foot on solid ground, we were quickly bound and thrown in the back of a carriage cart. The transport was small and boxlike with a rusty orange exterior. We were thrust inside through an open door, which slammed slut behind us; I peered through equally rusted bars and chuckled. The inside of the cart, I saw, was cramped; outside, in the vastness of open space, I watched Leftenant Jensen salute to another, whom I supposed was her superior officer. Then, suddenly, the cart jerked forward and we were off.

Cobblestones and pebbles were crunched beneath the wheels of the cart, making for an extremely rough passage. With the few glimpses through the bars I was able to muster, I watched Leftenant Jensen, mounted upon a chestnut mare, march alongside the prisoner cart.

“So,” Thayer said between a grin, “what’re you thinking?”

“How the hell to get out of this mess.”

“Wrong!” he shouted, laughing. “Oh, Emory. You’re hopelessly in love with a woman you’ve never met; let’s forget for a moment that she, albeit awfully pretty, is our abductor! Well, I wish you the best of luck because when I get out of this place, I’m sure you’ll want to stay.”

Shaking my head, I said, “I can’t stay, Thayer. I have to get back to Garden and prevent King Malliser from tainting Torryn. I need to –“  
 “You’re probably already too late, Emory! Think about how long we spent in that fucking brig. Days at the least. Gods, Emory! Dean is dead, and King Malliser has probably built three Myst factories by now. Do you think, even for a second, that we’re not too late? No, of course not,” he muttered to himself, “you’re thinking of Leftenant Jensen naked.”

Flushing, I vehemently shook my head. “O-of course not! And when you say it that way, it makes it sound like you’re speaking of a man.” I glanced once more out of the cart at Jensen before turning back to Thayer. “Look, Thayer. I’m going to get us right he hell out of the this mess. I just need a little time. And even if King Malliser has completed the factories, Thorradin and Love and the others are still in Torryn. I’m sure they’ll do something, don’t you? And, while we’re here, we can do everything in our power to prevent the Duke of Elenor from using the Phystalite.”

Settling back onto his seat, Thayer sniffed. “I hope so, Emory. I don’t know what I’d do if Garden and Torryn fell because of me. That’s too much on even the strongest man’s conscious.”

“Thayer… Dean’s death is not on your shoulders.” I relaxed onto the seat; there was no point in struggling for the remainder of the ride; who knew how much further we had left to journey? “His death was no one’s fault; no one could have possibly seen his crossbow. I didn’t. Dean didn’t. Kwasi didn’t. We’re just as much to blame as anyone, Thayer. Bosleigh was, simply put, an evil man.” I swallowed hard, closed my eyes. “He’s dead now, Thayer; Bosleigh won’t hurt anyone else.”

“That won’t bring Dean back.”

“No,” I said, “you’re right. It won’t. Get over it. Do you really, honestly think Dean would give two shits if it was you dead?”

Thayer smiled. “He’d probably just grunt once or twice and move on.”

“Exactly right.”

And with that, we settled in, quietly, for the remnant of the journey.

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As we approached our prison, Leftenant Jensen and her superior covered the barred windows with heavy black linen. So when the cart finally came to a studding halt, neither Thayer nor I had any idea of where we had been taken. The linen was lifted mere seconds after the cart halted. The brightness – which surprised me – caused me to squint; I lifted my hand to cover my eyes.

The cart door creaked in groans of rust as Leftenant Jensen opened it. I examined her face again, noticing now her high cheekbones and brilliant emerald eyes; within them, I saw a life, a fierceness that yearned to free itself. To free itself from what, I wondered. But I wasn’t given the opportunity to ponder as she clutched at the front of my tunic and pulled me free.

I was pressed up against her when I righted myself, feeling her breath upon my neck. She, embarrassed (or so I suspected), pushed me back three steps and straightened her uniform. From behind, I could hear Thayer chortle; he, I imagined, was all too amused at such an inappropriate time.

Scuffs, softly at first but growing louder as they neared, resounded. The man crossed my peripheral vision and came to stand slightly in front of Leftenant Jensen. She stood at attention as he passed, and I scrutinized the man closely. His forest green officer’s uniform was tightly pressed against his skin with numerous medals decorating his left breast. Scars were sketched across his face, colorfully prickling at his flesh; I visualized him smiling, scars tugging at the corners of his lips, teeth bared in a feral grin. It took all I had to suppress a chuckle.

His eyes were dead, however. They moved, certainly, from left to right in inspection. If interest flared or emotion blossomed, I could not tell. His eyelids seemed to droop as if a stroke slackened both sides of his face. They were barren like a womb; lifeless; fruitless; joyless.

A small golden nameplate was clipped to his right breast. It read: Mersson. When he spoke – and it took him at least a minute before he spoke – he spoke with a hiss; it was not unlike a snake. “So, General Warson,” he said, slithering in front of me, “I see you’ve been quite busy across the ocean.” He tugged at the sleeve of his tunic before resuming his speech. “I must say that I thank you sincerely for locating the Phystalite for our good Duke of Elenor. He spent so long searching it out that, well, to be honest, I was questioning its existence. But, well, then, King Malliser up and found his own; then, I knew they were real. However, how many were there?  
 “Rumors spread like rumors will, of course, as I’m sure you’re well aware. And it seems the Duke of Elenor was amidst these rumors. Which, I assume, spurred you to act quite out-of-hand and desert the Garden Palace. Am I wrong?”

I shook my head. “No, Mersson,” I said, earning myself a backhanded blow from Leftenant Jensen. “…sir. You’re quite accurate. But, really, I must ask you this, and, please, answer honestly.” Mersson held up a halting hand as Leftenant Jensen wound up to throw another fist. He nodded towards me. “How did you manage to hire out Lieutenant Bosleigh? Because that would mean some sort of correspondence between King Malliser for allowing that scum to live.”

“I don’t know who this Bosleigh fellow is, Warson,” he replied.

Thayer, a step or two behind me, cursed. “That son-of-a-bitch Malliser actually ordered Bosleigh…”

Mersson, intrigued, raised an eyebrow and studied Thayer. “What is this? Unrest between the king and his guardsmen? Between Emory Warson and King Malliser? Oh, do share, do share. I’m quite interested.”

Thayer, ever-so-clever, shut his mouth.

A thin smile cracked Mersson’s lips, something I would never had thought physically possible. I noted with a tinge of disappointment that, when smiling, he did not look like a rabid wolf. In fact, as I was duly disappointed to discover, Mersson appeared to show some sign of humanity when he, briefly, smiled. That, however, soon dissipated when he said, “You two are going to play, aren’t you? Oh, that is so exciting. I haven’t been able to play in quite a long time.”

“Well, I’m quite pleased you’re quite excited, but aren’t we quite overdue on our, I’m sure, quite extravagant prison cells? Or are they not quite prepared yet because I’d quite like to rest my feet, which are quite tired. Oh, I’m quite parched, by the way, and I’d quite enjoy refreshments, and –“

With disturbing speed, Leftenant Jensen spun Thayer’s head around with a backhanded slap. “Watch your tongue, soldier, or you’ll likely lose it. Kolonel Mersson is the most efficient and renowned torturer here in the Eastern Kingdom. I’m sure,” she said, a pleasant smile shaping her lips, “that he could find a hundred ways to remove that tongue.”

Nonplussed, Thayer simply stared at the Leftenant.

“Oh, Leftenant Jensen, you simply boast too much. I’m not quite,” he said, putting an emphasis on that last word, “that special.”

I shot a sharp glance back towards Thayer who, I noted, was clenching his teeth to restrain his next comment. Jensen saw the warning signal, and I noticed the corners of her lips twitch. Mersson cleared his throat and approached me, placing his left hand upon my left shoulder.

“Well, General Warson, I’ll let the Leftenant take you to your accommodations. And you,” he said, lifting his hand from my shoulder and turning to face Thayer, “will be escorted by yours truly. I’m quite the impressive escort, am I not?”

I was unable to hear Thayer’s reply – if he even made an attempt at one – because Jensen had clutched my arm and dragged me after her. When we were out of eyesight and earshot of Kolonel Mersson, she stopped me, turned, and said, “Soldier boy, don’t be stupid. If you want to survive here, you’ll work with me. Fortunately for you – and unfortunately for your friend – I am your ‘torturer.’ Mersson is his.”

Scoffing, I said, “I’m flattered. I didn’t know a woman could be a torturer.”

She laughed. “Of course a woman could be a torturer, soldier boy. Women, I hear, make the best torturers.”

“Oh, right. Women are inherently evil. They torture men and each other every day of their lives; it’s only natural.” I allowed, I hoped, enough sarcasm into my voice to take away the bite of the insult. Regardless of whether or not Leftenant Jensen understood it was moot when she drove her fist into my gut.

My breath escaped me in one ragged exhalation. It took most of what I could muster just to be able to keep from falling to my knees. Jensen patted my back in a disturbing gesture of respect. “I’m impressed, soldier boy. You may not look tough, but that was a pretty good blow to the gut, if I do say so myself.”

“Try,” I said between sharp inhales, “stomaching Winslow.”

She cast me a curious glance and said, “He must have one helluva sucker punch if that’s prepared you for this.

I grunted. “He just comes upon you like it’s nobody’s business.”

By now we were moving along a corridor that consisted of no doors, and the only windows were located at the top of the walls; even then, they were barely large enough to allow adequate sunlight through. She led me, then, along a series of faceless corridors, each looking identical to the one we had just exited. I was soon lost, unable to remember the sequences of lefts and rights, and how many times we continued straight at an intersection of hallways. I began to notice doorways built into the sides of the corridors, speckled almost casually throughout the palatial building. Never once, I thought, did I find two doors amongst the same corridor; I wondered if that gave the prisoner more comfort or prevented prisoners from collaborating. Perhaps, I thought, both. And yet we still pushed on through the corridors, I following Jensen, and she, lithely, following the faintest suggestion of sunlight. Eventually, though, the darkened hallways gave way to a much brighter scene.

When we finally escaped – for I honestly felt that, if she had left me in the middle of those corridors, I would have been endlessly lost; a prisoner nonetheless – I came up short in the next region of the prison. Whereas the lightless hallways whence we came, this series of corridors was brightly lit and colorful. What I assumed was stained glass decorated the halls, mingling with sun and projecting distorted colorations onto the tiles beneath my feet.

“This, soldier boy, is where you’ll be staying.”

“In these halls?”

Laughing, Jensen said, “No, soldier boy. Not quite. I have a room picked out just for you.”

And thus she led me throughout the maze of corridors and rooms similar in layout as the previous set but much more colorful. I hoped the inside of the cells didn’t drastically differ from the mood the stained glass windows and colored lights implied; that would be, I thought, the beginning of some psychological torture; and that’s what Jensen said she was: a torturer.

But when we actually reached my prison after a seemingly endless trek throughout various hallways of different coloration and lighting, Leftenant Jensen unlocked the door and slid it open. What lie before me was a beautiful sight; it was, in fact, more opulent than my quarters in Garden Palace. Hell, I thought, our quarters in Garden Palace were prisonlike. Yet when I was actually thrown into a prison cell, I discovered it considerably more comfortable than my home.

Was this another one of the torturer’s tricks?

I turned and faced her with an accusing stare. She, unguarded, cast an honest expression of concern; then, slowly, turned it into anger. “What is the matter with you now, soldier boy? Don’t you ever stop bitching?”

“I know what you’re doing. You’re trying – and you will fail, if I might add – to make me turn upon my home. This, this cell… is way more welcoming than any prison I’ve ever seen. So, it has to be some sort of vile ploy you people thought up to fuck with me.”

What began as a chuckle erupted into full blown laughter. Leftenant Jensen nearly collapsed upon the floor in her fit of amusement; I, unsure of what was taking place, stared upon her mirthful frame (which was shaking now) in utter confusion. After a moment she straightened herself and rested a hand on my cheek. She stood within a step of my body, and I could feel the warmth of her breath upon my face. “Soldier boy,” she said, moving her face closer to mine, “I could do so much worse than make you want to stay here.”

She pressed her lips against mine briefly and, just as quickly, pushed away. “I wanted to experience that,” she said, licking her lips. “Excluding the fact that you were cooped up in the hold of a vessel for, well, I don’t even know how long… it felt pretty good. Now what was I saying?”

I stood silently.

“I don’t remember. Well,” she said, turning, hand holding onto the door, “I’ll see you tomorrow, soldier boy. Be good now, you hear?”

The door closed with a click behind her.

I felt, for the first time, a snaking sensation that writhed up my belly. It coiled around the pit of my stomach and squeezed gently, and I thought I recognized the feeling; I couldn’t place a finger on it, however. So, I turned and examined the room that I was now pleasantly imprisoned in.

Pushing aside the memories of how I ended up in the Eastern Kingdom, I stared at the barred window before me. It was, like the rest of this section of the prison, stained glass. The window itself took more than half of the wall opposite the doorway, and I gazed at the mocking size. To the right of the doorway was an enormous, king sized bed, and, as I ran my fingers across the fabric, felt the rich silk that covered it. I had never known such luxuries before, and I mused at the irony of the situation.

I spun around and stared at the largest desk I had ever seen (sitting opposite, of course, of the bed in the overly large room). It was finished in a strong black lacquer and, in the discolored sunlight that danced through the window, shone in a stark magnificence. And upon the floor, which I had neglected until this moment, was a deep green carpet; I bent and touched it, feeling the softness of the material against my callused skin.

Slowly, I stood. As grand as this place was – and it was ever-so-tempting to remain there – I knew I needed to find some means of escape. I had to assume, at that moment, that Leftenant Jensen was toying with me; how could an enemy – a torturer, no less – fall in love, as it seemed, so quickly with her captive? And so I shook that thought from my head and walked to the desk. I sat down upon a cushioned, high backed chair and found a book of paper and ink and quill set out.

I picked up the quill, dipped it in the ink and wrote.

Fourteen

I.

Crown

A crown of gold,

Quite unlike a crown of thorns,

But just the same in theory, in ideology,

The same in shadows; identical in darkness,

Rests upon his head,

Guides his eyes and guides his desires.

It chains him, this crown, and weighs upon his neck;

Would it dare chance to break his bones;

Is it set upon a leash and held by another;

Or is gold the catalyst of greed and power;

It binds him to his throne,

That of which is made of blood.

II.

Blood

Construction, I’m told, falls together like the birth of a child.

Laborious pains, excruciating in the extreme, wrack the body;

Convulsions, barely noticeable at first, but growing, quickly,

In size and potency,

Wraps the body: a sandpaper blanket that leaves the flesh raw.

But the bricks are placed upon each other

Like the pressure upon the womb;

Mortar holds them together, cementing the structure,

The blood that leaks, the blood that lives.

Yet blood is spilled in creation,

In the laying of the foundation;

The fleshing of skeletal metal, of muscles and bones.

What trickles forth is new life,

New livelihoods, reflected upon (if strained to see),

The sleek and slender curves of bodies,

The blunt edges of walls.

The life given by a mother, like those of a nation,

Is nothing short of an ocean of blood.

III.

Adolescence

Innocence is nothing more than a myth

(A white dress cannot stay free of soil;

Even before its creation is it dirtied).

No child, dead upon arrival or alive (sick or well),

Is born pure.

What separates ideals of good,

Ideals of evil,

Is restraint, control.

Knowledge, then, may serve as vice or savior;

Whose hands hold it twists it -

For knowledge is rather malleable –

To fit a purpose, an existence.

Aging, believed a curse, is the saturation of knowledge

(For like a wine – aged – it yields more power;

Like a tree, it grows stronger).

It is natural to mature, to, perhaps, prosper or perish

(Though we all, indeed, suffer and,

In the end, die).

What we make of adolescence

(Our terminus in which we must choose

Between paths of virtue, paths of sin),

We make of our lives.