

# WILL WIGHT

AUTHOR OF GHOSTWATER



# UNDERLORD

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CRADLE : VOLUME SIX

# Contents

[\[Title Page\]](#)

[\[Dedication\]](#)

[\[Copyright\]](#)

[Prologue](#)

[Chapter 1](#)

[Chapter 2](#)

[Chapter 3](#)

[Chapter 4](#)

[Chapter 5](#)

[Chapter 6](#)

[Chapter 7](#)

[Chapter 8](#)

[Chapter 9](#)

[Chapter 10](#)

[Chapter 11](#)

[Chapter 12](#)

[Chapter 13](#)

[Chapter 14](#)

[Chapter 15](#)

[Chapter 16](#)

[Chapter 17](#)

[Chapter 18](#)

[Chapter 19](#)

[Chapter 20](#)

[Epilogue](#)

[\[Sequel Page\]](#)

[\[Bloopers\]](#)

[\[Other Books\]](#)

# Underlord

## Cradle - Book Six

Will Wight

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To Patrick, who has been with me from the beginning.  
Blame all the covers on him.

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## **Prologue**

### **Iteration 986**

Pariana was the last Abidan stationed in this nameless world. Sectors Ninety-Nine and One Hundred had been completely abandoned, but they still clung to Sector Ninety-Eight.

All the sectors from Ninety up were border worlds in the process of stabilization. The Way had a tenuous grasp on 986, so it was strange, lacking many of the fundamental laws that kept other Iterations stable. It was a flat plane, not a planet, with a sky that was a patchwork of a dozen bright colors during the day. At night, it became a sea of black, with ethereal creatures flying slowly overhead instead of stars.

She loved it here. Pariana had been born far from the human standard—she was three meters tall, bald, and golden-skinned, an outcast even in the world of her birth. But the population here, workers trained to operate in border worlds, had been born in Sanctum: the home of the Abidan. They were used to stranger sights than her.

They treated her no differently for her appearance, nor for her power or status. She was only a one-star Titan, not too far above them. So they treated her as one of her own.

That was why her teammates had left Pariana behind, as they were called one by one to fight off other border incursions in the sector. She actually liked it here.

Ten thousand souls called this place home, and they had brought with them a collection of buildings and machines to support colonization. The longer they lived here, the closer the Way would become, until eventually this world would be stable enough to support a long-term population. At that point, it would either become a source of raw materials for the Abidan or be split into multiple fragments that would become new Pioneer worlds.

She had long felt sadness at the thought of that day approaching; the day

she would have to turn over this Iteration to someone else. Now, she couldn't wait to see that day arrive.

It would mean they had all survived.

The Abidan had been without Ozriel for too long. Corrupted fragments were spreading, so it took longer for worlds to stabilize, and even stable worlds could begin to fall apart. The Abidan were stretched beyond their means, leaving Pariana alone in a world that should have been protected by a small team.

Protected from invasion.

Across the multi-colored sky, three massive circles of arcane symbols flashed into existence. Kilometers wide, these formation circles were her specialty. She had been recruited by the Abidan not because of her power, but because of her skill in creating these energy formations.

The golden circles blazed with power, shining like the suns this Iteration didn't actually have, and Pariana heard a warning siren in her mind.

[Impending spatial violation,] her Presence warned her. [World defense formations have automatically engaged. Sector Control has been notified.]

The sky cracked like glass in between the golden formation-circles, revealing darkness beyond.

Pariana heaved great breaths, her hands trembling. With a thought, she summoned her armor, which flowed over her in seamless white plates. Another thought, and alarms sounded all across the colony.

"Danger!" a mechanized voice shouted. "Danger! Seek shelter immediately!"

She didn't look back to see the workers dropping tools and hurrying toward the nearest fortified structures. She didn't need to see armored plates lowering over windows, or buildings sinking down into the earth for protection. She knew the security protocols. They had drilled for this, and everyone in this world was a trained volunteer.

Many of them were also her friends. Now, she was the only one standing between them and the invaders.

In minutes, the colony had sunk entirely beneath the ground, leaving only plains of crops and abandoned machinery. The cracks in the sky had widened until she could see the void beyond.

She cast out her will, taking control over the formation-circles. Even as the one who designed them, she found it difficult; these were complex structures, and controlling them one at a time required great skill and

concentration. Controlling three was a point of pride.

As soon as her Presence indicated that someone had slipped through the spatial crack, she fired.

Each of the three circles released a white-hot beam of destructive energy that thundered through the air, focusing on the crack. She had over-fortified this world, both in her zeal to protect it and out of a lack of other things to do; any one of these formations was powerful enough to scour Iteration 986 clean in a single blast.

Three at the same time released a blinding light and a deafening roar. Her Presence automatically protected her eyes and ears, throwing up a barrier around her to protect from the furious explosion of wind that tore up the plains for kilometers, shredding crops, sending a ring of dust blasting into the distance.

As a Titan, she had been trained to produce shields and barriers of all kinds. With her best efforts, she could *maybe* have defended against one of these attacks. She would have no hope against all three.

She trembled and caught her breath as the dust settled, trying to convince herself that this would be all there was to it. Her defenses had worked. The threat was over.

[Incoming!] her Presence warned her, and Pariana drew on the Way.

A perfect cube of blue power surrounded her, protecting her. It was just in time.

A cloud of black smoke stretched out from the crack in the world, forming into a mouth full of razor-sharp teeth. It bit down on her, large enough to swallow her whole, but had caught a mouthful of her Titan barrier instead.

The teeth scrabbled on the solid edges of the blue cube for a moment, trying to find a purchase.

Then her barrier began to break.

Panic threatened to swallow her from the inside. She had yet to catch a glimpse of the enemy, and they had already shrugged off her best attack and casually broken her defense. This was not a probe or a scout; it was a true assault.

And she was alone.

Pariana reached out for her formations again, turning them onto her enemy, but a spike of pain lanced through her brain and suddenly she could feel the defenses no more.

[Your authority has been overridden,] her Presence told her.



Impossible. She had designed and placed those circles herself. How could someone take them from her this easily?

But even to her eyes, the truth was clear. The golden formations were shot through with red light, and as she watched, they turned to focus on her.

The jaws stopped chewing on her barrier, the column of smoke slithering back to its summoner. Only then did she get a look at her attackers.

Four enemies of the Abidan floated in the air before her.

The first looked to be a standard human with dark brown skin, wearing a helmet with a pane of transparent red glass covering his face. Red light streamed from his fingertips, and its signature matched what had taken over her formations.

The second was an aquatic-adapted human, with slick blue skin, no hair, and gills at the side of her neck. She carried a pair of sickles that looked as though they had been torn off of a giant purple mantis, each of which carried a dark power that suggested they should be sealed away in an Abidan vault. The woman looked at Pariana with clear hatred, as though the Abidan had personally offended her.

She could see nothing of the third figure. He, she, or it was covered in a mechanical suit of synthetic fabric and steel. They carried a rifle, and even without examining it carefully, Pariana could tell the weapon carried far more power than her formations had. It felt like the sealed form of one of the Judges' weapons; it terrified her.

The final invader was another standard human, with pale skin and long, black hair tied into a tail that fluttered in the wind. She wore furs and leathers that looked as though they had been taken from a dark-furred lion, and they gave her a barbaric air. The black smoke drifted around her palm.

Her dark eyes surveyed Pariana with absolute disregard.

The Abidan's Presence whispered, [All four match descriptions of tenth-generation Vroshir.]

Pariana didn't ask for their names. It wouldn't help.

The first generation of Vroshir had worked for the Abidan, long ago. They lived to shatter the Eledari Pact and see the Court of Seven cast down. It was not a grudge that she could resolve.

In the face of her death, Pariana reached out to the Way. The touch of its absolute order soothed her.

But she couldn't fight the despair. Everything she had worked for, everyone she loved in this world, was coming crumbling down.

“Relinquish your Presence into our keeping,” the black-haired woman ordered, drifting down to hover over Pariana’s cracked barrier. “You shall be taken as a prisoner of war, and all others will be liberated.”

*Did Sector Control respond?* Pariana asked her Presence.

[No. I cannot confirm whether they received our report or not.]

Pariana closed her eyes. In truth, it wouldn’t matter even if Sector Control had heard them. No one else was close enough to respond, and even if they had been, it would be too late.

*Destroy yourself before they capture you,* she ordered.

[Of course. I am sorry I could not serve you better,] the Presence added, its voice tinged with sadness.

Smoke boiled out of the fur-clad Vroshir’s palm again. “Too late,” she said.

The mouth shattered Pariana’s barrier.

At the same time, the formations she’d created turned on her home. Impossibly hot pillars of light carved furrows through the crops, spearing into the bunkers beneath.

Pariana could feel the Way weakening as people died. She threw everything she had into a barrier to protect them, and a blue dome flickered into existence over the smoking hole in the colony, cutting off the weapon’s beam.

The gilled woman swept one of her sickles through the air, and a violet slash tore open a canyon in the earth. It split Pariana’s protection in half.

Earth blasted upwards as though a volcano had erupted underground, spewing fire and debris all the way into the atmosphere. The four Vroshir were surrounded by invisible barriers, protecting them and Pariana.

The Abidan Titan collapsed to her knees, soaked in tears. The smoky maw had left her alive. For now.

The armored figure had its rifle trained on her. Pariana surged forward—the Way was too distant for her to manipulate now, and her specialty had never been violence, but she had nothing left to lose.

He shot her.

The sound of the gunshot somehow pierced the deafening sounds of exploding earth. It drilled a hole through her white-plated armor, through her personal barrier, through her chest, and out the back.

Slowly, Pariana toppled to the ground.

She could feel her Presence trying to eradicate itself when it was seized

by red power and dragged out, a mass of colorless light like a ghost. The Way had never felt more distant.

As she died, she desperately cast out her mind, trying to feel someone alive. Without her Presence to guide her powers, she was left with only her mundane senses. It was like going suddenly blind.

Armor and powers broken, Pariana drifted into death alone.

...but as the darkness had almost claimed her entirely, it stopped.

“Fear not,” said a woman’s warm voice. “I have come for you.”

The world reversed itself.

Pariana was pulled to her feet as though on a puppet’s strings, her vision returning, her flesh stitched up and her armor restored.

The cascade of debris fountaining into the sky froze, then drifted back down, sliding back into place.

Pariana’s Presence, a squirming mass of silver, ripped itself from the hands of the Vroshir in furs and settled back into her mind. She sobbed again, in relief at having this piece of her restored. One by one, she could feel the lives of the colonists coming back, like candles being lit once more.

The only things in the world that had not been reversed were the Vroshir themselves. They resisted, pitting their wills against the power that had rewound the entire Iteration. They all rose into the air again, facing the source of that power, and of the blue light that shone down on the scene.

Suriel, the Phoenix, Sixth Judge of the Abidan Court, floated with the power of the Way streaming off of her to either side like massive wings. Her mantle blazed behind her, like a river of light, her armor seamless and white—identical to Pariana’s. Ghostly correlation lines, like strings of gray smoke, ran from her fingertips to the back of her skull. Her hair drifted behind her, bright shining green, and her eyes blazed with purple formations that could see Fate. At her hip hung Suriel’s Razor, dormant now, like a meter-long ruler of blue steel.

Pariana sagged forward, lowering her head in both respect and relief. A Judge had come for her.

Now everything would be all right.

The woman in furs began to laugh.

Ignoring Pariana, she threw her hands to the sky. Black smoke *gushed* from her hands, covering the world. The man in the red visor swirled his fingers in a significant pattern, and the smoke was threaded through with red lights. Pariana’s golden formation-circles drifted beneath them, still under his

control. The robotic figure pulled a mechanical device from behind him, like a computerized bear trap, activating it with a touch.

And Pariana realized she could no longer touch the Way. The lives of the people behind her had been restored, and her connection should have returned with them, but now it was as though the Way had vanished completely. The world had been cut off.

Suriel's mantle dimmed, weakening immediately, but the scars in the earth finished knitting themselves together. Finally, the entire Iteration had been restored to pristine condition. Only then did her mantle gutter and die. Even the blue 'wings' streaming from behind her vanished, leaving Suriel surrounded by enemies.

Without the Way, the world's laws would eventually crumble, which the Vroshir wouldn't want any more than the Abidan would. They wanted to use this world, to add it to their network, not to see it dissolve into fragments with no causality or consistent physics. But that would take time. For now, they had simply rendered any Abidan in the world powerless.

This had been a trap from the beginning.

Suriel still floated in the air, but now she was relying on her own power, not her authority as a Judge. Pariana ran beneath her. "Do we have reinforcements coming, Judge?"

"Stand down, Titan," Suriel said, and her words were calm and certain. "I am enough."

A rifle, two sickles, three golden formation-circles, and a maw of smoke all turned toward Suriel. Each weapon carried enough power to rend continents and shatter space.

The Phoenix faced them all with nothing but her own personal power.

"Surrender, and I will grant you mercy," Suriel said.

The black-haired woman bared her teeth in what Pariana hesitated to call a smile. "Keep your blighted tongue still, tyrant."

With no discernible signal, all four Vroshir attacked at once.

The aquatic woman slashed her sickles together, sending a cross of violet power rushing through the air. The attack cracked space behind her, the world splintering for hundreds of kilometers in her wake. The earth quaked and shook, and Pariana could feel the world's tenuous hold on reality begin to shake.

The woman in lion fur conjured a thousand ghostly mouths on worm-like bodies of black smoke. They dove for Suriel, and each one felt like a plague

that could decimate planets. They carried ancient hatred that soaked Pariana's soul, and only her Presence's protection kept their energy from sending her into madness.

The armored man's rifle cracked, and this time the sound echoed through the entire world. Air exploded away from him at the sound, and the bullet flashed forward with a thousand times the power he had used to kill Pariana the first time. That one shot alone carried enough energy to obliterate everything in this Iteration.

Finally, the red-visored man triggered the three golden formations. They fired pillars of superheated destructive energy. The columns of light blasted down.

Obliterating him instantly.

The attacks happened instantly and simultaneously, so Pariana had to piece the entire scene together afterwards. Without being empowered as an Abidan, and without the Presence's effect on her mind, she wouldn't have been able to follow what happened at all.

The formations fired, not at Suriel, but at the one who had taken them over. As she arrived, Suriel had taken control back, and neither Pariana—their designer—nor the red-visored Vroshir had noticed a thing.

Suriel flew through the air in an erratic pattern, a bright streak that dodged the thousand mouths of smoke effortlessly. The X-crossed slashes from the sickle had grown in size and power, destroying everything in their path from ground to sky, and they would not be avoided.

The Judge crashed through them.

The violet light burst, sending shards of power and malicious intent spinning chaotically through the world, carving serpentine scars into the earth. Suriel's armor had cracked as well, pieces flying from it, and blood flew from her exposed skin, but she was safe.

When the bullet reached her, she met it with her Razor.

The sapphire steel hit the missile and sliced through it. Pariana had never seen anything like it. The Vroshir had obviously put their entire will behind the bullet, but Suriel cut it as though it were nothing more than physical metal.

Her weapon split the bullet, which broke into two halves that flew to either side of her, landing with the force of missiles.

In the same motion, Suriel struck back.

The Razor swept through the air again, though there was no one in front

of her. Kilometers away, the armor-clad gunman's head flew off, streaming blood.

As though by coincidence, Suriel's chaotic flight path took her close to the fish-woman. Pariana didn't see what happened, but the Vroshir pitched over. With no visible wounds, she went from alive to dead in an instant. Purple sickles fell from lifeless hands.

The black-haired woman in furs screamed, pouring all her power into her legion of spirits until the entire Iteration screamed with her fury and hatred. An ocean hundreds of kilometers away was whipped into a frenzy, and dead fish began to bob to the surface. The luminous creatures inhabiting the night sky died one by one, falling to the ground like distant, shining meteorites. Even Pariana's consciousness began to fuzz.

Then her formation-circles, under Suriel's control, fired again.

The Vroshir woman was swallowed up by another sun-bright detonation, and her army of ghosts dissipated. But when the light faded, she strode out, protected by the power of her ironclad will. She raised her hands and her power together, enough black smoke boiling behind her to depopulate worlds.

Still flying through the air, Suriel faced the Vroshir, and her voice echoed with transcendent authority. **"Begone,"** the Judge said.

Pariana felt like she were submerged under endless pressure, like all of reality had been squeezed like a damp rag.

Then the one remaining Vroshir simply disappeared.

All of her ghostly smoke was erased from existence, and her barrier sealing the world lifted. The Way shone through once again, a comforting warmth to Pariana's senses.

A working like that took extreme concentration, even from a Judge. Suriel couldn't have done that while fighting the others—Pariana couldn't believe she had managed it even now. Wiping someone as significant as a full Vroshir from reality was all but impossible.

[The Way does not make a Judge strong,] her Presence said.

Suriel slipped her Razor back onto her waist, where it stuck. Her armor re-formed, her mantle reignited, and the wounds on her skin vanished. The devastation left by the battle was wiped away in seconds.

Leaving the Phoenix drifting in the air, in all her glory, pristine and unharmed.

"Glory and honor to the Judge," Pariana said, once again bending her tall,

golden body in supplication.

Suriel spoke softly, the formation in her purple eyes spinning. “There is still much to be fixed. Yours was not the only world under attack.”

## Chapter 1

Akura Charity, Sage of the Silver Heart, stood looking at the broken doorway into Ghostwater.

The jade doorframe, set into a cave in the side of the island, had been sliced apart from the outside. The smooth, fist-sized hole in the rock behind it told her what the technique had been: black dragon's breath.

She had other tasks on this island besides watching Harmony, but she had still kept her eye on him until the end. The interference from the collapsing space had grown too much, and the picture had grown less and less clear.

However, she had sensed it when the Blackflame artist and his contracted turtle had emerged from the pocket world. She had been surprised that her grand-nephew hadn't been the first out, but she hadn't worried much about it. She could still sense him, distantly, inside a Monarch's private space. She still had time before the world collapsed, and she didn't need a portal to enter.

But when she had tried to cross space, she had been denied.

A will greater than her own had locked Ghostwater down. She felt *him* arrive like a great ship passing by her in the ocean, stirring up the water with the weight of its presence.

With Northstrider there, she'd had no chance of breaking in. She had been forced to wait, hoping that the Monarch would bring her young grand-nephew home.

She had started carving a memorial for Akura Harmony in that moment. From everything she'd heard, Northstrider's mercy was a thin thread from which to hang her hopes.

When Northstrider's presence vanished, she tried once again to enter, but he had closed off the space. She slapped her power against his like a child trying to batter down a brick wall with her fists.

She felt the moment when Ghostwater crumbled to pieces. By that time, the spatial distortion had grown so great that she could no longer sense Harmony within.



Now, she placed a bust of her grand-nephew at the base of the jade doorway. Carved with her own hands, the sculpture captured his delicate features, the arrogant tilt of his chin, the distant look of determination in his eyes. Hair cascaded down his shoulders, and a dark halo hung behind his head.

A brief wave of sadness passed over her. His branch of the family had not produced someone so skilled in generations. He had hoped to become one of the legendary Akura clan pillars one day, like his great-grandfather Akura Fury or like Charity herself.

He would have had a long road to travel before he reached that goal, if he ever did, but he had been practically guaranteed a good life. She regretted the loss.

But she had buried younger relatives before. It was one reason she had never had children of her own. She stood in silence for many minutes, remembering Harmony.

The Sage looked from the bust of Harmony back up to the slice in the doorway. One of the Blackflames had broken the door behind them, trapping her grand-nephew in a dissolving pocket world.

They could not be allowed to take the Akura clan so lightly. An insult like this, gone without redress, would make the family look weak before their enemies. She was inclined to punish the sacred beast, simply on principle; any beast that dared to snap at a human should feel the consequences.

But one did not reach Charity's level without a certain amount of cold logic. And the Heart Sage had great control over her own emotions.

The Blackflame artist and his turtle had entered as the weakest individuals in Ghostwater. If they had truly grown to the point that they could threaten Harmony, then she couldn't blame them for doing so. Harmony had competed in a game—one in which he'd started with all the advantages—and lost.

It pained her to think of one of her young relatives in such a way, but regret couldn't change the truth. She had known there was some risk to Harmony. Training him in the face of real danger was part of the reason they'd brought him here; no talents bloomed in a closed room.

And they needed talents. Now, more than ever.

That thought made up her mind. She would not cut off the Blackflame boy's growth, unless of course he demonstrated hostility against the clan itself. He might grow into another valuable asset of the Akura clan.

But she could apply some extra pressure.

And if the Blackflame bloomed under pressure, then he would be qualified to pay off his debt.

~~~

Lindon knelt in the cramped confines of the cloudship, pushing pure madra endlessly into a script carved into a wooden panel. At the center of the script was a fist-sized crystal flask containing a rolling green cloud—the madra that powered their flight. The ship creaked and shook as though in the middle of storm-tossed waves.

[You're doing great work,] Dross said in his head. [So great. In about five minutes, when we run out of cloud madra and fall screaming to our deaths, I want you to remember that you died doing your best.]

They had found the Skysworn cloudship where they left it: on the edge of the island outside Ghostwater. It had been more or less intact, but the crystal flask that stored its cloud madra was not entirely full. The green Thousand-Mile Cloud wouldn't have lasted all the way back to land, so Lindon had been stretching it with pure madra.

Unfortunately, that meant diluting it. They didn't have any wind or cloud artists onboard, so the Thousand-Mile Cloud got thinner by the day. Eithan had fueled a cloudship in this way before, but he had alternated between providing his madra and using scripts to draw aura. Either this cloudship couldn't do that, or Lindon hadn't figured out how.

Yerin and Mercy took turns piloting the ship. Mostly Mercy. When Yerin took the helm, she tended to run them too close to aura storms, hostile sacred beasts, and mountain peaks. Though she did make good time.

Lindon sent another pulse of madra into the script, and the green cloud rolling in the crystal flask weakened another notch. The ship shuddered, and he knew the large Thousand-Mile Cloud that was keeping them aloft had faded as well. He couldn't add any more power. Scripts on the ship's hull would draw in aura from outside to replenish their stores, which was the only reason they'd lasted this long, but that system couldn't keep up any longer.

"Let them know," he ordered Dross.

He could feel it as the mental construct opened up his mind, projecting words into Mercy and Yerin at the same time. [Attention all crew: everything is fine down here, except that we're out of fuel. As long as we make an emergency landing right now, everything will be totally safe.]

Lindon hurried up, bracing himself against the wall as the cloudship

pitched. His pale right arm sank into the wood as though into soft mud, and it took him a moment to pull it free.

There were no windows below the deck. He had no way of telling if they were close to landing or not. They could be inches from the ground or a thousand feet in the air, and he would have no idea.

The worst part was not knowing, he decided. When the ship shuddered again and he lost his balance, he couldn't tell if the turbulence was nothing to worry about or if they were all on the brink of death.

Finally, the ship stabilized again, so he shoved open the trap door and made his way outside.

The weather was beautiful. He had been down in the dark so long that he had pictured it storming and raining, but in fact the wind was calm and the sky was clear.

Yerin stood at a wooden panel covered in shining script-circles, her teeth bared and eyes furious. The two silver sword-arms behind her back had been jammed into the wood of the deck, nailing her in place. The control panel had been made for someone taller than she was, so it came up almost to her chin, but she glared down at it like she was about to crush it to splinters.

Nearby, Mercy had lashed herself to the railing with long tendrils of darkness. She sat cross-legged, nestled in the center of her web, purple eyes shining. It seemed like she was looking forward to the danger, though he would have thought she'd have gotten enough on Ghostwater's island. Her hair was still short, shorter than Yerin's; a reminder that it had been burned off by a dragon Underlady and she'd spent weeks—and a fortune in elixirs—recovering from the damage.

She raised one black-gloved hand and patted the wall of smoldering shell next to her. “We’ve got everything under control,” she said. “No need to worry!”

Orthos didn't poke his head out. He was tied to the deck by the same strings of shadow that bound Mercy. His voice rumbled out, echoing as though from a cave. “You're the ones who should be worried. Not one of you has a shell.”

Lindon could feel that the huge turtle was barely keeping his fear under control. That made it harder for Lindon to wrestle his own nerves, but there was still a spark of pure joy left in Orthos' soul. He had been practically reborn in Ghostwater, and he hadn't stopped celebrating for the past two weeks. Even now, withdrawn into his shell and preparing for a crash, there

was a part of him that exulted in his new, strengthened body. That was enough to help Lindon fight his way free of Orthos' fear and keep a clear head.

Lindon pushed his way out and along the edge of the ship, keeping a tight grip on the railing. They were definitely descending, though the trees were getting closer at a much faster rate than he was comfortable with. And the green cloud keeping them aloft had faded to a sort of lime-colored haze. Maybe it was better not to look.

Mercy had been controlling the ship until recently, when she ran out of madra, and then Orthos had tried before getting frustrated and threatening to blast a hole in the hull. Finally, Yerin had taken over, determined to land the ship even if it killed her.

Through the creaking of wood and the rush of wind, he heard the soft tinkling of glass. Little Blue scampered up to him a moment later, a tiny spirit in the shape of a woman made of deep blue light. Her flaring dress slid smoothly over the deck. She pulled herself up Lindon's leg, nimble as a monkey, and a moment later she sat on his shoulder. Chimes sounded in his ear as though she were filling him in on everything that had happened since he'd gone below.

Recently, he'd thought he was starting to understand her: she was telling him about the sights she'd seen during their flight. It could have been his imagination giving shape to the Riverseed's meaningless squeaks, but he responded attentively nonetheless, nodding gravely at her and making responsive noises himself. If she was telling him something, he didn't want to seem rude.

Finally, he made it next to Yerin. "Apologies. I held on as long as I could."

The ship pitched so far to one side that half the sky was replaced by an ocean of trees before Yerin corrected it. "We're just a skip from some town. Long as there's an Arelius family down there, we're—"

The ship shuddered, and the lights on the control panel shone. Yerin growled with effort, gripping the sides of the panel so hard the wood splintered, her scars standing out brightly against her skin.

She shouted over the wind, sending another flare of madra into the panel. "Everybody hold tight!"

Lindon braced himself, gathering Little Blue in his left hand and holding the railing with his right. It was less than encouraging to know that if he

stopped cycling madra to the limb he would immediately fly off and be lost to the wind, but that was all the more reason not to stop cycling.

The wind picked up, the boat shook, and they started to fall. Lindon couldn't tell if they were landing or crashing, and at that point, there might have been little difference.

[Oh look, the owl's still there,] Dross noted.

Lindon was determinedly staring at the deck and *not* looking over the edge of the railing, but Dross' comment made him realize he could see something at the edge of his vision. An owl—or at least a Remnant that looked like one—perched on the opposite railing. It was made of madra that looked like swirling silver smoke, edged with the occasional flicker of purple light.

The Remnant had been following them for days. Maybe ever since they left the island. It showed itself once or twice a day, as though to remind them that it was still there.

Lindon had tried to point it out to Yerin and Mercy, but the owl always seemed to vanish when they looked for it. Lindon might not have ever noticed it himself if not for Dross, as the thought-construct was far better at using Lindon's senses than Lindon himself was.

He didn't spare another thought for the owl. Some Remnants had strange, almost obsessive behaviors; maybe this one was stuck following cloudships. He certainly wasn't going to deal with it while they were in the middle of a crash.

The deck surged upwards, and Lindon almost thought they'd made a soft landing before he realized Yerin was pushing out the last of their cloud madra. After this surge, they would fall.

For lack of something better to focus on, he kept his eyes fixed on the owl.

Mercy sat up, staring at him. “Is it the owl? Is it here?” She craned herself around in her little nest of black madra, eager to see.

She had been desperate to catch a glimpse of the owl. She hadn't said why, but sometimes people could be superstitious about Remnants.

Silver light flared from the script in front of Yerin, and the console exploded into splinters.

The ship hung in the air for one brief, frozen second.

Yerin sighed.

Then the cloudship fell.

...roughly two feet.

It settled onto the ground with a crunch, rolling slightly on its side, and shuddering for another moment or two before it came to a halt. Lindon released his grip on the railing, sliding over to come to a stop next to Yerin.

He nudged her with his elbow. "Congratulations on your successful landing, captain."

From behind them, Mercy cheered.

With her shoulder, Yerin lightly shoved him back. "Not the worst one of my life, I'll give you that." She eyed him. "You could have probably jumped down from the clouds and walked it off."

"Well," Lindon said, "thanks to you, I didn't have to."

It had been strange for both of them, over the last week or two, now that they were at the same stage of advancement. The atmosphere between them had changed, and Lindon was still trying to figure out how.

The dark webs around Mercy dissolved in a rush of black motes of color, and she stumbled down the deck past them, bracing herself on her braided black staff so she didn't slip. She looked back as she ran. "Next time, we should all jump!"

The ground rumbled as Orthos leaped over the side, landing on soft earth with a surge of relief that Lindon could feel. Gingerly, the turtle scooped up a bite of soil and grass, chewing with great relish.

Lindon released Little Blue from his hand, and she scampered off to go join Orthos. From inside Lindon's head, Dross gasped.

[Look, everyone! Look! Here come some friends! That's a relief, isn't it?]

Dross must have been sharing the message, because they all looked in the same direction at once.

They had landed in a clearing between trees, but the woods were thin enough that they had no problem seeing a nearby hill covered in low sandstone buildings. A large town or a small city—it was their destination, though none of them knew exactly where they were. They had simply planned to stop at the first town of any size to try and contact the Arelius family.

It would have been far easier to contact the Skysworn, who had agents all over the Empire. But given Lindon's previous experience, a Skysworn squad would be as likely to execute everyone as to welcome them back.

Between Lindon and the town, only a few hundred feet away, a group of two or three dozen people had frozen in the middle of a celebration. Colorful

ribbons were strung between trees, and they all wore fine clothing. There were a few different Goldsigns among the crowd: a green third eye in the middle of the forehead, a red flower of madra blooming over the heart, a wide and thick yellow-brown tail that was so dense it looked almost real.

Many of these onlookers were children, and the entire group stared at Lindon and the others with wide eyes. Some of them held drinks halfway to their lips.

But this wasn't the group that had grabbed Dross' attention.

[Wow, they were quick to show up, weren't they? They must have been trying to catch up for days!]

Over their heads, on the horizon and approaching quickly, was a group of green Thousand-Mile Clouds. They were heading toward the cloudship's wreckage.

Lindon's heart clenched.

"Dross," Lindon said aloud, "where did they come from?"

The clouds had gotten close enough that he could see their riders, wearing exactly what he had expected: deep emerald armor.

[Relax!] Dross said in a soothing tone. [They're from the same organization as you are. Nothing to worry about! We can take it easy and let them carry us home. And look, they're protecting us from every direction at once!]

Yerin whipped around to the other direction, checking to see if there were really people behind them as well. Lindon had no doubt there were, so he continued watching the group of approaching Skysworn.

"How many?" he asked.

[Four Truegolds, four Highgolds, and six Lowgolds,] Dross reported. [And I believe one Underlord. Nothing to worry about with him around!]

Orthos braced his feet, staring into the sky with eyes shining red. Little Blue stretched to her full six-inch height on his head, pointing into the sky and letting out a mournful flute note.

"The Empire is too big for a chance like this," Orthos said. "We were hunted."

"Don't I just feel like the prettiest girl at the dance," Yerin muttered, drawing her sword.

Seeing this, the people at the party began to run. Parents threw their food to the ground and grabbed their children, herding them back to the safety of the city. Lindon suspected the Skysworn would have evacuated the innocents

as soon as they arrived, and indeed a pair of the Lowgolds broke off from the main group of Skysworn to dive for the fleeing party.

That did nothing to loosen the knot in Lindon's stomach. They had agreed to go to the Arelius family first, precisely because they wanted Eithan on their side before they made contact with the Skysworn.

And Naru Gwei, the only Underlord in the Skysworn, had come already.

He represented a significant amount of the Skysworn's total combat strength. Lindon could think of only one reason why someone so important would hunt them down in person: he had decided to be rid of them once and for all.

"We can talk with them," Mercy said, though her face was pale and she had started running one hand nervously through her short hair.

"Run for the town," Yerin ordered. "They'll have to fight us in the streets, not rain fire on us from the heavens."

Lindon sharply wished he still had his Thousand-Mile Cloud, but he took off running nonetheless. He and Yerin ran side-by-side, and the Skysworn ahead of them slowed their flight, pointing.

Lindon realized it must look as though they were chasing after the group of escaping families. His breathing came quick, Blackflame madra boiling up behind his eyes, and the nausea in his gut deepened.

The Skysworn had caught them too quickly.

He had thought they would at least make it back to a major city, and had a chance to contact the Arelius family before the Skysworn caught up to them. Even if they had been caught, he reasoned, it would be by one squad: a Truegold or two and a group of trainees.

He had never imagined they would respond immediately and with overwhelming force. Now, they had to hope the Skysworn were interested in talking.

Lindon glanced back to Mercy, sure she couldn't catch up to him and Yerin, but she had straddled her staff and was flying on it only a few feet above the grass. Little Blue clung to the top of Orthos' head, looking terrified, and Orthos glared up at the clouds.

The Skysworn, of course, didn't let them make it to the town. One figure pulled up ahead of them and swept his arm in a low arc.

Wind rose between them and the town, bright green in Lindon's aura sight, whipping and twisting in a transparent barrier. It was a Ruler technique, gathering up the wind to form a long wall of violent air a hundred yards long



and dozens of feet high. Yerin skidded to a halt before she reached it, and Lindon followed suit. The wind-wall tore up chunks of dirt and grass from the ground, blowing them upward.

Naru Gwei stood twenty feet over them, as firm on his cloud as on solid ground. His arms were crossed over his battered breastplate, his matted gray hair pulled back. One of his eyes was burn-scarred, an old Blackflame injury, and a massive dark slab of a sword had been slung across his back.

Usually he looked as though he'd been woken in the middle of a nap, but this time his eyes were sharp and locked on Yerin.

Lindon's heart raced as the worst-case scenario played out in his head. If the Skysworn launched Striker techniques from their clouds, he and Yerin and Orthos would be forced to defend themselves.

And while Mercy seemed to have plenty of non-lethal options to choose from, he and Yerin did not. The only technique he could use that would reach the Skysworn on their clouds was his dragon's breath.

The Path of Black Flame was not suited for taking prisoners.

That was why he held up empty hands and tried not to cycle his madra too quickly. The minute blood was truly spilled, this would devolve into a brawl. And there would be no winning that. Not with an Underlord present.

"Faces against the ground," Naru Gwei ordered. "Hands behind your backs. Spirits veiled. We're taking you back for your involvement in the death of Skysworn Renfei and the assault and kidnapping of her partner, Bai Rou."

His tone brooked no debate, but Lindon didn't have to look at Yerin to know that she wouldn't comply.

"We would be happy to explain ourselves," Lindon said loudly. "There's no need to restrain us, we will come willingly."

Gwei gestured, and the four Truegolds began cycling their madra, preparing to launch their techniques. "Faces against the ground," he repeated, voice harder.

Lindon spoke in a calm, even tone. "We're on the same team." Mercy nodded vigorously in agreement, but Yerin was still crouched with her sword out, her Goldsigns gleaming over her shoulders.

Naru Gwei's face contorted. "You turn on Bai Rou, then ask for my trust?"

Lindon looked to Mercy and Yerin. He'd heard something about this over the last week or so, but he didn't know what had really happened between

them.

“Just a little scuffle!” Mercy called up. “No one was hurt!”

Yerin looked from Skysworn to Skysworn, paying special attention to the ones behind her. Lindon expected her to be angry or resentful, but she spoke to him in a calm voice. “If they’re supposed to bury us, why haven’t they gotten on with it?”

Lindon took that as encouragement, turning back to Naru Gwei. “We will give you a full accounting, I promise. Please, let us talk this out.”

The Skysworn Captain unfolded his arms. “We will listen when your spirits and bodies are shackled. Faces on the ground, final warning.”

Part of Lindon wanted to agree, but he had been locked up by the Skysworn before.

And he was growing tired of letting other people decide what to do with him.

“...I’m afraid if we do that, you are going to imprison us again.”

Finally, the Underlord’s spirit flared. He raised his hand to the sky as though clawing for the sun, and wind aura rose at his command. The air grew rigid against Lindon’s skin, and he felt himself pressed together by wind, stiffening up. Yerin, Mercy, and Orthos were chained in the same way. Orthos seethed, heaving against his bonds.

“You have no standing to bargain,” Gwei continued relentlessly. “My word is your law.” The four Truegolds descended, covered by Highgolds above them, and began moving toward their captives. Lindon felt a great weight bowing his shoulders, pressing him down. “You have not advanced enough to question me.”

And that was it.

Lindon’s fear ignited. When he’d been imprisoned by the Skysworn before, it was for no cause other than his Path. They had never trusted him to work for them, and had treated him like an enemy from the very beginning.

They had used their superior advancement to push him and control him and keep him locked in a tiny room. If he continued to allow that, it would never stop.

There had to be an end to it.

He swiveled his eyes to the side until he met Yerin’s gaze. He had planned to use Dross to send his intentions to her. But as soon as she saw his eyes, her lips curled up into a smile.

A Truegold man twice Lindon’s age seized his wrist in a gauntleted hand,

extending a halfsilver manacle that would seal his sacred arts.

The Burning Cloak blazed to life around Lindon, covering him in transparent black-and-red flames. Power flooded him, explosive force that demanded to be used.

For an instant, Lindon struggled against the Ruler technique holding him in place. He was trying to swing his arm back, but it felt like he was pushing against a wooden wall.

With a shout and a flare of Blackflame madra, he shattered that wall to pieces. Wind rushed out as the technique was broken, and his left fist flashed backwards.

He hit the Skysworn with the back of his fist.

The man was a Truegold as well, and he had been on his guard from the beginning. He raised one armored forearm to block, pink light shining out from his Enforcer technique.

Lindon's knuckles made contact.

The Skysworn *blasted* backwards.

He tore through the air in a streak of green, his passage kicking up dust, until he tumbled head over heels to land in a pile a dozen yards away.

Lindon's hand of flesh stung, so he shook out his fingers, keeping his eyes on Naru Gwei. "I would prefer to talk," he said softly. "But that doesn't mean I won't fight."

The Skysworn Captain's expression darkened. "Take them," he ordered.

The other Skysworn attacked at once.

## Chapter 2

“Dross,” Lindon said. “I need a battle plan.”

The three remaining Truegold Skysworn surrounded them. Three wouldn't be enough, but four Highgold teammates covered them from overhead, their hands starting to shine with Striker techniques. The Lowgolfs were either evacuating the party or protecting the city. The odds were already stacked against them, even if Naru Gwei didn't move himself.

Lindon needed an edge.

He braced himself for the world to slow down.

Instead, a lance of force pummeled Lindon in the chest, shoving him backwards. He twisted to the side as spears of golden light stabbed into the earth next to him, and Yerin slashed a spray of acidic madra from the air. Orthos roared as the Truegolfs advanced under the cover of their Highgolfs.

[Not a problem!] Dross said. [Not a problem. Give me a minute or two to gather enough information on their Paths and behavior, so I can model them just right. One hour, max.]

Lindon had missed his window to strike back, pressured by the Highgold attacks. Now a Truegold was on top of him—a woman with gray-streaked black hair and forward-curving yellow spikes emerging from her shoulders. Her armor had been modified to allow her Goldsigns to pass through the plates.

*What can you do for me?* Lindon asked desperately.

The woman drove her palm toward him, her hand Enforced with shining golden madra.

[Have you not noticed?] Dross asked, surprised.

The Burning Cloak ignited around Lindon, a black-and-red haze around his body. He jumped to the side, and the explosive power of the cloak launched him ten feet away. He landed next to one of the two armored Truegolfs fighting Yerin, an older man with balls of swirling green liquid madra hovering around his head. He was gathering up a technique between

his hands.

[Oh, this is fun, you're going to like this. By living in your head, I can handle some of your unimportant thoughts myself! Only a few of the smallest ones, but I can keep them from distracting you. You should notice an increase in your concentration and your processing speed, and your reactions should be a *little* faster.]

Another Highgold Striker technique was rushing toward his back; he could sense it. At the same time, the Truegold man had turned his attention to Lindon, seemingly unsurprised to see him land out of nowhere. He pushed the green liquid madra forward.

Lindon barely needed to think.

He spun to the side, catching a spear of golden Highgold madra with his right hand. He triggered the hunger binding for an instant as the enemy's technique made contact with his palm, just enough to destabilize the technique and cause it to break apart.

In the same motion, he kindled dragon's breath in his *left* palm, shoving it into the Truegold's newborn technique.

The gold spear dissolved into essence against his right hand as madra exploded in his left.

The armored Truegold staggered back, smoke and bright particles of madra essence blasting around him, but the power of the Burning Cloak had already detonated inside Lindon, searing his madra channels. He slammed his right fist into the man's breastplate with the full weight of his body and spirit, red-and-black madra flaring.

His opponent hurtled away. He slammed into the Truegold Lindon had knocked away earlier, falling on top of him in a pile.

[Look at that beautiful stack. Couldn't have done that on your own, could you?]

Dross was right. The whole exchange had felt fluid and natural, and Lindon's thoughts flowed like water.

Not to mention his strength. He'd known the meat from Ghostwater had enhanced his body, but for the longest time he'd had no one to compare to other than Orthos, Harmony, and a bunch of monsters.

The female Skysworn with the gold-spiked shoulders reached him only then, Forging a hammer of golden force the size of a wall. She slammed it toward him even as more Highgold Striker techniques converged on his location.

With a burst of Blackflame madra, he vanished.

He stood in front of Mercy, who had turned her staff into a bow. Had it been a bow the entire time?

She had an arrow nocked and was trying to track a target, but a tiny pink fireball landed at her feet. She stumbled back, but remarkably didn't lose the arrow. She loosed it at an armored Truegold who had noticed her, approaching with an axe that looked to have been made out of a living tree.

The arrow stuck in his armor and did nothing.

But Lindon was there now. He let his Blackflame madra drop, switching to his pure core. This time, the Soul Cloak sprang up around him, a fluid blue-white light. It passed through his body like a nourishing river, and his body responded without thought.

Since the fight with Harmony, he hadn't had enough time to explore his new capabilities. Between the sacred beast meat enhancing his strength, Dross speeding up his thoughts, and the Soul Cloak guiding his movements, it was like he was in control of a completely different body.

He stopped the swing of the wooden axe, dodged a Striker technique, kicked one of the Skysworn's legs out from under him, released a finger of dragon's breath to keep Orthos' opponent off-guard, tore the axe out of the Truegold's hands, dispersed another golden technique from behind him with his Remnant arm, smashed the Truegold with his own axe, then dropped the weapon and grabbed the woman following him by the spikes on her shoulders. She had already started pushing madra into her Goldsigns, but it was too late; Lindon had spun and thrown her with all the power he could draw.

The two Truegolts landed on the pile one after the other.

It had felt almost effortless. Like one long motion.

He was out of breath and his madra channels felt sore, but he spun, looking for the next opponent.

There came the chime of a great bell, and the four Highgolts—two on the ground, and two still on their clouds—all flew backwards at the same instant, sparks flying from their armor as though they'd been struck by invisible swords. The two in the sky fell, and Lindon launched himself toward the closest one: a girl with lines of crystal tracking down from her eyes like tears.

He couldn't know what this girl's Iron body was. Maybe she would be fine. But he'd worked too hard to avoid killing the others to let blood be spilled now.

The Highgold Skysworn apprentice flailed in the air, Forging a tower of purple crystal beneath her to try and catch herself. Lindon leapt up before the tower formed, catching her in his arms and landing on the grass. She shuddered in his grip, clutching the front of his outer robe.

He turned to see Yerin standing beneath the other falling Skysworn. As he was about to hit the ground, she reached out and caught him by his collar. His neck jerked backwards and his heels still slammed into the earth, but he was fine.

A second later, Yerin dropped him anyway.

Lindon gently placed the Highgold girl down on the grass...although now that he looked, she was probably older than he was.

Mercy cheered, and Orthos laughed. Lindon's pile had already collapsed, three of the four Truegolds having risen to their feet, but none of them attacked.

Yerin looked from the Truegolds to Lindon. "Tell me true. What were they feeding you while you were gone?"

"Sea monsters," Lindon said.

Naru Gwei surveyed the situation from his cloud, arms folded. In one long, slow motion, he pulled a finger-sized leaf from a pocket at his waist and placed one end into his mouth.

Behind him, the wind wall had already died to half its original height.

"No one is hurt too badly," Lindon said. "We can end it here."

Naru Gwei chewed on his leaf, looking from one of them to the other. Lindon couldn't guess the Underlord's thoughts, but he kept pure madra cycling quickly through his channels.

"Bai Rou," Naru Gwei said at last, "says that you all are a calamity waiting to happen. A bunch of indiscriminate murderers."

Lindon relaxed a fraction. The Skysworn squads were bruised and embarrassed, but all still alive. Naru Gwei knew as well as anyone how much easier it would have been for Lindon to kill someone with dragon's breath.

Although their enemies hadn't been out for blood either. The fight could have been a lot worse, on both sides.

"Looks like I need to take a look at you for myself," the Skysworn Captain said. Reaching up for the sword hilt over his shoulder, he stepped off his cloud.

Massive emerald wings flared out behind him, and he glided over to Yerin, pulling his sword as he flew. The huge slab of dark steel was so

pocked, pitted, and scarred that it didn't reflect sunlight.

Yerin's, by contrast, gleamed white, and her Goldsigns shone silver. All three blades flashed as she swung them, sending three madra blades slicing through the air.

He broke them with one sweep of his sword, but Yerin wasn't finished.

She jumped at him as he was dealing with her techniques, smashing her weapon into his side. He responded quickly, swinging his own heavier blade, the two swords meeting with a deafening crash.

Yerin smashed into the ground, but Naru Gwei didn't come out easily. He was launched back, his wings losing purchase on the air, flapping and twisting to try and land on his feet.

A bar of Orthos' dragon breath blasted toward him.

He pushed one armored hand against the black-and-red stream, holding it off like a flow of water as he landed on his feet. He drove his sword into the earth, making a clawed fist with his now-free hand, and Mercy stiffened. She had been drawing an arrow into her dragon-headed bow, but now she was gripped by invisible chains.

She was only Lowgold...or, wait, she was giving off the pressure of a Highgold now. Had she advanced during the fight? Either way, she was still too weak to bother Naru Gwei. He had immobilized her to show that he could.

He pushed his way up the stream of dragon's breath, shoving the Blackflame madra down, though his armor had dissolved around his hand and it was starting to disappear up his forearm. Orthos had finally had enough, biting off the Striker technique.

Then it was Lindon's turn.

He dashed in with a sudden burst of speed from the Burning Cloak, launching a punch at Naru Gwei's back. He didn't know how much it would do to an Underlord, but he could at least knock the man off-guard.

With disarming speed, the Skysworn Captain spun around into a punch of his own. Aimed straight at Lindon's.

Their two fists crashed together. Naru Gwei's hand was bare, his gauntlet stripped away by Blackflame, and Lindon's was a skeletal Remnant white.

Madra flashed, green against black-and-red, in an explosion that tore away the grass around them.

Lindon was knocked back, pain shooting up his Remnant arm as though he'd cracked a bone, his shoulder aching.



But Gwei backed up a step too. He shook out his hand as though it were sore.

Then the towering pressure of his spirit vanished as he veiled himself. A familiar exhaustion crept over his expression, and he sighed. "I need your word—all of you—that you will at least help me unravel this whole mess around you and Renfei and Bai Rou. Then I promise you fair treatment."

They all agreed, though Yerin muttered something under her breath that Lindon didn't catch.

Naru Gwei rubbed at the burn over his eye with one thumb. "You've taken up far too much of my personal attention already. And I'm not so flush with strong Truegolds that I can afford to throw them away." The leaf in his mouth had been torn away in the fight, so he replaced it.

When it was between his teeth, he grumbled around it, "...now I'm going to have to see the smug look on that guy's face."

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Naru Gwei and his team had come in a cloudship of their own, and it was three times the size of the one that had carried Lindon and the others. There was plenty of room for all of them onboard, though Lindon, Yerin, and Orthos were all wary of sharing a ship with the sacred artists they had beaten only hours ago. The woman with spikes on her shoulders kept pointing at Lindon as they boarded; one of her arms was held up in a sling.

Lindon didn't know if she was threatening him or pointing him out to her friends, but it wasn't comforting.

Naru Gwei left orders behind in the town for a crew to repair and recover the cloudship Lindon had traveled in on, and then their ship was leaving.

Though their previous cloudship had crammed them all inside, and this one had plenty of room to spread out, Lindon immediately found this trip the less comfortable of the two. No matter where he looked, there were Skysworn and Skysworn apprentices—some with armor, some without—all sporting injuries that he and the others had caused. They treated him like a vicious, wild dog let loose among them, avoiding him at every turn.

Yerin reacted by vanishing as soon as she could. Which left Lindon trying to find her.

He passed over the deck, stepping around the young Highgold woman with the crystal tear-tracks on her face. She seemed less hesitant around him than the others. He hoped that catching her had built up some kind of goodwill. She kept shooting glances at him like the others, though he didn't

sense any hostility from her. Maybe she was better at keeping her wariness under control.

Past her, he walked around some Skysworn polishing armor to see Mercy leaning over the railing, staring down beneath her. Her hair had grown long enough to fall down around her face. She leaned so far over that Lindon thought she might pitch over the side, clutching her black staff in one hand.

She gave an audible gasp and whirled around. When she saw Lindon, she dashed over and seized him by the wrist, dragging him over to the railing.

“Look, look, you have to see this!”

She pointed with one black-tipped finger at a circular patch of burning forest.

It was only after a few seconds that he realized what he was really looking at. One massive tree, as big as a town but far below, with leaves that blazed. A quick glance at the vital aura showed him a huge sea of fire aura, but not nearly enough destruction—the flames were burning, but they weren't consuming anything. The leaves might have been *made* of fire.

Around the branches flew fiery birds. They almost looked like leaves drifting off of the burning tree, drifting on the wind.

There was a strange shiver at the base of Lindon's neck, and Dross spun into existence. The one-eyed spirit had pebbly purple skin and two stubby, boneless arms that drifted down to touch Lindon's shoulder.

[Phoenixes! Oh, would you look at that! They're rated as the number one pet that you should never, ever bring to an underwater facility! I have a presentation memorized for the Ghostwater workers called 'You Will Never See A Phoenix.']

“I've never seen a wild phoenix before!” Mercy said, leaning over the railing again. “Just the ones my uncle keeps in his show garden.”

A cold spark tingled up Lindon's right shoulder as Little Blue climbed to take her perch opposite Dross. She stared and pointed too, chittering loudly and pulling on his hair to make sure he was seeing them.

Mercy turned around to look at the Riverseed. “Right? I've always wanted one!”

Did Mercy really understand her so easily, or was she guessing?

Little Blue made a bright sparkling noise.

Even from so far away, the phoenixes *were* impressive to watch. They left ribbons of red-and-orange light behind them as they flew, and their cries formed a symphony that drifted up all the way to the cloudship.

One phoenix swooped down into the burning leaves like a bat taking an insect, emerging with something huge and red in its beak. It opened wide, gulping it down.

This time, Lindon was the one to point in excitement. “Did you see that? It grabbed a fruit! The fire tree has fruit!”

Dross and Little Blue gave a simultaneous “Ooooooooooh.”

“A wild natural treasure,” Mercy said. “It doesn't look like anyone is harvesting it. Well, other than the phoenixes. You couldn't ask for anything better for a fire artist!”

Lindon considered leaping over the side.

But the cloudship was moving too quickly. The fiery tree was already almost gone, the phoenix-song fading into the sound of the wind.

Mercy jumped up, pointing at something else. “Oh, look at that!” This time, it was a mountain that jutted straight from the earth like a spear. Its peak was covered in dark clouds flickering with lightning...too much lightning. It looked almost like a ball of lightning containing a little cloud.

“You must have seen more amazing things than this with your family,” Lindon said. Lindon had never spent much time watching the scenery, but he suspected that the wonders of a Monarch's home must dwarf these.

“Well, sure, we keep fountains and gardens at home for decoration. But I'm always training at home.” Purple eyes met his. “When you spend all your time training, you don't get to go out and just *enjoy* things, you know?”

Spent all her time training?

“Forgiveness,” Lindon said hesitantly, “but if you spent all your time on training, then how are you still...” He trailed off. “I'm sorry if it's too personal.”

Mercy looked down at the deck, laughing awkwardly and scratching at her cheek. “That's a little embarrassing, actually. The truth is, I used to be stronger.”

[And now the owl's back! There are so many birds around here. Maybe the *bird* aura is strong here. I know there's no bird aura.]

Dross drew Lindon's attention up, where he saw the silver-and-purple owl swooping down from the clouds above them.

Mercy saw him turn and followed his gaze. “Is the owl back? Where is it?” She sounded doubly eager to see the owl, almost like she was afraid to miss it.

“It went under the ship,” Lindon said apologetically.

Mercy kept surveying the horizon, gripping her staff tightly. “I’m afraid it might be a...family thing.”

That brought up a thought that Lindon had been avoiding for weeks, ever since stepping out of Ghostwater’s gate. He and Mercy had never really talked like this before, and this was as close to alone as they were going to get.

“Speaking of your family, I wanted to—well, I wasn’t sure how to bring it up. Do you know Akura Harmony?”

Mercy hurriedly glanced from side to side. “I’m not sure now is the right time to talk about this.”

“I’m afraid I have some...news. Harmony is *mmmph*.”

Mercy covered up the last word by pressing both hands against his mouth. Her Goldsign, the black madra that she wore like gloves, felt slick and cool.

“Ssssh! Nope! I don’t need to hear it! I can guess!”

Lindon tried to tell her he understood, but she pushed harder. “I get it! I understand!”

She was still looking *past* him, as though desperately afraid of being overheard.

[That’s right, I *thought* she looked a lot like Harmony,] Dross said, fortunately only to Lindon. [I mean, like how Harmony *used* to look. Not how he probably looks now. Sliced into a thousand little cubes by a collapsing world and left to dissolve in a sea of chaos and oblivion.]

When she finally noticed Lindon’s nods, she released him and continued. “It’s not as big of a deal to me as you might think. We were only engaged because—”

“You were *engaged*?” Lindon interrupted. His voice was a little too high.

Little Blue reacted to his surprise, letting out a startled peep.

“It was a family thing,” Mercy said hurriedly. “His branch of the family wanted to improve their status, so they wanted to marry him off to the Monarch’s daughter. And he thought the only one worthy of him was...”

She trailed off for a moment and started fiddling with her fingers. “...the family genius.”

The cloudship shook, running across a moment of rough wind, and Mercy pitched over face-first. Only a quick string of shadow tied her to the railing fast enough to prevent her from slamming her nose into the deck.

Her staff—or maybe it was a bow, in the form of a staff—hissed as it clattered to the deck. She scrambled to retrieve it.

Lindon wondered in what area she had been considered a genius. A scripting genius? A refiner? Mathematics? Maybe she was a genius with shadow madra; he wouldn't be able to tell.

“Did Harmony—” Lindon started to ask, but Mercy grabbed her staff and pushed it into his face. The dragon's head on the top glared painfully bright violet light into his eyes, hissing at him from an inch away.

He was afraid to move with the staff so close, and he kept his eyes fixed on the dragon's snout, but behind it he could see movement. The silver-and-purple owl had openly landed on the railing next to them, only a few feet from Mercy.

Its wide eyes stared straight at Lindon.

“Good-bye, Lindon!” Mercy shouted. “It was fun talking with you! I'll see you later!”

The owl continued staring at him as Mercy pushed him away.

Dross spun off his shoulder and back into his spirit. [Some consider owls to be omens of death,] Dross said. [Especially mice.]

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Yerin sat in the cramped confines below the deck of the airship, a sword in her lap, cycling. The aura was thin here, and she was almost wasting her time trying to pull power from the sword, but she would accomplish even less up above.

Lindon, Mercy, and Orthos were up there, but if Yerin spent more than two breaths on the deck, she'd end up drawing swords on somebody.

A few more breaths, and the weak aura finally broke her patience. She gave up and stabbed her cycling sword into the wall, where it stuck, quivering. If she had wrapped her madra around it, the weapon might have split the wall in two.

Cycling wasn't going to do anything for her, and besides, she'd spent most of the last couple of months cycling and running through the jungle. Lindon was back, finally; she wanted to *do* something, not sit here alone and wait on the mercy of the Skysworn. It was like getting a taste of freedom only to be hauled back by the collar.

She fiddled with the hilt of her master's sword, restless. She wanted to be let out, to go...

To go and do what?

She wasn't sure *what* she wanted to do, but she couldn't sit here anymore. The fight earlier had gotten her blood flowing. And speaking of blood, her

Blood Shadow was as riled up as she was, seething inside her soul. They both wanted a challenge.

She found herself thinking back to the Blackflame Trials, back in Serpent's Grave. She'd had a challenge then, something to try and overcome every day.

And she'd pushed herself forward to meet that challenge. With Lindon.

Images of the fight with the Skysworn rose up in her head. Compared to her memories of him in the Blackflame Trials, Lindon today was like an adult compared to a child. Only a month or so out of her sight, and he'd undergone a heaven-and-earth-shaking change.

He was strong now. Too strong.

He'd given her a brief outline of what had happened to him in Ghostwater, but she still wasn't sure about the details. Whatever had happened, it had rebuilt him from head to toe. And he had kept her from joining him.

She'd always hoped that he would catch up with her one day, but it had happened so *fast*.

Her Blood Shadow surged inside of her again, and she kept it suppressed with the strength of her madra. It still disgusted her, but it was supposed to be a ticket to great power. It hadn't done much for her so far, but maybe that was her way forward. Her personal Ghostwater.

She shook herself. It wasn't like her to worry too much about someone else. She should focus on herself and her path to Underlord. That was certainly what Lindon was doing.

A knock at the door shook her back to reality, and she rose with Goldsign blades poised over each shoulder. A quick scan, and she knew who it was, though she was surprised to sense him here.

She felt oddly guilty as she opened the door for Lindon, as though he might somehow have heard her thoughts.

Maybe he was feeling the same way, because he wore an expression like he was smuggling weapons under his outer robe. He looked uneasy, which—on his severe face—made him look like he was plotting a murder. He ducked inside before she could say anything, glancing behind him.

He grabbed the door from her and slammed it shut, pulling a small object from his pocket: a nail. Without a word, he started scratching runes into the door.

"You kick Gwei between the legs and run, or what?" Yerin asked. It was helping her mood to see Lindon acting this way; if there had been something

*really* wrong, she would have heard explosions. And he wouldn't have left Orthos and Mercy up there on their own. Which meant he was getting himself all worked up for something small.

Still, she was curious. Maybe it *was* a big problem. She could hope.

When he'd finished his script-circle, he ran some pure madra through it, and the runes erupted in light. The wood creaked at the force of the madra running through it, and some splinters flew off into the air, but Yerin's spiritual sense was suppressed.

Lindon relaxed, slipping the nail back into his pocket. "Apologies, but I think there's an owl following me."

He turned from the door to her, and suddenly Yerin was conscious of how small this room really was. It wasn't much of a room at all, more like a closet—she'd piled bags of uncooked rice into the corner in order to give her enough room to sit and cycle without cramping her Goldsigns. The training sword she'd jammed into the wall took up half the length of the space.

Her face was on the level of Lindon's chest, and she looked up at him, standing over her. The heat from his body filled the space, and the quiet aura radiating from his spirit was stronger than it had ever been.

He looked down, eyes intense, and her heartbeat picked up. He was the same old Lindon, but the strength in his soul made him feel older, more reliable, and somehow *new*, like she had taken her eyes off him for a second and he had grown up. And he was so *close*.

Lindon stretched his hand out, reaching for her face. She stared at the hand approaching, thoughts whirling in place. Her heart hammered harder.

But his hand moved past her, reaching the side of the wall. She turned her eyes to follow him.

A door opened in midair.

She let out a heavy breath as the space appeared, her face suddenly hotter than before. She was both relieved and somehow disappointed, but she didn't examine either emotion too closely. She shoved them to the back of her mind, where she determined to forget them.

Instead, she focused on the most shocking aspect of this whole situation: "Where in heaven's name did you get a void key?"

It was like looking into a closet that hadn't been there before. A closet containing Lindon's belongings; she recognized the box he'd once kept his Thousand-Mile Cloud in, but most of the rest of it was new to her. The space was packed with jars, bottles, and vials of all shapes and sizes, though they

looked like he'd scavenged them from a trash heap. Little Blue stared at her from within a bundle of firewood, and there was a bone-handled axe leaning up against the wall.

Lindon hurriedly held up a hand, keeping his voice low. "The script doesn't stop sound. Could you grab that closest jar for me?"

Close to the opening, beside Yerin's feet, was a clay jar covered in hastily painted scripts that looked similar to the one Lindon had carved into the door. She bent down and scooped it up, and then the portal instantly vanished.

Without instructions, Yerin pulled the lid off of the jar, and Lindon didn't say anything to stop her. Blue light rushed out from within, and she sensed the rich power of a high-grade elixir.

Her eyes widened, and she dipped a finger in, pressing a drop to her tongue.

It tasted like sweet spring water, but the energy within was enough to shock her spirit into action. It nourished her soul directly, her madra rushing through its channels.

"I don't know what Naru Gwei would do if he sensed this," Lindon said. "And Mercy...well, I don't know her too well yet."

"This..." she wasn't sure she had the words. "This is like something my *master* would drink. With a sword to my throat, I couldn't even guess how much this is worth."

It took her another second to remember that she'd seen more bottles inside the void key.

Lindon's eyes sparkled at her reaction, but he pretended to be casual. "It's yours. As far as I'm concerned, you can drink everything I brought out. I had much more than this in Ghostwater."

Yerin pushed the jar back at him. "I'm not too polite to take a gift, but this is brainless. You've got two cores to fill, and one of them is still Highgold."

"That's why you should have it. If you got the same chances I did, you'd be Underlord by now."

A second later, he cleared his throat and added, "Besides, I doubt you'll need *all* of it. Once you reach the peak of Truegold, I can still drink whatever's left."

Yerin slowly replaced the lid, unwilling to meet his eyes. She was ashamed of the tracks her thoughts had taken before he'd shown up; only a few weeks by herself, and she started thinking like she was alone again.

"Will it not work for you?" he asked anxiously. "I thought it would, but I



couldn't be sure. Did the Sword Sage give you something better?"

Yerin ran a hand over her face as though to check what expression she was making. "No, sorry, my brain had run off without me. Had to pull it back." She slipped the jar into her outer robe—it was a little big for her pocket, so it would bulge out, but it wouldn't be a problem as long as she didn't fight. "You know I'll put it to good use."

His face relaxed into a smile. "Good! I was—well, never mind, that's good! Don't get too comfortable, though. I won't let you get too far ahead of me."

"I know you won't," she said.

And to herself, she added, *I won't let you.*

## Chapter 3

In his Imperial palace at the heart of Blackflame City, the capital of the Empire, Emperor Naru Huan stood in a courtyard looking into the sky. He wore his full Imperial regalia, from the intricate crown on his head to the dragon-adorned layered robes that hung from his shoulders. Emerald wings spread behind him, shimmering in the setting sun.

An Emperor's appearance was important. He exercised daily to keep his body firm and toned—a straight back and broad shoulders showed strength. His beard was neatly trimmed and close to his chin, and his gaze was level and piercing. He had been trained for most of his life to project strength in everything he did.

To his left, his first wife was radiant in robes that complemented his own. The smile on her face looked effortless and natural, but the way that she repeatedly lifted her hand to adjust her hairpin revealed her nerves. He wished he could calm her, but he was in need of some comfort himself.

Two Skysworn in full green armor stood behind them, spears at the ready, Truegold souls unveiled. Today, they were nothing more than marks of his status. He was the strongest sacred artist in this quarter of the continent, but his visitor could obliterate them all as easily as lifting her hand.

Behind the Skysworn were his contingent of four normal guards, all Truegolds themselves, as well as forty ministers, councilors, and advisers. Servants stood to the sides, carrying pitchers of wine or trays of food in case they were called upon.

Their half of the courtyard was packed, but no one crossed the invisible line separating the other half. That was reserved for their visitor.

No one wanted to accidentally offend the Sage of the Silver Heart.

She had sent word to await her, but she had not said whether she meant to come in person or not. Therefore, he had no choice but to prepare as though Akura Charity could herself appear out of thin air at any second.

As far as he understood the powers of a Sage, she might well be able to do

as much. She was an Archlady, at the peak of the Lord realm, but most Archlords never earned a Sage's title. There was something special about Sages, but only rumors and legends could tell him what that was. He'd never had a Sage to consult.

The sun sank down to the level of the roof surrounding them, and the general level of chatter in the courtyard faded with the light. She said she would deliver her message at the first touch of night, and the closer that approached, the greater the tension in the air grew. Some of the people behind him even trembled in their spirits, and he wanted to turn and command them to master themselves or leave. But it would be beneath him to lower himself to that level.

Shadows lengthened, and the sun disappeared.

As soon as it did, another light replaced it. An ethereal, flickering violet light.

The murmurs in the courtyard died out entirely.

The source of that light came into view only an instant later, as four horse-Remnants galloped side-by-side through the air, their steps like drumbeats. They were made of layered violet light, and flames of the same shade flickered around their ankles. They bared teeth and rolled their eyes as they ran, which was as much detail as he had ever seen on Remnants.

Through his spiritual sense, he felt the hidden heat of banked coals and the cool of a summer shadow. The Akura clan were famous for their use of shadow madra—it was not a distasteful power, like death or blood, but an aspect of madra as natural as wind. Even so, it had mysterious properties that were difficult to pin down. That made dealing with any shadow artist a trial. Dealing with the Akura even more so.

After first glance, it became clear that the horses were harnessed together. They pulled a black carriage behind them, wrought of iron and floating on a deep purple cloud. The Remnants slowed slightly, trotted down the air as though on a slope, and slid to a halt in the courtyard in front of the Emperor.

The black door of the carriage was marked with the symbol of the Akura family in silver: one great star flanked by two smaller stars, all rising over a mountain range. When he saw that, he inclined his head.

Everyone besides him bowed at the waist.

They held that pose for one long moment before the door swung open and a woman stepped out.

She was a slender, young-looking woman with black hair carefully bound

behind her. If he hadn't known better, he would have said she was only twenty, but her deep purple eyes carried the weight of ages. She was dressed as befit her station, in ornate wide-sleeved robes of black decorated with purple lines that glowed softly in the shadows. The lines evoked stars and moons, but also reminded him of a script-circle.

An owl stood on her shoulder. An owl made of feathery silver light, connected by ribbons and sparks of purple.

Charity had her spirit veiled, so the pressure of her presence did not weigh on the souls of everyone nearby. Even so, she still radiated an unquestionable dignity. All else stilled before her, and even his trembling Blackflame attendants quieted, as though she carried with her the calm of a peaceful night.

"Naru Huan, Emperor of the Blackflame Empire, I send you greetings on behalf of my family," she said. Her voice was smooth and young, but she spoke with the confidence of an empress. "I, Akura Charity, Sage of the Silver Heart, speak with full authority for my grandmother and in the interests of the Akura clan all across the world. Heed me now, as this is the greatest service you have ever been required to perform."

The Emperor was not sure if he was expected to respond, but he bowed slightly anyway. "The Blackflame Empire is eager to know how we may serve the Akura clan. If there is any hospitality we can provide, please do not hesitate to say so."

His servants stepped forward slightly, but the Sage ignored them. She met his gaze with her purple eyes. She gave no signal that he could see or sense, but the door of the carriage behind her slammed shut. The Remnant horses whinnied—it sounded like they were doing so from underwater—and took off, trotting into the air once more.

When they were gone, the Sage continued.

"When they feel the time is right, the great Monarch clans hold a tournament for their students, measuring their star disciples against one another to demonstrate their strength. It is in this way that those of the young generation can test themselves and grow against equal opponents.

"This contest is known as the Uncrowned King Tournament."

It was with no surprise whatsoever that Naru Huan thought, *Eithan was right*.

This was not news to Naru Huan, but it had never concerned the Blackflame Empire before. Their disciples were unworthy to compete at such

a level. Had he not been warned by the Arelius Underlord, this sudden requirement would have caught him off-guard.

“This year’s tournament,” Akura Charity continued, “will be the largest in history.”

She paused, hands folded in front of her, as though she could sense his questions.

Naru Huan was unaccustomed to speaking humbly, but this was the time to show deference. “Forgive our ignorance, but affairs that concern Monarchs are far beyond us. If the Sage could enlighten us: what is so different this year?”

The owl of silver and purple madra spread its wings, and the slightest shiver passed through Naru Huan’s spirit. If it weren’t for his abundant experience, he would have thought he’d imagined the sensation.

“You have guessed correctly,” Charity said. “Old powers stir. No one will remain untouched. Now, more than ever, we must make the balance of power clear, and raise up defenders from a new generation.”

*The Dreadgods.* He had suspected as much, but it was disturbing to hear his fears confirmed.

“Therefore, our Akura clan will be inviting our vassal states to participate in the Uncrowned King Tournament as well. The coming years will challenge not only our head family, but all our subjects. So they all must be tested.”

Thus far, Naru Huan had learned very little new information. Eithan had made his predictions, and Naru Huan could infer some facts of his own. However, it had all been theoretical until this moment.

Now, he faced a very real problem.

“If we may ask, what stage must our disciples have reached in order to compete?”

“The tournament does not permit anyone above or below Underlord,” Charity said, “though advancements during competition are allowed. All competitors must be younger than thirty-five, and the younger your participant, the more favorably they will be viewed.”

As he’d expected. It would be hard enough for him to produce a handful of Truegolds under thirty-five, much less Underlords.

“We would give our lives to avoid disappointing the Sage, but we may not be able to live up to her expectations. For us, producing young Underlords is...”

Purple eyes swept over the crowd gathered around the Emperor. Most of

them, including Naru Huan himself, were beyond the required age. And no one *but* him met the power requirements. He thought he saw a glimpse of pity in her gaze, and she let out a short breath.

“I am aware of your situation. For that reason, I will open to you the Night Wheel Valley, one of the sacred training grounds of the Akura clan. You should be grateful; this is where we often train Akura Golds.”

He *was* grateful, to the point that he had to fight to keep his expression dignified. His wife grabbed his elbow, fingers tightening, and gave a slight gasp. Depending on how many people he was allowed to send, this could be a huge opportunity for the entire Empire, not just the young Truegolds with the potential to break through to Underlord.

He opened his mouth to express profuse thanks, but she held up a pale hand to stop him. The owl on her shoulder let out a low whistle. “Of course, I have not given this opportunity to you alone.”

His smile turned bitter.

“I will open the way for the Seishen Kingdom as well. As the two weakest vassal states under our protection, you will compete with each other for the valley’s bounty. By the time summer comes, I will select the *three* young Lords and Ladies that will serve us in this tournament. I could choose all three from one kingdom, or the best from both. You will be richly rewarded for every young Underlord that I appoint, though if I cannot find even three worthy between you, you will all be...”

Her eyes flashed, and she let her veil slip enough to add spiritual weight to the next word. “...*instructed*.”

Naru Huan’s thoughts turned cold. After the devastation of the Bleeding Phoenix, the Blackflame Empire was hanging together by a thread. The Jai clan had fallen, and the Arelius family had yet to rise to their place, so the west was fractured and lawless. The attacks from the Trackless Sea up north had intensified, the wall that defended them broken by the Dreadgod’s rampage. To the east, the Wastelanders were having a difficult time holding back the dragons, and beyond the southern jungles, the Seishen Kingdom eyed his lands.

The Empire his mother had saved from the Blackflame family was now webbed with cracks. One firm tap could send it all crumbling to pieces. Over a hundred million people would divide into a thousand splinter kingdoms, all at war with one another.

The offered reward didn’t matter to him, although anything that came

straight from the Akura family would surely be dazzling. No, the Empire needed *stability*. Training in the Night Wheel Valley would help him with that, as it would strengthen the sacred artists loyal to him. And competing on the world stage would allow him to make connections he could never have dreamed of otherwise.

His homeland would die or thrive based on the Akura family's favor.

"We will not fail you," he swore. He had no ill will toward his southern neighbor, the Seishen Kingdom, but he would crush them if he had to. Anything to distinguish his Empire to the clan that ruled them all.

The Sage's owl took off from her shoulder, swirling over the heads of the crowd around the Emperor. He could feel them trying not to shiver. "One final note: I will be monitoring you to make sure that your competition with the Kingdom does not get too far out of hand. Conduct yourselves like honorable sacred artists with the reputation of the Akura clan behind you. However, the Night Wheel Valley will undoubtedly be dangerous. Only sacred artists willing to risk their safety should be allowed inside."

The owl settled onto the head of a nearby servant, who looked like she would pass out. Akura Charity reached out a hand, and that servant scurried to present a tray full of drinks to her. She selected a shallow bowl, allowed the servant to fill it with dark wine, but she did not drink.

She looked down, staring deeply into the surface of the wine as she spoke. "That concludes our business on behalf of my family."

Naru Huan was not fooled into thinking this meeting was over. She wanted something else, and was making it clear that she didn't represent her family in doing so.

"I have kept my eye on someone from your Empire," she continued. "A young Blackflame, contracted to a sacred turtle."

Naru Huan remembered descriptions of Eithan's disciple. "There is no *true* member of the Blackflame family remaining," he hedged. He couldn't lie to a Sage, but he wanted to know more about her interest in the boy before he gave her the answer she sought. The more he knew, the more advantage he might be able to squeeze out of the situation.

The Sage continued examining the wine. She did not increase the power of her soul.

But the rest of the world turned black.

It was as though only Naru Huan and Akura Charity existed, and everything else was swallowed by a sea of endless black. Behind the Sage's

head, an apparition loomed up, like the sudden appearance of a Remnant; it was a huge book, wrought of silver and purple light, with a shining Remnant eye in its center.

The eye swiveled, locking onto Naru Huan, and he began to sweat.

Out of instinct, he released the veil around his spirit, trying to fend off this attack with his power...but he failed. Nothing happened. His soul remained tightly bound, his madra still. His body trembled, as an inexplicable dread pressed in on him from the outside.

“You should not lie to me,” Charity suggested. She took a sip of wine.

As quickly as it had appeared, the darkness vanished. The book disappeared like a hallucination, and the fear snapped out of existence.

Leaving the Emperor, sweating and trembling in the middle of his court. His wife looked at him in concern, and all the others in shock.

They had only seen him lose his nerve for no apparent reason. He collected himself, pretending nothing had happened, but his face burned with shame. He swallowed his broken pride for the sake of the Empire, pushing his head down into a reluctant bow.

“We beg your forgiveness, Sage,” the Emperor said.

Then he told her about Eithan’s disciple.

When he had finished, Charity did not react. She told him nothing about why she had wanted to know, merely placed her now-empty cup back on the servant’s tray and inclined her head.

From above, he heard the warbling cries of Remnant horses returning, dragging the carriage behind them again.

“I will not be staying the night,” Charity said. “I must deliver the same message to your neighbors. In two months, I will return and open the gateway to the Night Wheel Valley for your Empire. In that time, you should gather up all your best prospects and strongest fighters here in Blackflame City.”

The carriage didn’t even touch the ground. It swept by, its door flickering open and closed, and she slipped inside in one motion.

The Sage’s voice drifted behind her. “Work hard, Your Imperial Highness.”

When she was gone, the courtyard erupted. Everyone questioned him all at once, or else offered their own opinions on what to do. Their decorum as members of his court was entirely forgotten.

He let them ramble. There was only one thing they could do: contact all the Underlords and have them bring their disciples to Blackflame City as



soon as possible. It would strain his resources to contact everyone and have them return within two months, but he would spare no expense.

After that, he had only to hope that this generation had some hidden dragons.

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The Skysworn's flying city of Stormrock was built on a massive green cloudbank. Guard towers loomed over forbidding walls of black stone, even as one tower rose over the rest of the city.

Starsweep Tower. Headquarters of the Skysworn.

Other cloudships, Thousand-Mile Clouds, carriages pulled by winged creatures, and flying sacred artists had to stop at the gates of the city, but Naru Gwei's cloudship soared over the walls without even slowing down. They headed straight to the highest floor of Starsweep Tower, where a broad path of stone jutted out like a bridge to nowhere. The dock for his ship.

Flanked on all sides by Skysworn, Lindon and the others followed Naru Gwei into the tower.

The last time they had visited, the Skysworn had treated them with outward hostility. This time, the looks from those they passed changed: instead of revulsion or pity, now Lindon saw more outright horror.

Dross made a soft hum inside Lindon's head as a green-clad woman pressed herself against the wall to slide past Lindon, even though there were several paces between them. [Oh, they're afraid! Are they afraid of you?] He lowered his voice, as though he didn't want to be overheard, even though he was speaking directly into Lindon's thoughts. [Do they hate you? On second thought, forget I said anything. Best not to dwell on it. They probably like you *too* much, that's why they're running from you.]

*They didn't expect us to make it to Truegold*, Lindon replied. At least, he assumed that was the reason. He couldn't imagine why else the Skysworn would be afraid of seeing them in the custody of their Underlord Captain.

[Good! That's good. I was worried it was your face. And you know what? It makes sense. I didn't expect you to live to Truegold either. Every day you survive is a new surprise for me. Full of surprises, you are.]

Naru Gwei pushed further into the tower, slipping easily through the hallways. Skysworn stepped aside to let him pass. Finally, he stopped before a heavy door marked with the Skysworn emblem: a thick cloud surrounding a ball of fire. On Lindon's apprentice pin, it had been the same, but without the fire in the center.

The Underlord turned to face them, arms crossed in his battered armor, chewing on a long leaf. As usual, he looked like he had been roused unwillingly from a deep sleep.

“I have more than one reason not to trust you,” he said. “But I’m willing to chance it. *If* you can help me settle one particularly disturbing report.”

Mercy leaned forward, smiling brightly. “We’ll do whatever we can!”

“Who’s this ‘we’?” Yerin muttered.

Naru Gwei rapped his gauntleted knuckles against the door, the sharp ring stealing their attention back. “You’re here to gain my trust. Remember that, when I open this door.”

Mercy nodded, but Orthos blew smoke, and Yerin’s eyes went cold.

Lindon knew the feeling; personally, he was happy to do whatever he could to get Naru Gwei out from in front of them, but the Underlord’s attitude still bothered him. As Lindon reckoned it, Naru Gwei was the one who had mistreated *them*.

Little Blue crooned from Lindon’s pocket, and he reached down to pat her.

Then the door swung open, and Bai Rou was waiting for them.

The huge Skysworn man sat with a broad table between him and the door, his elbows propped up. Yellow eyes burned in the shadows beneath his wide-brimmed straw hat, and he didn’t look the least surprised to see them.

The room looked identical to some of the other meeting rooms in the tower, with a few exceptions. It was a little larger, the table was covered in paperwork, and a giant Skysworn emblem—cast in bronze—hung behind the room’s lone chair. A bundle of long leaves sat on the table to Bai Rou’s left.

Naru Gwei waved a hand at the other Skysworn irritably. “Get out of my seat,” he said, and Bai Rou obeyed. The Captain drew his huge slab of a sword from his back, letting it rest on a metal rack in the corner that seemed designed especially for this purpose.

So this was Naru Gwei’s office. Lindon was somewhat interested in looking around more, but a murderous aura filled the space, as though a battle had broken out. He didn’t need to extend his spiritual sense to know where this sensation was coming from.

Both of Yerin’s steel sword-arms were poised, she was gritting her teeth, and her eyes boiled with anger. Her scars stood out, pale against her flushed skin, and her hand was tight on her sword.

She didn’t attack, but she didn’t withdraw the pressure of her spirit either.

Lindon could feel the Blood Shadow clearly; its anger and its thirst for blood.

“Can't get rid of you, can I?” Yerin said.

“Try,” Bai Rou responded. He was standing at Naru Gwei's shoulder now, and though he made no outward move to attack, he started cycling his madra. The air was filled with a thick, oppressive atmosphere that reminded Lindon of a nightmare.

[Ew, that's...that is *disgusting*,] Dross said, making a choking sound.  
[Don't let him close to me.]

Alarmed, Lindon turned his attention to the construct. *Is he hurting you?*

[Ugh, it's like something slimy and sticky has a million legs and is crawling all over my face. If I could vomit, I'd be vomiting all inside your head. Right up in your spirit.]

*But is he a threat?*

[You know what? Let's say he is, and just...stand a little further back. Ick.]

Orthos stood at Yerin's side, taking up half the office on his own, smoldering with Blackflame. He wasn't looking for a fight, but he was prepared for one.

“Bai Rou has told me that you attacked him in the field,” Naru Gwei said. “That you were unsatisfied with his commands, so you began to fight him in enemy territory.”

“That's dead right,” Yerin said. “He was...” Her gaze flickered to Lindon for an instant. “...he held me back from saving lives. If we'd followed his orders, we'd have left half our squad in the grave.”

“You would have killed me,” Bai Rou said.

“You tossed me out of the sky!”

There was a green flash from Naru Gwei, and thunder rolled out in a deafening peal. “I have better things to do than listen to children bicker. Bai Rou, you say the Akura family has taken responsibility for Renfei's death, but losing her is enough of a blow. I'm not going to lose any more Truegolds if I can help it. Is there any way for you to set aside this personal grudge...”

The conversation continued, the Captain talking, Yerin and Bai Rou arguing, and Orthos burning quietly to the side. But Lindon didn't listen to it. He'd been distracted by Dross' sudden voice.

[That is the most dedicated janitor I have ever seen.]

Lindon immediately stopped watching the scene, glancing around.  
*Where?*

[Up. Higher. In the corner. Really, I'm using *your* eyes, so you shouldn't need me to point him out.]

After a second, Lindon craned his neck to look up and behind him. The ceiling in the room was surprisingly high, criss-crossed with metal support beams.

And there, as he had suspected, was Eithan.

The blond Underlord floated on a deep green Thousand-Mile Cloud and wore armor of a matching shade, which was enough of a shock on its own. Since when had Eithan joined the Skysworn? Or was this a disguise?

He floated in the high corner, scrubbing at a spot on the ceiling with a rag. As Lindon stared, Eithan finished polishing the spot, snapping the rag and making it vanish into thin air. Now that Lindon paid attention, he realized that the entire ceiling and all the supports were spotless.

[There was a janitorial staff in Ghostwater, but I've never seen anyone so committed to their job! Come to think of it, what happened to...oh, right, eaten. They were eaten.]

Eithan glanced down to meet Lindon's gaze, his eyebrows raised in surprise. Clearly, he hadn't expected anyone to notice him. He waved, then raised one finger to his lips for silence.

Lindon looked back at the others. Yerin, Bai Rou, and Naru Gwei were still locked in a three-way argument. Mercy jumped in, saying something conciliatory on behalf of the Akura family, and Orthos had drawn his head back into his shell. Clearly, he was bored with the whole thing.

None of them had noticed Eithan.

Lindon couldn't sense anything of the Underlord, and apparently neither could anyone else. Eithan had always been skilled in veils. But for once, Lindon had caught him.

Dross made a throat-clearing noise. [*Who* caught him? Hm? It's not as though I need the praise, but a little credit...]

It was hard to concentrate on the argument after that. Yerin was red in the face, her sword-arms quivering, and her hands pressed down on the table hard enough that the wood creaked. Mercy stood next to her, leaning on her dragon-headed staff. Inside Lindon's pocket, he could feel Little Blue playing with Suriel's marble.

Bai Rou turned his whole body to Mercy whenever she spoke, looking oddly respectful. Finally, he said, "I will live up to your test, honored Akura."

This seemed to surprise Mercy, and it caught Naru Gwei's attention. "You

had better explain yourself, Skysworn.”

Bai Rou looked to his Captain, pressing his fists together in a salute. “I cannot say anything until the time comes.”

Naru Gwei bit his leaf in half, letting the other half drift down to the table. “I don’t like learning new things this late, *Skysworn*.”

“They gave me a glimpse of what is coming,” Bai Rou rumbled. “I swore an oath to reveal nothing before the proper time.”

Naru Gwei turned sharp eyes on Mercy. “And is the Akura clan planning something? Is this something the Emperor should know?”

Mercy looked as lost as the Underlord, stammering out an answer, but Lindon turned back to Eithan.

The Arelius Underlord drifted backwards to the corner of the ceiling, over Naru Gwei's head. Lindon was the only one watching him.

It was hard to keep his expression blank.

The Underlord withdrew his Thousand-Mile Cloud and released his veil at the same time, dropping to his feet behind the Skysworn Captain and clapping his hand on the man's shoulder.

Naru Gwei tensed up, his eyes closing as though he were holding himself back from taking a swing.

Mercy gasped, Yerin groaned, and Orthos stuck his head out of his shell. Bai Rou leaped back, conjuring a fistful of yellow liquid madra, and Dross choked again.

Eithan leaned in next to the Captain's face, grinning ear to ear. “Well, based on this new information, it seems I was correct once again. You should be used to that by now.”

“We have no evidence of that,” Naru Gwei said, clenching his hand into a fist.

Eithan turned to address Mercy. “Young miss Akura, I have suggested that this year's competition between Monarch disciples will spill over to affect us here in the Blackflame Empire. Tell me, have you seen any signs of your clan putting unusual emphasis on raising up their young elites?”

Yerin turned to him, suspicion on her face. “The Akura Sage said something with about the same shape to it. There's a competition coming, or so she said. It's why all those Truegolds were on the island.”

Mercy ran a hand across her shortened hair. She looked deep in thought. “If they sent Harmony *and* Aunt Charity to Ghostwater, then...I don't know if they'll involve you or not, but it does seem like the tournament is going to

shake us up this year.”

Lindon still wanted to tell her exactly what had happened to Harmony. Or at least his role in it. But he wasn't sure if she was afraid of being overheard or if she really didn't care.

Still holding onto Naru Gwei's shoulder with one hand, Eithan reached out to lay a hand on Bai Rou. The Truegold Skysworn tried to dodge, but he might as well have stood still; Eithan's green gauntlet landed on top of his straw hat.

“Yet *another* reason why we can't afford to stifle the growth of such promising young talents!” Eithan said passionately. “Let us set aside the petty feuds of the young generation, and grow together for the good of the Blackflame Empire!”

It was a warm speech, but Naru Gwei spat the chewed-up remnants of his leaf at Eithan's feet.

Eithan smoothly slipped his shoe to one side and continued talking. “It's truly fortunate that I have come to support the Skysworn in your time of need, to raise our youth into responsible citizens and champions of the Blackflame Empire.”

“They have no loyalty to us,” Bai Rou said, eyes burning. “They are a weapon that will turn in our hand. They—”

Eithan cut him off by whirling on him and grabbing him by both shoulders. “Do you think I'd forgotten *you*? What a paragon of a young Truegold you are! Even among the children of the vaunted Akura clan, how many of them could possibly have talent to rival yours?”

Mercy started to speak up, but Eithan waved her to silence without turning from Bai Rou.

“How could you focus on this tiny grudge? It's beneath you! Let me take these children out of your way,” he turned to Naru Gwei, “and yours. I assure you, I will keep my sharpest eye on each of them.”

Dross spoke up. [Say, here's an idle thought: do you think you could take me out of your head and put me in his? Not that I think he's better than you, or anything. Of course not. But uh...could you think about it?"]

Lindon wasn't actually sure if he could separate himself from Dross at all, but he started thinking very hard about pulling Dross out of his spirit and putting the construct back into a gem. Then dropping the gem into the ocean, where it would sit for decades.

Dross coughed. [Just a little joke. You know, a sense of humor would

make you more popular. Maybe then people wouldn't stare at you in the hall.]

"No," Naru Gwei said to Eithan. "I trust you least of all. If I use them, I'll be splitting them up and stationing them in different cities."

When Eithan spoke, his words reverberated in Lindon's spiritual sense like a gong. "I, Eithan Arelius, hereby swear on my soul that if I am allowed to take these young sacred artists as my Skysworn squad, I will do everything in my power to lead them to their own benefit and the benefit of the Blackflame Empire."

His voice continued to echo, and Naru Gwei looked stunned. Eithan's smile crept upward, and he added, "In addition, I will follow your lawful orders in the course of my duties, and..." He paused for maximum effect. "...I will personally spend no more time in your presence than required."

"Deal," Naru Gwei shouted immediately, as though he feared the moment would pass. Their spirits both quivered, so that even Lindon could sense it, and Eithan spread his hands and his grin wide.

"Brilliant! Easy enough. Ladies, gentleman, turtle, if you will follow me, I believe I am now obligated to give our honorable Captain some space."

Yerin looked around the room, then pulled her Goldsigns close to her back. She shook her head, a smirk on her face, and walked from the room.

Orthos chuckled and said something to Eithan, butting the side of his shell up against the Underlord's hip. Eithan laughed and rested his hand on the turtle's head, and the two of them walked out as well.

Mercy looked bewildered, but she bowed to both Naru Gwei and Bai Rou before leaving, using her staff like a walking stick.

Lindon made sure he was the last to leave the room.

He was watching Naru Gwei, who melted into his chair with a sigh of absolute release.

Bai Rou spoke up. "He got exactly what he wanted," the Skysworn said, his deep voice laced with anger. "You let him—"

The Underlord slapped the table, letting out a loud bang. He left an indentation of his hand pressed into the wood.

"Bai Rou," he said, "shut up. Just...shut up."

## Chapter 4

Only a day later, Lindon found himself with a new set of armor inside a Skysworn training facility. The room was a stone box reinforced by scripts to withstand the high-intensity sparring of Truegolds, and targets and training weapons leaned up against one wall while benches lined the other.

Yerin staggered stiffly in the middle of the floor, trying to bend her arms. The green armor sat on her like she'd been encased in stone, and she stomped around as though she had weights tied to each limb, her Goldsigns sticking out from the back. They had worked together to find adjustable panels on the back that could be removed in order to allow her sword-arms the freedom to move.

"It's like locking myself in a box," Yerin grumbled. She tugged at her collar, but the leather padding of the interior was stiff. "If I have to fight in this, at least I'll be wearing my own coffin."

Mercy propped one leg up on a bench, doing a few quick stretches in her armor. She actually looked more comfortable in the green plate of the Skysworn than she did in her normal clothes, and she looked pleased while patting her armor. "How do I look?" She straightened up from her stretch, transforming her staff into a bow and striking a pose.

With a sound like tinkling glass, Little Blue applauded. Mercy bowed to the spirit, and Yerin shot her a jealous look.

"This is the only sensible thing I've seen any human wear," Orthos said. "But it does leave your head unprotected."

Lindon hadn't put on a single piece of his armor, though he wore the tight-fitting cloth suit that you were supposed to wear beneath it. He was sitting nearby, flipping through the armor's manual.

He tapped a page. "There are defensive constructs in the armor that cover the head. That's the real defense, more than the armor itself. And there are protective scripts circling the neck."

Orthos snorted. "Too complicated." He slipped his head into his shell and



back out. “You see how simple this is?” His head disappeared and reappeared again. “The simple solutions are best.”

Lindon flipped the page, running down the list of optional accessories. “Oh, you *can* order a helmet, you just have to pay for it yourself.”

The armor was interesting. Ever since seeing Renfei die to a single attack from Akura Harmony, he had looked down on Skysworn armor, wondering what it actually did to protect its user.

It *could* do quite a bit. It came with a dream construct that could transmit messages, a Thousand-Mile Cloud contained in a compartment on the back, a triggered defense in the form of a wind barrier, passive defenses in the form of scripts that weakened hostile madra and spiritual attacks, and a long list of additional options that could be added by the Skysworn Soulsmiths.

However, he could see the limitations easily. For one thing, each of those constructs had to be powered. If it drew on itself for power, it would only last for a few days before needing to be replaced. If the sacred artist fueled the constructs, their madra had to be compatible. Even so, the armor would need near-constant maintenance, and the more options it had, the more expensive it would be to maintain. He suspected most Skysworn would have as few constructs in their armor as possible, and would activate them only rarely.

As for Akura Harmony's attack...

[Harmony used the Shadow's Edge technique,] Dross said. [It's a Striker technique with shadow and sword aspects, and it cuts on the spiritual level as much as the physical. Harmony could slice a single page out of the middle of a book with it, and if the target has a spirit? That's even easier. It's amazing! You should *see* what it can do to a person. Oh, I guess you have. And if I had been a tenth of a second later, you'd have seen what it did to your spine. Good thing I'm around, isn't it?]

Lindon shivered and turned back to his armor. He didn't have to worry much about madra compatibility, so long as he only used his pure core to activate the armor's techniques, but pure madra maintenance was only better than nothing. He would need to have Fisher Gesha take a look; he already had some modifications in mind.

For one thing, the communication construct could go. Its range and efficiency were poor, and Dross could do the same thing faster and more clearly.

That left only the passive scripted defenses, the Thousand-Mile Cloud, and the triggered barrier of wind. He had a lot of room to add constructs of

his own before they began to interfere with one another.

It would take huge amounts of madra to activate multiple constructs at the same time, but that was to be expected. For one thing, he didn't have to activate all the constructs at the same time.

For another, he had madra to spare.

He was working with the right arm of the armor, trying to see if it would work with his Remnant prosthetic or if the white arm would obstruct the scripts, when Eithan popped open the door.

“No horrific mishaps yet? Good, because the Skysworn require us to take on an assignment soon in order to complete our registration as a squad.”

Lindon hoped it wouldn't be *too* soon. They had only been back in the city for one night, and he wanted to enjoy hot meals and clean beds for a while longer. Besides, he hadn't gotten to talk with Yerin enough on their journey back.

“So how about *right now*?” Eithan continued. “I happen to have found a terrific opportunity nearby!”

Yerin groaned. Orthos huffed out smoke. Little Blue let out a sad little tinkling noise and slowly climbed out of Lindon's boot. Even Mercy sagged against her staff, giving a sigh.

[A terrific opportunity? I was going to say we should pass up a regular opportunity and take a day off to rest, but a *terrific* opportunity? How can we say no to that?]

A worm of guilt ran through Lindon's gut. How could he even think of taking it easy? He had a long road to travel, and he couldn't afford to be lazy.

But last night, he had woken up half a dozen times in a sweat, thinking he was in danger. It had been too long since he'd slept in safety. In Ghostwater, he had never felt *truly* secure, and now he couldn't shake the feeling.

Eithan clearly noticed the mood, because his smile turned sympathetic. “Believe it or not, I do believe rest is valuable. You have worked hard, and any weapon pushed to its limits for too long will break. However, time does *not* wait, so I'm afraid I must push you one last time.”

Lindon was sure this wouldn't be the last time.

“In return, I am an open book.” Eithan spread his hands. “What would you like to know from me?”

Before Lindon could even digest the opportunity, Yerin answered.

“Underlord,” she said simply.

There were many things Lindon wanted a straight answer about, but that

was the most urgent. He agreed without hesitation. “If you could guide us to Underlord, I would be grateful.”

Eithan turned to Mercy and Orthos, as though waiting for an objection, but neither said anything. Mercy looked like she was bracing herself for bad news, but Lindon felt eagerness—though muted and restrained—from Orthos.

“Well, all right then! Underlord it is.”

Eithan stroked his chin as though organizing his thoughts. “There are three steps to reaching Underlord. Mastering yourself, mastering the world around you, and then *connecting* yourself to the world. It’s the third step that’s the most mysterious.”

*What about soulfire?* Lindon asked Dross.

[That’s the by-product of connecting to the world around you,] Dross said. [And don’t worry, I know everything about advancing to Underlord. But since my memories are all jumbled up and pieces of them are missing, let’s listen to him first, right? Just to make sure he knows what he’s talking about.]

Eithan continued. “First, you must open your soulspace, which involves reaching the peak of Truegold and controlling your madra completely.”

Lindon had understood that much already. Jai Long had reached that state after absorbing and digesting as much madra as he could.

“Second, you must weave soulfire from aura. Many would-be Lords and Ladies fail at this step, but I have some tricks that you may find useful.”

[Oh, that’s not terribly hard for any *real* sacred artist,] Dross said confidently. Lindon’s spirits lifted. [Or so Northstrider said.]

Lindon wasn’t sure if that was reassuring or not. On the one hand, a Monarch would surely have great understanding of the sacred arts. On the other hand, they might have impossible standards. What was simple as lifting a hand for him might be an incomprehensible riddle for Lindon.

“And for the third and final step,” Eithan went on, “you must call upon your soulfire to re-forge your body. Sounds simple, doesn’t it? It’s not.”

[*That’s what Harmony asked me about!*] Dross said excitedly. [Not me, but me when I was part of the tree. You remember. He couldn’t complete the third stage and advance to Underlord, so he asked me how.]

*What did you say?* Lindon asked.

Eithan continued speaking, cutting off Dross. “Many Underlords don’t know the secret to triggering the soulfire transformation, reforging your body and tying you to the world around you. Even though they’ve passed it

themselves, they don't recognize exactly which insight made it possible."

[Remembering is...hard. There was more of me before. But Harmony...I told him to put his life at risk, and all would become clear.] Dross paused a moment. [Why would I say that? That sounds like terrible advice.]

Well, at least that helped explain why Harmony was so set on fighting Lindon.

"It is a personal revelation," Eithan said. "A true, deep understanding of *yourself* that causes the soulfire inside you to resonate with the aura around you, activating your advancement."

Yerin looked thoughtful, crossing green-plated arms awkwardly, her Goldsigns hovering over her head. Mercy looked surprisingly grim, though Lindon couldn't see why, and wistfulness drifted over from Orthos' soul, as though he'd heard a story about something he wanted but could never have.

Little Blue peeped and ran back into Lindon's pocket, curling up for a nap.

Lindon committed the process to memory, though he was sure he'd write it down later. *What else do you know about reaching Underlord?* he asked Dross silently.

The construct's voice was filled with longing. [Everything...or at least I did. It was like being a piece of all knowledge in the universe, all of it at once, and then it was like getting rudely torn away and tossed into some human's head. Which is, you know...great.]

*Forgiveness. I did not intend to hurt you. Even the smallest fragment of what you remember could be helpful.*

[...you're too serious, I know I've told you that before. I was only complaining.] Dross sighed. [Listen, you won't have any trouble with the first step. Not once you get your pure core up to standard. It's scrawny right now, a little wimpy, so you're going to want to beef that up. Put some meat on those bones. Second step...well, not to brag, but I can handle that one. No problem. You have to sense the unity of aura, which is a *lot* easier with a mind-spirit in your head.]

This time, Lindon wished he *could* take notes, but he still didn't want to expose his void key to Mercy. Or to Eithan, for that matter.

He wanted to surprise Eithan when he would get a better reaction.

[The third step is the weird one. You'll want to discover your reason for practicing the sacred arts.]

*That's it? How does my motivation change anything?* He had experienced

dream tablets left behind by Lords, and he could still imagine the feeling of channeling soulfire. He was sure that the secret to advancement was a soulfire cycling technique.

What did his knowledge of himself have to do with advancement? It almost didn't feel like sacred arts at all.

[If my memories of Northstrider have taught me anything,] Dross said, [it's that the sacred arts only get weirder.]

Eithan clapped his hands, staring off into space. "As it turns out, we're even more limited on time than I expected, so now that we're all armored up, I'm going to give you a choice."

Lindon started hurriedly pulling his armor on. He would have to keep his right arm under control until he could script some longer-term safety measures into the suit.

Eithan tilted his head to the left. "We can go on some secret missions I've discovered that would be of great benefit to the Empire, or..." He tilted his head the other way. "...we can embark on the most efficient way I know to train you to Underlord. It's entirely up to you."

"The missions!" Mercy said, raising her staff.

"Underlord," Lindon and Yerin said at the same time.

Eithan gasped. "This is an amazing coincidence, because the most efficient way I have to train you requires us to earn a great deal of money. And the most profitable prospect available to us—" He held up a stack of papers. "—is to complete missions for the Skysworn!"

Orthos chuckled. Yerin gave Eithan a flat stare. Mercy looked excited. Little Blue let out a little whistling snore and curled up tighter in Lindon's pocket.

Lindon asked, "What about the Arelius family?"

He knew that Eithan was restricted by what the family would allow him to spend, but surely the greatest source of funding available quickly would be from the Arelius family.

Eithan cleared his throat. "We're having a temporary disagreement of sorts. Suffice it to say that I do not have the same access to family funds that I used to."

Lindon didn't want to pry further, but his heart fell. Without the resources of the Arelius family, advancing would become that much more difficult.

"I've come across some good fortune in Ghostwater," he admitted, though it speared him through the gut to be volunteering his spoils of war. "Works of

art I...recovered...from a gold dragon. They aren't any help in the sacred arts, but Orthos suggested we could sell them."

He hated to give up money he could use, but if Eithan really knew of a way to advance them all together, then Lindon would contribute.

Eithan clapped him on the back. "Generosity! Truly, the disciple takes after his master. Now, we have to get going! Those sewer spirits won't blow themselves up."

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Yerin had worked for the Arelius family before, and she'd never say out loud that she missed it. Working for the Skysworn was much the same.

It was nice to have a mission and a purpose that was simple enough to complete. Sewer spirits formed out of corruptive, toxic aura, and grew until they could squeeze their way up into homes, eating pets and weak Remnants. Just had to track them down and dice them up, then track them back to their source. The Arelius family would have to clean up the mess at the center of it all, but the Skysworn existed to keep the peace in the sacred arts world. Dealing with spirits that got too strong was their job.

A few days after that, they chased down a circle of renegade Soulsmiths selling faulty healing constructs. They had hired a pack of Truegold sacred beasts as muscle, so that one ended up getting a little heated.

For ten more days, they recovered stolen weapons, hunted Remnants to replenish their Soulsmith supply, and guarded a farm from a group that the Soulsmith called bandits. They ended up being hungry locals, driven from their homes after the Dreadgod attack, who agreed to stop making trouble in exchange for a crate full of food.

In between everything else, they had to supervise the Emperor's latest decree. He had called every sect, school, and clan that mattered a notch to Blackflame City, and even Stormrock was drifting in that direction. They passed over caravans, cloudships, and processions of sacred artists heading to the capital, and of course a few holds and sects that didn't want to listen.

Intimidating stubborn Truegolts into following orders was a bright spot in her day. Wasn't too long ago that they could have swept the floor with her, and now they had to straighten up their spines as soon as she walked in the door.

Besides, now that Lindon had a proper spirit in him, he had a natural gift for sharp looks. It made her heart warm to see him make a white-haired elder choke using nothing but a black-eyed stare. The baby squirrel had finally left

the nest and grown into a...well, squirrels never turned into anything scary. Call it an ancient sacred squirrel.

They had taken their first steps toward becoming a real team, too. Mercy had no problem taking care of Remnants or feeding the hungry, but she couldn't scare so much as a baby kitten. Orthos had no interest in anything complicated; he just wanted to know what to knock over. A turtle after her own heart.

Little Blue...still wouldn't touch Yerin.

That didn't bother Yerin. Why should it? The spirit looked so happy riding around on Lindon's shoulder, pointing out the scenery they passed, scampering up on his head to get a better look.

...maybe she should get a Sylvan of her own.

Everyone was working as a merry team except one. On his own, Eithan could have done as much as the rest of the squad, but he seemed happier to sit back and watch them. He didn't talk to the citizens, he didn't fight, he only pointed them in the right direction and watched.

Lindon didn't say anything, but Yerin could tell it was pushing him to the edge of a cliff. He tried every night to get Eithan to train him in pure madra techniques, but Eithan always said Lindon wasn't ready.

Yerin couldn't imagine what he was waiting for, but he was starting to get on the wrong side of her, too. What right did he have to treat Lindon like that?

Though she had to admit that part of her was relieved. With Eithan's personal instruction, Lindon might beat her to Underlord.

What if he made it, and she never did?

They flew back to Starsweep Tower, landing and withdrawing their Thousand-Mile Clouds. Yerin still hated the armor, but having a cloud you could summon and dismiss at a thought was pleasing.

"Where's dinner?" Yerin asked, as soon as they hit the pavement.

Lindon carried the papers proving that they had completed their day's assignment—tracking down a pack of sacred bats and 'persuading' them to stop attacking the cloudships that came and went from Stormrock. He would turn the missions in for payment, then join the rest of them.

"Fisher Gesha is cooking for her family," Lindon responded, flipping through the papers one last time. "She invited us over."

"*What* has she got cooking?" Yerin asked. She wouldn't put it past the old woman to boil up a pot full of spiders.

“Apologies, I'm not sure. Crab, I think?”

Crabs. The spiders of the sea.

Yerin looked to Mercy and Orthos, hoping they would have other plans, but Orthos was still shivering on the ground, relieved to get out of the sky. Eithan's Thousand-Mile Cloud was the largest, so he had to haul the turtle every time, and Orthos still hated flying. Mercy gingerly patted the turtle's head, speaking in a soothing voice.

Finally, she turned to her last hope: Eithan. Who was already staring at her with a big grin on his face.

That was never a good sign.

“Why don't the rest of you clean up and head over?” Eithan suggested, slipping an arm between Yerin's Goldsigns and resting it on her shoulders. “I'd like to have a moment with Yerin, if she doesn't mind.”

Mercy agreed enthusiastically and then guided Orthos away, paying no attention to the rest of them. Lindon looked up from the papers, glancing from Yerin to Eithan's arm on her shoulders. Then he turned his gaze to Eithan.

Sometimes it was hard to tell what Lindon's face meant. Yerin couldn't tell if he was waiting for an explanation for an Underlord or if he was glaring. It looked like a glare, but then, it always did.

Eithan pulled his arm back and coughed. “I have a few remarks I would like to share with her. About her training.”

Now *that* was definitely a glare.

Eithan waved a hand at him. “You know I haven't forgotten you, just go get our pay. We'll meet you at the Fisher's.”

Lindon looked less thrilled about getting the money than he had before, but he trudged off toward the accounts office.

Once he was gone, Eithan ushered Yerin into a nearby meeting room. The tower was riddled with identical rooms, which Yerin had seen before; Skysworn used them for everything from interrogations to filling out paperwork to throwing parties.

Eithan shut the door...and, for a moment, actually looked a little embarrassed.

It was strange enough that Yerin wondered if she should draw her sword.

“If you recall,” Eithan began, “a long time ago, I promised to give you a present. It was something I picked up from the Desolate Wilds, and only recently has it become appropriate to give it to you.”



Yerin eyed him. She'd never expected Eithan to give her anything. Lindon had needed more of his attention, and they shared a Path anyway.

Eithan rubbed the back of his neck, looking sheepish. "Over the last few days, I have come to remember that I have not been a good mentor to you. You have your own Path and your own direction, so I allowed myself to forget that you need guidance as well. For that, I apologize."

The Underlord actually bowed at the waist, pressing his fists together.

Yerin didn't know what to say. Seeing Eithan without his swagger was twisted and wrong. Like night falling at noonday.

"It's nothing worth getting all chipped about," she muttered.

Eithan straightened up, beaming again. "Excellent! I intend for us to stick together until we're slapping Monarchs and juggling Dreadgods, so it would be a waste to fall to a misstep now."

"Right, well, I *intend* to walk to the nearest gambling hall and win every game all at once." She extended a hand. "Never mind. You've got something for me?"

She couldn't hope for too much. Eithan liked to talk big, and sometimes he even convinced her, but in the end he was only an Underlord. Saying that he wanted to bring them all to the level of Heralds or Monarchs was like saying he wanted to pull the sun out of the sky and stick it in his fireplace.

She and Lindon could at least stick with him until he failed.

Eithan looked into her eyes and smiled at what he saw there, which irritated her all on its own. He reached into his outer robe and pulled out a small bag, which clinked as he tossed it to her.

She plucked it from the air and glanced inside. Three stones, smaller than her fist, each covered in scripts. Otherwise, they couldn't have looked more different: one of them was a chunk of crystal, one looked like it was made of dull rainbows, and the third was a smooth scripted river-stone. She scanned them with her spiritual sense—lightly, so they didn't activate—to confirm that they were what she thought.

"Dream tablets," Eithan said, which told her nothing about how useful they were. That was like saying they were 'books.'

"Two of them, I took from the Transcendent Ruins. One is from a researcher who examined the Bleeding Phoenix directly, and the other is from the man who would become the Sage of Red Faith. They're his experimental Path notes as he learned how to cultivate his Blood Shadow. The third I added myself: it's the Arelius family library's analysis on the uses

of a Blood Shadow.”

Yerin narrowed her eyes. There would be a hook in this somewhere. That all sounded too good to be true.

Her spiritual sense slipped into one of the dream tablets, not enough to fully activate it, but enough to get a glimpse of what it contained.

*She saw a drop of blood transform: into a tiger, a wolf, a woman, a sword. Now it joins a thousand other drops, ten thousand, an ocean...and that ocean spreads its wings and lets out a searing cry. The earth and sky are stained in blood.*

She jerked her mind back, breathing heavily. Before Truegold, she would never have been able to process this dream tablet. A glimpse of it agitated her Blood Shadow; it took her a long moment to get it back under her control.

“You were just...hanging on to these?” Yerin asked.

“The Sage's tablet requires you to be at least Truegold and firm of mind to view it at all, and the other two contain techniques that are only useful once you have a certain spiritual strength and insight into your Blood Shadow.”

His smile brightened. “I hang on to a lot of things.”

Yerin hefted the bag, hearing the dream tablets clink. It excited her to think of everything she could learn from these, but she was still a little disappointed that this didn't have anything to do with the Path of the Endless Sword.

She didn't want to rely on her Blood Shadow; she knew Lindon would use everything he came across, that was stone-certain. But her recent breakthrough in the Endless Sword technique had made her think that maybe she could follow in her master's footsteps.

“Looks like I owe you some thanks,” she said.

“Don't thank me yet,” he said, and winked. “Once you're a new Sage, *then* you can thank me.”

~~~

The underground chamber was cold and dark, lit only by the essence bleeding from a dying Remnant. Of all the prison cells Eithan had ever seen, this one ranked near the very bottom.

Eithan pulled a chair from his void key and sat down. As he waited in the darkness, he watched his students do battle over fifty feet above him.

His bloodline powers showed him the scene: Yerin and Lindon, both in their Skysworn armor, stood in the entrance of a shoddy bar. The patrons had scrambled to leave the second the Skysworn had shown up, some of them

fading through the walls or crashing through windows. The place was now deserted except for the Skysworn and the half-dozen ragged murderers they had come to collect.

This small organization had taken advantage of the influx of strangers into the capital, drugging people in the bar overhead, taking them downstairs, and then killing them for their Remnants. Some of the Remnants they sold to local Soulsmiths.

Others, they had used for parts.

They had been very careful to only abduct those without any family or connections, so their operation may have gone unnoticed by the Skysworn had Eithan not passed by this street the day before.

Now, Yerin singlehandedly suppressed the room with the Endless Sword. Whenever one of them reached for a weapon, an invisible knife sliced across his skin. If one tried to move, chips of wood would fly up from a nearby table. Though she said not a word, the message was clear: she had them all prisoner.

Meanwhile, Lindon—his eyes blackened—instructed the criminals to stay quiet and to keep their madra under control. They were to be detained and brought to trial. Orthos loomed behind him, blocking the main entrance and adding weight to his every word.

Mercy, meanwhile, was perched on the building across the street. Her bow was drawn, a black arrow nocked, as she watched and waited for a fight to break out.

It would, Eithan knew. He could see the signs too clearly.

As the murderers shouted and threw themselves into the hopeless battle, he stopped paying attention. He reached back into his void key—by habit concealing it as reaching into a pocket—and withdrew a pipe.

He packed it and tamped it down as Yerin flew into the middle of the opponents, throwing them away from her with pulses of tightly controlled sword madra.

The Sword Sage had really stumbled across a buried treasure. If only he had survived, he might really have been able to pass on his unique Sage techniques to his student. Eithan would have to make sure he honored the man's memory by serving his disciple well.

Though nothing ever went as smoothly as it should.

He'd meant for the dream tablets to be only one part of her gift. Nine or ten months ago, he'd commissioned Lezaar—the most accomplished refiner

of the Arelius family—to craft him a very specific pill. But he had been ousted as Patriarch before the pill was finished, and hadn't returned since. As far as he knew, the rare and valuable ingredients he'd put into making this miraculous elixir might have gone to waste. Or the pill might have been taken by someone who would never appreciate it.

He caught his frustration before it bloomed into anger, instead pulling out a scripted fire-starter and lighting the pipe. He didn't need the fire-starter, strictly speaking, but he enjoyed using it. The script lit up one rune at a time as it spiraled down the wooden script, pulling in red fire aura as it did so, culminating in a burst of sparks when it reached the end. So satisfying.

With nowhere to go, the smoke curled against the ceiling. He turned his attention to Lindon.

He was relying almost entirely on Blackflame, using his pure madra as a backup, which was a shame. But he couldn't handle Eithan's techniques yet. Despite having practiced the Heaven and Earth Purification Wheel for a year and a half, he did not have the madra reserves yet. Nor could his spirit handle them before his channels and core were reinforced by advancing to Underlord.

Of course, there were still other things Eithan could teach him about the use of pure madra. But he was spread out too thin as it was, trying to master two Paths, Soulsmithing, the madra in that arm of his, and the upgrades to his body and soul that he'd found in Ghostwater. By watching him move, it was obvious to Eithan that Lindon had found a way to enhance his mind, which had pleased Eithan enough to make him dance a little jig. Privately.

Eithan breathed out another mouthful of smoke. No, giving Lindon more to do would be counterproductive. What he really needed was time to adjust to the abilities he already had. But no matter how many times he told Lindon as much, Lindon took it as an excuse.

Aboveground, Lindon smashed through a shield of madra and hauled a Highgold murderer up by her collar. Orthos stomped down on a man who tried to flee, Mercy put an arrow through a hand that tried to stab Yerin in the back, and Yerin sliced a spear in half.

He smiled around the pipe. They moved with a confidence beyond their age. He couldn't have been prouder of them.

And he couldn't wait to see where they went from here.

Only one of the murderers escaped; the lookout. Eithan's students had never seen him. He had waited underground, veiled and peeking through a

trapdoor. After seeing the Skysworn devastate his partners, he had scurried downstairs, pulling a scripted seal from his pocket.

He was muttering to himself, a crazed smile on his face, as he approached the vault. His last resort. Eithan could see the thoughts written on his face: he was going to release their secret weapon. The puppet construct they had created for emergencies. Stitched together from Truegold Remnant parts, it had not been crafted by a true Soulsmith, and as such it was all but uncontrollable. He couldn't direct it; he could only unleash it.

The murderer placed the seal against the vault door, and the greater script on the door shone brightly. Interlocking metal gears began to turn, and the door slowly ground open.

The man laughed triumphantly as the vault was revealed, but his laughter slowly faded.

He stood face-to-face with Eithan, who sat on a padded chair in his Skysworn armor, calmly smoking. Behind him, a monstrous puppet-construct continued to dissolve into motes of rising light.

Eithan blew smoke into the man's face.

## Chapter 5

A few busy days later, Lindon and the rest of the team landed on Starsweep Tower to find Cassias Arelius waiting for them.

He was flanked by two Truegold Skysworn, who must have escorted him to the top of the tower, but his bearing made them look like his attendants rather than his guards. He was only a few years older than Lindon, his curling hair the same blond as Eithan's. Rather than sacred artist robes, he wore a pressed shirt and pants of dark blue with silver trim, and he stood straight as Starsweep Tower itself. His hand rested on the hilt of a thin, silver sword that he wore at his hip.

He glared at Eithan as the team landed, but he still spared a bow for the others. "Lindon, Yerin, Orthos. It has been too long. Your *squad leader* has been ignoring my messages." He shot another angry look at Eithan as he turned to Mercy.

"I apologize, young lady. I am Cassias Arelius, and if you'll forgive me, I'd say you must be Akura Mercy."

"Pleased to meet you, Cassias!" She bobbed an unsteady bow. "Thank you for lending us your Patriarch. He's always taking us to interesting places."

If Yerin had said the same thing, it would have been sarcastic.

Cassias looked surprised, and glanced over to Lindon and Yerin. "Yes, ah, that brings up what I'm here for. But first, Lindon and Yerin, you've... advanced. Of course you have. Congratulations to both of you."

He didn't sound congratulatory, but weary, as though he suspected Eithan of pushing them far too hard. He had expressed concern for them before.

But Yerin accepted his praise proudly, straightening her spine and lifting her chin, her sword-arms extending.

Lindon bowed to Cassias in response. "Gratitude. We have been fortunate."

"I truly hope you're taking care of yourselves. Both of you. But I'm here

because you *haven't* taken our Patriarch away from us. Eithan forfeited that title months ago."

Lindon shifted uncomfortably, stealing a glance at Eithan. Yerin was staring at him openly, waiting for a response, and Mercy made a face that suggested she'd rather not be hearing this. Orthos let out a long breath of smoke, and through their bond, he felt resigned. Like he'd heard his most troublesome child had caused a problem once again.

Eithan looked unconcerned, smiling gently as the wind pulled his long yellow hair behind him. He wore the emerald armor of the Skysworn more naturally than any of them, and Lindon had wondered more than once if he'd had the shape modified for style.

"I've been making the most of my freedom since you stripped me of my position," Eithan said. "Making the Empire a better place one locked-up smuggler at a time."

Cassias stepped forward, looking ready to draw his sword. "*I* did not strip you of anything, the branch heads did, and I took it on myself to inform you. And they had *good reason*. You don't do your job, Eithan! They cut off your funding and authority to *force* you to come back and face the family. The Emperor himself allowed it! And we've heard less from you than ever!"

Eithan's smile grew tight. "You don't think we could do this somewhere more comfortable?" The sun was setting, and the wind was growing uncomfortably cold.

Cassias threw up his hands. "I think you'll run off! I've spent the whole season trying to track you down, and now I think you'll disappear if I take my eyes off you for an instant! You always do that!"

He *did* tend to do that a lot, Lindon realized. Though he appeared out of nowhere even more often.

"Very well, then," Eithan said, and suddenly he radiated a presence that Lindon had only felt from him a handful of times before. It had nothing to do with the power of his spirit, which was still veiled. It was more subtle than that; a sense of authority, as though he was suddenly possessed by the Remnant of a king.

"When I arrived from the homeland," Eithan said, "I agreed to take over the Patriarch position for the Blackflame branch of the clan, but I also made it clear to your father that I had plans and goals of my own. His memory is short, for only seven years later, I find that he is dissatisfied with my level of service. Very well, then. Let it be as though I never traveled through that

gate.”

His blue eyes were cold. “If you cannot trust me, then leave me to my own devices.”

Cassias actually did draw a few inches of his sword, releasing the power of his spirit. It was only then that Lindon noticed that he’d advanced; he was a Truegold now.

Though, Truegold or Highgold, it was still suicide to throw himself at Eithan.

Cassias shoved his sword back harshly, but his words carried his fury. “Trust you? *Why?*”

His spirit was still unveiled, and he walked straight up to Eithan, unafraid, until they stood only a hand’s breadth apart. Eithan was three or four inches taller, but Cassias stared him down. “You tell us that what you’re doing is in the best interests of the family, but how are we supposed to know that? Do you know what it’s like to have to take something like that on faith? Truly, I mean it, *do you even know?* Do you know how frustrating it is to *not* know everything?”

Their blue eyes clashed for a long, frozen moment. Lindon knew they weren’t closely related, but at the moment, they looked like brothers.

To Lindon’s surprise, Eithan was the first to soften.

The intangible sense of authority faded. His shoulders slumped, and he raised an armored finger to rub his nose.

“That...is...a...painfully valid point,” Eithan finally admitted.

Cassias did not relent. “Come to the family elders. Most of them are on their way here. You can meet them before the Emperor’s deadline.”

Lindon and the team had spent much of their time over the last few weeks supervising the caravans of people traveling to Blackflame City to make the Emperor’s two-month timeline. He had called upon all major factions to send their best, especially their strongest and most talented disciples.

Lindon was vague on the details because the decree itself was. The Emperor did not see fit to explain his motivations to his Empire...or, at least, not in a publicly distributed command. Lindon gathered that the Blackflame Empire had gathered for a selection process, probably one associated with the international tournament coming up, but he had little to go on other than that.

Eithan probably knew the details, but that was to be expected.

“I will not meet with them,” Eithan said, holding up a hand to stave off Cassias’ anger. “*But* I will resume my duties as an Underlord. Not as the



Patriarch, but I can produce scales and supervise the distribution of our personnel here in the capital. I know that we're stretched to our limits with so many people in such a small area."

Cassias took in a slow breath, then stepped back. "That will help. Thank you. But I have one further request." He looked briefly at Lindon and Yerin. "It would help our standing greatly if our family could take one of the positions in the Uncrowned King tournament. We would be practically guaranteed to replace the Jai clan."

"Uncrowned King tournament?" Lindon immediately repeated.

Yerin's eyes widened. "Bleed and bury me, *that's* the competition everyone's all riled up about? I don't even believe the Blackflame Empire can afford a seat to *watch* that tournament."

Mercy looked to Yerin in surprise. "You're familiar with it?"

Eithan smiled. "That doesn't surprise me. Her master famously made it to the top eight three tournaments ago."

"If the sun fell from the sky and landed on your head, would *that* surprise you?" Yerin asked.

Eithan pondered for a moment before answering, "Yes."

Cassias took over the explanation. "The Heart Sage is choosing three Underlords from the young generation to represent the Akura vassal states in the tournament. I suspect Eithan—"

"—already has his candidates picked out," Eithan said, throwing out his arms. "If it all works out, I'll be able to provide all three candidates. And two of them officially have the name 'Arelus,' so it still looks good for us."

Lindon and Yerin traded glances. He was clearly pointing to them, and they *had* been adopted into the Arelus family.

Cassias' eyebrows raised. "Three?"

"Three?" Mercy repeated.

Eithan met her eyes and smiled. "Three," he said. "...if everything works out, as I said."

Cassias was quiet for a long moment, staring at Eithan and drumming his fingers on the hilt of his sword.

At last, he said, "I suppose I've taken everything else from you on faith. One more time won't kill me."

~~~

Two months since the Emperor had called for all the young Truegolds in the Empire to travel to the capital, Blackflame City was packed.

In his emerald armor, standing on a broad raft of cloud, Eithan led their pack. Orthos huddled behind him, head withdrawn, and Lindon could feel his nerves.

Mercy and Yerin followed afterwards, Mercy straddling her bow, and Yerin standing on a Thousand-Mile Cloud of her own. They all wore the green armor of the Skysworn, though Yerin looked no more comfortable in hers than she had two months ago.

Little Blue sat on Lindon's collar, snuggling against his chin, though she was almost too big to do that anymore. She chirruped to him like a spirited bird.

Somehow, Lindon thought she was talking about the view.

[What? That's insane. Could you really? I don't think you could,] Dross responded. Then he lowered his mental voice. [She's a little *too* enthusiastic about flying, don't you think? You should watch her so she doesn't jump.]

As nervous as Lindon had initially been about doing tasks for the Skysworn, he had ended up resting plenty over the last eight weeks. They often spent a few hours in travel to a simple job, and returned in time to eat, train, and sleep.

Now that the Skysworn weren't treating them like prisoners anymore—at least, not usually—he was enjoying the life. Even Yerin wasn't pushing for them to do anything more adventurous; she seemed to enjoy this period of relaxation as much as he did.

Today, Lindon let the chill of the early spring wind wash over him, warming himself from the inside with Blackflame madra. He still hadn't added anything to his Skysworn armor yet; he and Fisher Gesha were still studying it. Maybe they could arrange a heater with fire madra.

Their squad drifted away from the floating city of Stormrock, which had arrived over Blackflame City almost a week before. Lindon looked far below him at the capital of the Blackflame Empire.

It was surrounded by sharp, jagged walls of fractured obsidian so large that he wondered if they classified as mountains. Smaller gates had been carved through the walls all around, but the main gates rose as high as the walls themselves. Each gate was flanked by a towering statue in the same black stone: one, an Emperor with a crown and a long tail. He balanced a carved flame on one extended palm. This long-past Emperor stood facing his counterpart, an Empress with a similar crown and long tail, an identical flame on her palm as well.

Together, this Emperor and Empress stood watch over a city that dwarfed anything Lindon had ever seen. It was hard to determine distances from high up on Stormrock, but the imperial capital might have been the size of the entire Sacred Valley.

And every inch of it was crammed with people.

The crowds spilled out from every gate, backed up in lines miles long. An ocean of people battered against the walls like waves, waiting to filter into the already-teeming city.

There were plenty of Skysworn missions to go around, now that they had arrived at the packed city. So much population packed into a small space was a recipe for disaster, and the Skysworn were in high demand. Normally, Eithan allowed them to select their own assignments and lead the way when completing them.

This time, he had gathered them without telling them where they were going.

They flew in the icy wind, trusting Eithan to lead them to a destination only he knew. That was enough to make Lindon suspect they were heading somewhere unspeakably dangerous.

When they were a few miles out from the city walls, away from the roads, Eithan pointed to a cluster of hills. “We’re setting down over there!” He went on about the lovely rolling grassland, but the wind swallowed every other word he spoke.

When they finally landed—to Orthos’ great relief—and withdrew their Thousand-Mile Clouds, they were left standing on a grassy hill among many grassy hills. They could see Blackflame City off in the distance, the Emperor and Empress still peeking out over the hills, but there was nothing else for miles.

Eithan looked into the air as though he was watching the vital aura, though Lindon opened his Copper sight and saw nothing but the expected ribbons of color representing wind, earth, and life.

“Perfect!” Eithan said at last. “We arrived a little earlier than expected, but better early than never, as they say. Now, listen to me carefully, as we don’t have much time.”

Little Blue chattered in his ear and pointed. Lindon followed her gesture and looked up.

In the distance, swirling around the clouds, was a silver-and-violet speck. He didn’t need to see any greater detail to know it was an owl.

[That's not the same one,] Dross said confidently. [I can tell. No, wait...no, it is the same one. With those wings? One hundred percent sure. Hm. Wait...]

Lindon wanted to bring up the owl, but Eithan had continued talking. “Now, when the massive pillar of darkness erupts in front of us, run *into* it. You're going to have to fight the urge to run away.”

Mercy's grip tightened visibly on her staff, and her spirit suddenly felt disordered. Lindon was standing behind her, so he couldn't see her face, but he thought he sensed a dangerous pressure from her. “...a pillar of darkness? How did you hear about this?”

She didn't sound so cheery anymore.

Eithan gave her a knowing smile. “See for yourself!”

A deep thrum shook the earth, as though the hill on which they stood was a plucked string. From all around them, stone monuments covered in rings of script blinked into existence, embedded into the earth without disturbing it, as though they'd always been there. The closest one was only a few feet away.

[Ah!] Dross shouted. [Are those...were those there before? Did you see those before now? Are your eyes working all right?]

There were dozens of obelisks all over the hills. To Lindon, it looked like they formed a vast circle a mile or more across, and they were standing only a few feet outside the perimeter.

With a sound like the breath of a giant swallowing the clouds, a wall of darkness *blasted* up from the ground. The darkness was contained within the monuments, shooting up into the heavens, a perfectly black column of madra and light-devouring power that covered up half of Lindon's view. Everything behind him was lit by a bright sun, and everything ahead of him consumed by night.

Eithan had been right: Lindon's instincts told him to run, but he cradled Little Blue in one hand and started running.

[Let's wait and think about this for a second,] Dross said. [I'm sure we can come up with a dozen reasons to...you're not listening. He's not listening to me.]

Yerin had stared in shock, sword drawn, bladed Goldsigns spread wide. Lindon grabbed her free hand and pulled her forward. She caught his momentum and started running.

Mercy wasn't running, but she also hadn't hesitated. She marched toward the column, and when Lindon finally passed her, he glanced back to see that

her face showed cold determination.

Orthos, by contrast, had shot off running in the other direction.

It seemed Eithan had anticipated that, because instead of entering the tower of darkness himself, he had grabbed the turtle's shell with both hands and shoved him back into the night.

As Lindon rushed into the dark, a crushing weight pressed down on his spirit, but he braced himself as he had when running into the dark ocean of Ghostwater. Gritting his teeth, he plunged inside.

~~~

By the time Emperor Naru Huan sensed the massive pillar of darkness, he was ready.

Today was the promised day. He stood on a balcony at the top of his Imperial palace in Blackflame City, waiting for the signal he'd been promised by the Akura family. This was it, and there could be no mistake.

He walked out to the edge of the balcony, to get a better view of the column. He gestured with his wings, and he didn't need to extend his senses to know that his servants would be going to spread his orders.

By that gesture, he had summoned all the leaders of the major factions from all over the Empire. They had gathered here in the capital for this event, and he would need to give them their instructions soon.

As he stared at the mile-wide tower of shadow madra rushing into the sky, he saw a familiar chariot racing across the sky, pulled by horse-Remnants with shining violet hooves. The Akura family chariot came to a stop over the palace, and the Sage of the Silver Heart stepped onto the top of her chariot.

With her emergence, the sky turned purple.

The blue of the sky was stained as though someone had spilled paint, slowly spreading until the Akura family colors filled the heavens. Over the capital, a symbol was traced in shining white light: the Akura family crest. One great star flanked by two smaller stars, all three floating over a mountain range. Projected as it was, the stars looked real, the jagged mountains drawn in starlight themselves.

Charity began to speak, and while Naru Huan was close enough to hear the voice from her own lips, every word was also transmitted from the massive symbol overhead. It boomed out so that she could be heard across the city, and likely for miles around.

In the voice of heaven, the Sage spoke. "The darkness before you is a gate. It leads to a sacred land of opportunity, but *for* this opportunity, you

must fight. Our family—”

That titanic voice hesitated.

“—our family requires the strongest of the young generation to fight for us. To bring honor to humanity, fortune to your Empire, and glory to yourselves...”

She went on, but Naru Huan knew why her voice had faltered.

She'd sensed the same thing he had a minute before, when he'd extended his perception at the appearance of the towering darkness. She had felt it a little later than he had, and her surprise had been enough to interrupt her planned speech.

A small handful of people had been waiting at the base of the portal. They had rushed into it as soon as it had appeared.

Upon seeing a massive pillar of black that stretched from the earth to the sky, who would willingly walk into it? Only someone who knew what it was *and* where it would appear.

Naru Huan's lips twitched into a smile.

Akura Charity continued. “Beyond this gate lies the Night Wheel Valley, which is filled with valuable treasures and great opportunity...but also great danger. We are seeking young Truegolds who wish to break through to Underlord, and young Underlords who wish to increase their power. Travel to our garden, and let your spirits grow.”

Naru Huan was still listening, but his thoughts had raced ahead of him. His servants would gather the Blackflame Underlords, who would bring all their servants and most promising students.

At first, they would enter the portal and gather all the benefits they could from the other side. He hadn't been able to learn much about the Night Wheel Valley, but if it was valuable enough for the Akura clan to consider it a treasured territory, even an Overlord like himself might get some benefit out of it.

But eventually, they would have gathered everything they could safely. For that, they had to prepare defenses.

Because there was an opponent in this game.

~~~

The elite of the Seishen Kingdom had gathered together in the Highborn Gardens to listen to the Sage speak. They were surrounded by carefully cultivated natural beauty: waterfalls spilling over carved miniature mountains, splashing into crystal-clear pools filled with bright fish. Trees

with flower-bright leaves of orange, red, or pink provided shade for cushioned tables, around which the richest and most powerful in their kingdom shared sweet wine.

There was a forced cheer to the atmosphere, as everyone pretended not to mind that the sky had turned purple, and a heavenly voice was decreeing their fates from a massive triple-star crest.

Prince Seishen Kiro waited at the largest table, too nervous to touch his drink, though it gave off a tempting scent of berries and sunshine. That glass cost more than his monthly stipend, and had been poured only for a special occasion, but he couldn't appreciate it.

Kiro's father, King Dakata, munched merrily on cakes and tiny pies, only occasionally glancing up to the sky. He had committed to this casual pretense more than anyone. Dakata had united this kingdom through the force of his own personal sword, and he looked like it: he was built like a castle wall and reminded Kiro of an aging bear.

Kiro had inherited his father's size, but fortunately he had a somewhat more graceful appearance. He thought so, at least.

His little brother Daji, seated a little further down the table, looked more like a wolf than a bear. A bad-tempered wolf. He slumped down in his chair, glowering at the Sage. More than anything else, Daji craved combat, and he never did anything to hide that.

Not that the Sage of the Silver Heart would care what any of them looked like. From heights like hers, the Underlord princes of a small kingdom were nothing more than beetles crawling on the ground.

"...go forth, for the future of the Seishen Kingdom...and for glory," Akura Charity finished.

She spoke without the passion Kiro usually associated with speeches, but there was something about the weight of her delivery that made her words effective. A cheer rose from the tables around him, led by his father, who brushed crumbs from his hands in order to clap.

Kiro joined in, though he had given the actual announcement less than half his attention. He understood enough to realize that only honor would bind them once they were actually in the Night Wheel Valley. He was focused on that distant moment.

But now the Sage's carriage drifted down, coming to land on the hill between a nearby pond and the royal table. Charity herself was still standing on top as the sky cleared, turning blue again.

Kiro's stomach clenched. He had hoped she wouldn't come to address them directly. This was nothing but an opportunity for his family to embarrass themselves; what could they say to a Sage?

Dakata rose, beaming, his arms spread as though for a hug. “Brilliant, Silver Heart, just brilliant! I have waited for an opportunity to show our worth to you ever since I took the crown!”

Purple eyes took him in and passed over the rest of the table.

The King chuckled. “As expected of a Sage! You see right to the heart of the matter.” To Kiro's embarrassment, his father walked around the table and clapped a hand on his shoulder. “*This* is the Underlord who will do you proud in the tournament! I can't say for sure he'll keep up with the young disciples from *your* family, but if he's not the strongest Underlord of his generation in the vassal states, I'll eat my sword!” Dakata threw his head back and roared a laugh, as though he assumed everyone else would laugh along with him.

A few people chuckled politely.

Daji glared. He was two years younger than Kiro, but the fact that he was only Truegold burned him. He pushed himself too hard to catch up, and he seemed to take Kiro's every step forward as a personal insult.

Kiro forced a smile at his father's words, feeling a surge of guilt. He wasn't even the strongest of the young Underlords within ten feet.

“Please excuse my father,” Kiro said smoothly. His training didn't go away even when he wanted to crawl in a hole and hide forever. “He is grateful for the chance to serve you, as are we all.”

Akura Charity glanced over him, then immediately pointed behind his shoulder. “Does that include the young Lady, as well?”

It would be inappropriate to sigh in relief, so Kiro kept himself under control. Inwardly, he thanked the Sage for immediately seeing the truth.

The *real* strongest young Underlord in the Kingdom—and maybe among all the Akura's vassal states—stood behind him, tending to the trees.

Riyusai Meira knelt at the roots of the red-leafed tree that gave them shade. She stroked a hand along its roots, massaging green light into the bark and whispering soothing words.

When the Sage addressed her, she shot up, gray eyes wide. Though she was only twenty years old, her hair was as gray as her eyes, her skin pale, and her clothes drab. She would have looked colorless if not for her Goldsign: vivid green vines and pink flowers that grew out of her head and wove in and out of her hair. Kiro knew some of their peers found the contrast disturbing,



but he had always considered it beautiful.

After staring stiffly at Akura Charity for a moment, Meira threw herself bodily to the ground. “This servant does not dare to address the Akura Sage, but is grateful for the Sage's attention. It is the honor of her life to serve the first prince of the Seishen Kingdom.”

Kiro stared at Charity's impassive face, which looked even younger than his own. Mentally, he urged her to mention Meira.

Though the gardener didn't seem to care herself whether she was singled out or not. Her first concern was, and had always been, for him.

Dakata cleared his throat, stepping between Meira and Charity. “We do not have so many young Underlords that we can afford to overlook this...precocious Underlady, but her Path is intended for the maintenance of the palace grounds. This is the first time anyone of any power has come from her family, and while we are of course proud of her, my son's future growth is immeasurable.”

Kiro would have traded all that growth to the heavens for the guts to stand up to his father. This would be the time to say something; Dakata couldn't back down in front of a Sage.

*Meira is a genius. Someday, she will defend the Kingdom better than I ever will.*

Saying it might change Meira's future...but it also might change nothing. Maybe the Sage wouldn't care, and he would have infuriated and embarrassed his father for nothing. More importantly, he would have lowered the Seishen Kingdom's appearance in the eyes of the Akura family by contradicting his king in public.

He couldn't do it.

Akura Charity looked to Meira again, but to Kiro's disappointment, she said nothing. Instead, she turned to Dakata. “Your Highness, I need you to understand what is at stake here.”

Dakata grew serious, clasping his massive hands together. “My mouth is shut, and my ears are open.”

“The Monarch factions do not move quickly,” Charity went on. “The Uncrowned King tournament does not begin for fourteen months. However, I will make my selections before the first day of summer, so that I have time to personally prepare my recruits.”

Kiro's heart leaped. The Sage's personal attention was a valuable prize in itself. He saw Daji's jaw tighten; undoubtedly his little brother was

redoubling his resolve to reach Underlord.

With the instruction of a Sage, Meira would ascend to the heights she deserved. Kiro had to make sure she got that chance. And if they had only the remainder of winter and into spring, it meant they had five months. At most.

The Sage's purple eyes were clear and direct as she looked at the King, as though she meant to impart a hidden message through her gaze alone. "The Night Wheel Valley will only remain open until the last day of spring, by which time I trust you will have reaped great benefits from its riches. It would also make my decision significantly easier if one party's young generation were to demonstrate itself decisively superior to the other."

Kiro read the implication clearly. Of course, his father didn't miss it.

Dakata chuckled. "Ah, and who among the Blackflame Empire has caught the eye of the famous Sage of the Silver Heart?"

"How strange that you ask," Charity said, tone dry. "In fact, there is a young man—a Truegold—who was recently involved in the death of my own grand-nephew."

The other nobles around the table, who until now had done a grand job of pretending to be somewhere else, audibly shifted in their seats or took in a breath. Kiro's little brother leaned forward hungrily; Daji would relish the thought of an enemy.

Dakata's expression darkened, and Kiro's chest grew tighter. He hadn't realized how volatile this situation really was. The Akura family making their vassals compete wasn't terribly unusual, and might not escalate to the kind of combat he feared.

But if one of the enemy had killed a core member of the Akura clan, under such circumstances that the Sage felt like she couldn't act directly...

"As you gather resources in the Night Wheel Valley, some clashes are inevitable," Charity continued. "I do *not* expect to lose talented members of the young generation, but I'm sure both sides would benefit from a...spar. And I would, of course, watch the results of such a contest closely."

Kiro didn't see how he could possibly distinguish himself in a fight against a Truegold. On the surface, the Sage was simply using him to vent her frustrations on this Blackflame. But she was a Sage. There had to be more to it.

It sounded like this situation was a better fit for...

Daji stood up so fast that he almost knocked his chair over. He looked furiously eager. "A Truegold! He is mine. I will carve the difference between

us into his body.”

Charity did not move her eyes from the King’s face. “That would not be appropriate. As I said, I wish not to lose talented members of the young generation.”

“I swear to you on the name of our family that I will leave him alive to regret crossing you.”

Finally, Charity turned to him. “I will make myself clear. If you face Wei Shi Lindon before you reach Underlord, you will surely die.”

They were in a wide open space, but her voice seemed to echo, hanging in the air long after the words should have faded.

Daji’s mouth fell open a little, his face showing pure, almost comical shock. He had never faced a worthy opponent of his own advancement level. The very idea seemed to have ground his brain to a halt.

Mentally, Kiro upgraded the Blackflame Truegold to an actual threat. If he was so much better than other Truegolds his age, then he could not be allowed to advance to Underlord.

“Say no more,” King Dakata said. “Describe him to my oldest son, and you have only to sit back and watch.”

Charity looked to Kiro, who stood up straight, focusing on the Sage’s chin. He was too afraid to look into her eyes. “As first prince of the Seishen Kingdom, I swear to serve you with all my ability.”

He felt Meira behind him. This would be his way of living up to her expectations. If they could both be selected by the Sage, then he would thank the heavens. If they couldn’t, he could push her forward.

He could not match her in the sacred arts, but at least he could do his duty.

## Chapter 6

The darkness blinded more than only Lindon's eyes. All his senses, his spirit, and his Copper sight shut down one step at a time. Little Blue trembling against his Remnant fingers vanished first, and then the feel of Yerin's hand in his. There was a rushing sound in his ears, until even that faded to silence.

The presence of the others—the subtle force of their spirits—faded away, until he felt more alone than he had since leaving Sacred Valley. He had never realized how much he relied on spiritual sense until now; even Orthos' existence in his soul disappeared.

It was like being Unsouled again.

His instinctive reaction was to panic, to flail around and grasp for what he was missing, but he restrained himself. If Little Blue was still in his hand, and only his sensation of touch was missing, he could crush her if he lost control of himself. If they had been teleported separately, then she would be safe either way. The important thing was to stay calm.

But with his senses stripped away, he hung in an endless abyss.

Completely alone.

[I don't know that I've ever been anywhere this dark before,] Dross said. [There's always something around that glows. It used to be me.] He sighed. [I miss glowing.]

Lindon seized on the company. *Dross! Are we being taken somewhere?*

[Oh, yes. Classic spatial transmission. Here's a funny story: when Northstrider first tried to develop transportation gates to and from Ghostwater, everyone he sent into them died! They just, *pop*, blew apart! Even the *slightest* error results in messy, horrible death.]

The darkness retreated, Lindon's senses fading back in with the smell of wet earth and the comforting sensation of friends all around. Little Blue had scampered out of his palm and up to his shoulder. She gave a long whistling sigh when she saw him again, throwing cold arms around his neck. Yerin's

hand was still in his, and she squeezed tighter when she felt him there.

[Ah, there we are. Nothing to worry about, as I expected.]

They stood on a grassy field, staring down the length of the Night Wheel Valley.

It was well named.

The broad valley was shrouded in darkness, with black clouds covering any trace of the sun. Most of the dim light came from purple lightning flashes deep within the clouds, and the long grass at Lindon's feet blew in a wet breeze.

Like a hurricane, the clouds swirled in a slow vortex over the entire valley, with the glow of purple lightning most intense at their center. Lindon had to assume that was the Night Wheel.

The valley ran between mountains on the east and west. While the western mountain was largely blanketed in trees, the eastern mountain was absolutely *covered* by what looked like one massive castle of black stone. Crenellated walls rose in layers up the side, marked by towers that blazed with purple bonfires. Windows and arrow-slits throughout the huge fortification shone with orange or purple light—the orange seemed to come from natural fire, and the purple from runes. He could see a few script-circles burning purple even from this distance, and for him to see them at this distance, each rune must be the size of a horse.

The spiritual pressure coming off that massive building was overwhelming. It pressed against his spirit like a lurking nightmare, until Lindon wished he could return to the darkness he'd just left.

Most of the valley, like the mountain to the west, was covered in trees. He couldn't see the far end of the valley because of the trees, except for the tower of darkness that rose from the ground to the sky. It was identical to the one on their side, which caused Lindon to put a few pieces together.

If there was a gate, that meant someone else would be coming through it. Of course the Akura family wouldn't simply give them an opportunity; they had to make it into a competition.

The trees were difficult to see in the gloom, and upon further investigation, he could see that their leaves were black with faint lines of pulsing light running through them like veins. The bark was dark gray.

They reminded him of the trees in the Desolate Wilds, though those plants had been corrupted by some disease. These didn't *feel* unhealthy; they radiated a sense of life, like any other trees, but somehow muted. As though

he hadn't entirely shaken off the suppression of the portal's darkness.

Orthos poked his head out of his shell, looking around. "It was a gateway?" He gave a loud humph and bit a chunk out of a nearby blackened tree. Even its wood was a pale gray. "You should have said so," he complained, through a mouthful of splinters.

"Who has time for thorough explanations?" Eithan asked, then pointed to Mercy. "Now, Mercy, where are we?"

Mercy had set her jaw, her eyes fixed on the massive house to the east, her staff gripped firmly in both hands. "This is one of my family's properties," she said. "I didn't live here, but it's where I was trained."

Suddenly, the massive spiritual presence in the castle took on ominous significance.

"Does that mean, in the house..." Lindon was afraid to finish the sentence. From what Mercy had said before, he suspected the Akura Monarch could sense her name spoken anywhere in the world.

"Maybe," Mercy said grimly. "My mother doesn't live here, but she visits from time to time. Her presence...lingers."

She pointed with the dragon head on the end of her staff, and its eyes flared with violet light. "This valley is like our family garden. I used to cycle out here when I was a little girl. The vital aura here is strong, and we have every aspect you can think of.

"Of course, the strongest aura here is shadow. It covers everything."

Lindon could already feel that was true. Everything was soaked in darkness, and it felt like a ghost was running fingers down his spirit. He already wanted to turn back.

"This place is *full* of natural treasures," she continued, and Lindon immediately throttled the urge to leave. "It's where we grow them, so to speak."

The air seemed to push against Lindon. He felt heavier, and simultaneously hotter and colder. That couldn't entirely be explained by shadow aura, so he opened his Copper sight.

And immediately regretted it.

A canvas of solid black pushed against his eyes, with lines of bright color burning against it. It was so stunning that it seared his spirit, and he cried out, hurriedly shutting his senses.

Yerin moved her hand to his arm, checking to see what was wrong, and Little Blue gave an inquisitive peep.

Dross hissed in sympathetic pain. [For you, looking directly at the aura here is like staring into the sun with your human eyes, so try not to do that. You probably could have used that warning a minute ago, but uh...lesson learned! Let's call that a win for practical education.]

"The aura density here is far greater than it was in the Transcendent Ruins," Eithan announced. "Cycling aura here will be much faster than back home, which will make reaching Underlord that much easier! Half of the reason that Underlords are so rare in the Blackflame Empire is that the aura is so thin, reaching the peak of Truegold becomes difficult. So for us, the opportunity to train here is a treasure all its own!"

"That's...more than nothing, but how about the *real* treasures?" Yerin asked.

"That is the correct question! Your first step is to reach the pinnacle of Truegold and open a soul space. You can get there with time...or with money. This place is a treasure trove. We are the first ones here."

Eithan didn't say any more, clearly waiting for them to take over. He didn't need to say anything; Lindon understood.

"Mercy and Eithan are the two guides," Lindon said. "Split up, cover more ground. Orthos and I should be separated. Go to the closest source of treasure, clean it out, and send a signal through your armor when you have. Then we'll assign new hunting spots so we don't waste time covering the same ground..."

He realized he was giving orders. He had grown used to making the decisions for his little group in Ghostwater, and doing missions for the Skysworn over the last two months, Eithan had kept himself out of command. Lindon had often slipped into the role, but why? This was Mercy's home, Yerin was stronger than he was, and Eithan was the only Underlord.

Lindon flushed and looked down at the ground. "...unless anyone else has another suggestion."

"We don't," Yerin said, turning to Mercy. "Lead the march. You, me, and Lindon. The turtle can go with Eithan."

"I look forward to catching up with my old friend Orthos!" Eithan said, leaping over to the sacred turtle. "And my old friend Yerin!"

Yerin stopped in place. "...what?"

"Every second we spend talking is a second we're not stealing! Begone with you!"

So Lindon and Mercy headed off together, trying to pretend they didn't

see Yerin staring dejectedly after them.

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Delving into the forest was like plunging into a dark, icy cave. The wind howled through the trees, fire madra doing little to ward off the cold, and unseen things shifted and hissed in the shadows...perhaps the shadows themselves.

Mercy had lightened up as they ran through the forest, and now she looked around with fondness. "I used to go on picnics out here," she said. "This way!"

In only minutes, she led them to the edge of a short cliff. The drop was only ten feet down, and they overlooked a clearing about fifty yards square. It radiated an aura so forbidding that it stood out even from the deep shadows of the forest around it; Lindon shivered and slowed as they approached the cliff, afraid to glance down.

But Mercy walked up and looked around without fear, so he followed suit. Beneath them, filling the clearing, was a small battlefield. Skeletons littered the ground, rusted weapons sticking out of the earth. At first, it looked as though armies had clashed here, but all the skeletons were facing the same way. So an army had been obliterated here.

Between the bodies were brown grass and petrified vines, as though nothing could survive entering the clearing. The whole scene was shrouded in shadow like the rest of the Night Wheel Valley, but a spectral green light gave the field of death an otherworldly glow. At first, he couldn't make out the source of that light.

"The Valley has been in our family for generations," Mercy said, walking to a row of long spears that had been driven into the ground on the edge of the cliff. The spears were covered in scripts, and were connected to the ground by long coiled-up cables. Their spearheads were dull. "The aura is so strong here that every big event leaves a permanent mark. This is where the Nutarou family tried to storm our house, believing that the family of shadow-artists living there was just a myth to keep them off the land." She lifted a spear. "Their Remnants are long gone.

"Now, it's filled with death aura."

With one motion, she hurled the spear into the land below—the momentum of the throw caused her to stumble and almost fall. Lindon caught her by the green-armored elbow, and she looked up at him gratefully.

"Sorry. Still don't have my legs back."



“Back?” he asked.

While waiting for her to respond, he watched the spear. It landed between the bones...and for the first time, Lindon noticed black spots covering the bones. They almost looked like beetles crawling over the carrion, though they weren't moving. Maybe more like barnacles.

As the spear drove itself into the ground, cable uncoiling behind it, the scripts on the weapon's shaft activated. Those black spots darted over to the spear's shaft like bits of iron pulled by a magnet.

“My Puppeteer's Iron body gives me great control over my movements,” Mercy said, springing into a handstand. And almost immediately starting to fall. “Or...it used to,” she said calmly as she toppled.

Wisely, she had moved away from the cliff for this demonstration, so flopping onto her back only kicked up some dust. “Having my coordination sealed was one of the prices for leaving home. With enough training, I'll get it back.” She sat up, brushing herself off. “Looking on the bright side, I've learned a new appreciation for physical training! My Iron body made things too easy. Would you light up that circle for me, please?”

The long cable connected to her spear on one end was tied to a stake at the top of the cliff. The stake was driven into a stone block with a script on it, and Lindon activated it.

Immediately, the cable came to life and started drawing the spear back. The spear, now covered in black spots and glowing with a hazy green light itself, was reeled back like a fish on the end of a line.

“Incredible,” Lindon said, as he watched the process. “The death aura is too strong to go down personally, so you bring the natural treasures to you.”

“Not just the aura!” Mercy said, popping to her feet. “There are Sylvan Graveseds and other natural spirits down there, not to mention nasty Remnants that like the power of death. It's safer from up here.” She gestured to the long row of spears. “Most of the treasures growing in the valley have some system like this when it comes time for harvest.”

“What do your servants do with the natural treasures they...harvest?”

This Night Wheel Valley seemed too good to be true, like walking into a forest and finding that every tree was heavy with ripe fruit. The Akura family obviously lived here, so why didn't they make sure not a single treasure went to waste?

Mercy glanced over the cliff at the spear, which had almost returned. “A lot of it is sold or burned for soulfire,” she said, and Lindon made a quick

mental note of that.

“But the rest of it is stored in a vault not too far from here until it's needed.”

“This vault,” Lindon said, “would it be open to...*any* members of your family?”

The spear rattled up the side of the cliff, pulled by the cable, returning to drive itself into the ground again. The cable landed in a perfect coil at the end.

Now Lindon could see what the barnacle-like objects were covering the spear's shaft: they were skulls. Tiny, black skulls, from some that would have fit on the end of his pinky to a few bigger than his whole thumb. Each of them glowed from within with a soft, unearthly green light, and they radiated a sense of fear and decay that reminded him distantly of destruction aura.

Mercy stopped, mouth open in the middle of speaking. She held up a finger, then lowered it. She scrunched up her face. “I, uh, well...it actually is, but I've been cut off from family resources. Although technically *they're* not allowed to help *me*, so they would be the ones...” Finally, she shook her head. “No, I can't. This is Aunt Charity's property. She wouldn't notice the loss, but she doesn't tolerate cheating. She only allows a break in her rules in order to keep things fair. Or if she thinks it would bring enough of a benefit to the family.”

[It sure is a good thing no one in their clan knows you left Harmony to die,] Dross said. [That's a relief, isn't it? Such a load off your mind.]

Lindon pushed that thought away and walked over to the spear. There were baskets next to each one, which he supposed was how the treasures were meant to be collected. But how to remove the skulls from the spear? Surely you weren't supposed to peel death treasures off by hand.

“There's a separate script-circle on the butt of the spear,” Mercy said. “I'd activate it at a distance if I...were...how did you do that?”

Lindon had placed his fingertips on the end of the spear, where the death aura was weakest, and activated the spear as soon as Mercy had spoken. By the time she'd suggested activating it at a distance, it was too late, and the tiny skulls were already tumbling to the ground.

The nearby basket inhaled them, presumably as the result of another circle he hadn't seen activate, and it filled itself quickly with green-and-black skulls.

He stopped with fingers halfway back from the spear, suddenly panicking. Was that even more dangerous than he'd imagined? It hadn't *felt* too

dangerous.

“Golds can't get too close to death aura,” Mercy said, waving her hand near the basket to demonstrate. A few inches away, her arm jerked away as though it had been slapped, her fingers curling against her side. “The life aura in your body reacts automatically to protect you.” She squinted at him. “I wish I could take a closer look at you. I've never looked at your lifeline before, but it must be thick as an oak!”

*That must be...* Lindon began to think, and Dross finished his thought.

[That's right. Life Well,] he said. [Doing its job.]

“Ghostwater,” Lindon explained aloud.

She slapped his armored chest with the back of her hand, which had about as much impact as a leaf blown by the wind. “I'm so jealous! Getting to tour Northstrider's pocket world...it must have been incredible.”

A second later, her expression was bright again. “But the Valley has some sights worth seeing too. We should move on.”

Lindon looked back over the field of skulls. “There's so much *here*, though.” He wasn't familiar with the prices of natural treasures back in the Blackflame Empire, but he knew he was looking at a fortune.

“Natural treasures are sold in mixed sets,” Mercy informed him. “It's better to grab as many as you can. And there's an ancestral tree not far from here that weeps gold.”

Lindon snatched up the basket. “Lead the way,” he said. Then he deliberately opened his void key.

He left it open for a moment, making sure that she could see the savage-looking axe with the bone haft sitting within. Harmony's axe.

He was trusting her with two things, now—the existence of his void key and of Harmony's weapon. But if they were going to be gathering treasures together, she was going to learn about the void key sooner or later. He couldn't tell her to turn around every time he wanted to pack something away, and he certainly wasn't going to leave any empty space in his void storage that could be filled with valuables.

And if she didn't want him to discuss Harmony aloud, he could try to bring it up without any words.

She stopped as she saw the inside of the storage space, her stance softening. A cloud passed in front of her face.

“It's all right,” she said softly. “What's taken in battle is fairly won. If...someone...wants the weapon back, they will simply ask you for it. You

won't be punished for having it.”

Lindon left the key open for a moment, waiting to put the basket inside.  
“Gratitude. That's good to know. But *you*...”

He trailed off. He wasn't sure how to phrase the question, especially not without using Harmony's name.

He just wanted to know how she felt.

“No problem,” she said. “I understand.”

But as she led the way through the darkened forest to the next site, her steps were heavy.

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In the dream tablet, the Blood Sage—the Sage of Red Faith—manipulated his own madra. It was the same pattern as a basic cycling technique, but all tangled up in some places and reversed in others. Rather than waiting for the Shadow to feed on his spirit, he was funneling his own madra to it.

*When you choose to channel your spirit yourself, the Sage's voice said inside her head, it contains your own will. In the short term, this will give the Blood Shadow more power over you, which is why the weak and simple will never even think to try it. But over a few short months, the Shadow will begin to act as a true shadow of yourself. A blood copy of your own spirit.*

*This is but the first step on the road to true power. As for the second...first, tap into your soulfire...*

Yerin released the dream tablet, as she always did at that point. The second step of the Blood Sage's instruction was a set of soulfire control techniques, which at that point were about as useful to her as a bird telling her how to fly.

She and Orthos had followed Eithan to a patch of the shadow-drowned forest where the trees were covered in mushrooms that softly glowed purple or dark blue. They didn't look like soft, regular mushrooms, but rather like they were made of crystal. They felt like stone, too, but they still gave slightly in her hands. Like they were squishy, but covered in a hard outer shell.

The light hardly pushed the darkness back at all, and the aura the mushrooms gave off felt...strange. She couldn't put her finger on it, and since she couldn't open her Copper sight to look at it, she didn't even try to guess. But Eithan assured her they were safe to touch, so she peeled them off the trees and dumped them into sacks that Eithan had packed in advance.

Each one of the hand-sized mushrooms was worth more than a decent

cycling sword back in the Empire, so she was cramming her sacks full. But that didn't make the task any less boring, so she kept her mind focused on advancement.

Or, at least, advancing her Blood Shadow. Her own advancement was on a smooth track until she reached the very end of Truegold or Lindon ran out of his miraculous water.

"This would be a fine place for a dragon to find an adventure," Eithan said. He and Orthos had been chatting non-stop since they'd left, and Yerin mostly blocked them out.

"Once I'm at the peak," Orthos responded, "the quality of the aura will not matter to me. You know that. It's a sacred journey."

"One that is traditionally taken with family," Eithan said. He was leaning with his arms folded and his back against a tree, but mushrooms still drifted into his sack. She normally didn't question how Eithan did anything, but pure madra couldn't lift and move anything. Curious, she extended her spiritual sense to him.

Vital aura was moving the mushrooms physically. He was controlling them with some kind of Ruler technique. How? Pure madra had no...

The answer came to her at the same time as Eithan said it aloud. "One of the uses of soulfire, Yerin. It grants you weak control over any aura, though it's practically useless in battle. Nothing even close to a real Ruler technique."

She should have realized. Her master had lit campfires and brightened rooms with the wave of his hand, and she had long ago gathered that it had *something* to do with soulfire.

Then again, he was a Sage. No matter what he did, she wouldn't have found it strange.

Yerin ran her thoughts lightly over her dream tablets, drifting quickly through their memories. They had a lot to say about soulfire as well; the second stage of the Blood Sage's instruction was using her soulfire to push her own life and blood aura into the Blood Shadow. That would cause it to take on a version of her physical strength, personality, and appearance.

She focused on his vision of a complete Blood Shadow, raised according to his method.

*Others, weak of vision and will, keep their Shadows as formless, shifting weapons. Or they feed the Blood Shadow with the powers of sacred beasts, creating monstrous forms.*

She could feel his contempt flowing through her, even as his words were

accompanied by flashes of image and memory. If she dove deeper into the tablet, she would find herself drawn into the vision, but she kept half her attention on harvesting mushrooms.

*Such techniques show a pathetic lack of commitment. Bestial or formless Shadows are easy to control, but how can they stand up to mine? I am the first to perfect the true form of the Blood Shadow: an absolute copy of myself, a second body, with my own powers and will. It is often said that a Blood Shadow counts as an extra ally in combat. Is this true? Not for the weak and uncommitted!*

*For the dregs, it is worth only as much as a sacred weapon. What a waste of a Dreadgod's power! No—only those who follow my path to the end can truly be called masters of the Blood Shadow. It is a partner of absolute loyalty, who can operate in perfect coordination with me because its thoughts are my own. Such a partner is worth more than simply one more ally. Together, we form a greater whole.*

She wasn't only listening to his words, but his thoughts. The Sage of Red Faith knew his technique for raising a Blood Shadow was an unrivaled power. He believed himself truly invincible against anyone of the same advancement level.

But he was also a revolting slime of a man who would do anything, to anyone, for his own personal power. He would think nothing of bleeding a village dry if his Blood Shadow was a tad thirsty, so why would he care about giving the Shadow a mind of its own? Of course it wouldn't revolt against him. He gave it everything it wanted.

Yerin stared deeply into the mass of blood madra sleeping inside her soul, and once again she was filled with revulsion. And fear. If she got too weak, and the Shadow remained strong, it would wear her like a husk. Not a day went by that she didn't have to wrestle it down at least once.

"I thought my Path was over," Orthos said to Eithan. Yerin was still only listening with half an ear, focused on her own spirit. "Now, I face decisions that I...did not expect." He stretched out his neck, biting off a crystal mushroom the size of a human head.

"Not yet, you don't," Eithan said, pulling out a pipe. He filled it from a pouch as mushrooms continued to slowly drift over his shoulder, but lit it with a scripted fire-starter. Now, if he could control fire aura using his soulfire techniques, why didn't he use it to light the pipe?

"Soon," Orthos rumbled, and Yerin thought he sounded sad. "Soon," he

repeated.

Eithan patted the turtle on the shell. “Don't be so grim! You sound like you're facing down the end of your life, but you're practically starting it again. How many years do you think that Life Well gave you back? A century? Two?”

Orthos shook his head as though to clear it. “I'm losing myself. It's the shadows.”

“Enough to cast gloom on anyone,” Eithan said, taking a puff from the pipe. “Speaking of which...”

He glanced over to Yerin. “There's more than one tablet in there, you know. You have options. It's not as though you *have* to train your Blood Shadow in the same way Red Faith does.”

“That's clear as good glass,” Yerin said, walking over to a tree to snatch up a mushroom.

She'd glanced through all the tablets already.

There were three paths before her:

The most common was feeding her Blood Shadow primarily with blood madra. Usually in the form of scales. It would still leech from her a little, but it would eventually become little more than a mass of easily controlled blood madra. This was what the Sage called a “formless” Blood Shadow, and allowed the Shadow to be used essentially as a weapon. It was the most common and easiest to both control and create...and the Sage of Red Faith spat on those who chose that path, because he considered it the weakest.

The second method, and the one that Redmoon Hall often encouraged, was feeding the Blood Shadow with actual blood. The Shadow would absorb power and substance from the blood, eventually taking on a monstrous form. It was like storing a very solid Remnant or a vicious sacred beast inside her spirit. The Sage considered a bestial Blood Shadow to have its uses—feeding the Shadow exclusively dragon blood, for instance, would eventually result in a blood dragon that lived in her soul.

But he favored the third option. The clone. He had cultivated his Blood Shadow further along this path than anyone else, and now he was effectively two Sages in one body.

It only meant that Yerin had to give the Shadow a mind of its own.

She had to feed it not just her own madra, but her blood aura—the power of her body—and her life aura. The power of her life itself.

It required soulfire techniques to control those aspects of vital aura, since

her sword Ruler techniques certainly wouldn't do it. So she couldn't make her final choice yet, even if she wanted to.

But the day was coming soon when she would have to choose. Feed it her own life and power, or settle for a weaker weapon.

"You could turn your Shadow into a weapon," Eithan said idly. "Or a pet. Or a clone of yourself that will make you an unstoppable force of pure destruction."

"Hard work is quiet work," Yerin said.

"Take your time deciding. Just because two techniques are relatively common and one is the legendary power of a Sage doesn't make one *better* than the others."

"How has no one killed you yet?"

"Sheer laziness. Listen, you shouldn't worry: my wisdom is vast and deep. I have ideas about how to improve whatever Blood Shadow you create. There's a rare metal that can bond with a formless Shadow and still be stored in your spirit, which would give you a shifting, metallic weapon that responds to your every thought."

A sword that could change shape as she fought. She could see some uses for that. What the Blood Sage considered the weakest option was only his opinion, after all.

Eithan breathed out a cloud of smoke. "Yes, if Lindon had chosen a Path other than Blackflame, I would have worked with him. Never let it be said that I stop people from making the wrong decision. Like, let's say you *don't* want to combine the power of two Sages in one body—well, in two bodies..."

Yerin threw her sword at him.



## Chapter 7

Hours later, the group met back up, Lindon and Orthos drifting closer to one another over the course of the day. The whole group had Thousand-Mile Clouds stored in their emerald armor—except for Orthos, of course—but they all walked, comparing natural treasures.

Eithan assured them that there was no need to hurry anymore, and it soon became apparent why.

While the darkened forest had been largely empty on their way in, now that they were headed back out, it was bustling with activity. Sacred artists flooded through the trees, mostly Truegolds, but with Highgolds here and there.

The closer they came to the towering portal of darkness, the more people they ran into. Some were already clearing trees and assembling huts, or driving wagons through gaps in the forest. Shadows passed overhead, both cloudships and flying creatures.

The bustle reminded Lindon of the Five Factions Alliance in the Desolate Wilds, but when he emerged from the trees, he realized how wrong he'd been.

This was on a greater scale entirely. It looked like an entire nation on the move.

The ground for miles on either side—so far away that the distance was choked in shadow—was covered in an army streaming from the portal. The sky was packed with ships, and the earth with carts and wagons, all bearing the symbols of different Blackflame Empire factions.

He spotted mobile gardens pulled by the Redflower family, small contingents of servants under the banner of the Arelius family, emerald-winged flyers from the Naru clan, massive stone elephants draped with the emblem of the Kotai clan, small Skysworn squads here and there, and dozens of flags and symbols that he couldn't identify.

His spiritual sense was suppressed by the overwhelming shadow aura of

the Night Wheel Valley, and he couldn't even see as far as normal, but the scope overwhelmed him. It looked as though every land they'd passed on their cloudship journey from Ghostwater had been squeezed empty of people, though he knew that couldn't be the case. The Emperor had called to Blackflame City only the strongest and most influential, as well as their servants and staff.

So this was the power of the Blackflame Empire.

Without discussion, they all boarded their Thousand-Mile Clouds and took to the air, Eithan expanding his to accommodate Orthos. An official on a red cloud was directing streams of air traffic, though in their Skysworn armor, they were allowed to pass easily.

Eithan wove deftly through the chaos, and Lindon didn't question that he knew where he was going. He led them down the outer edge of the army of settlers, where people were starting to find space to stop their wagons or begin erecting shacks.

They landed near a half-completed barn, where an ancient, miniature woman with her hair in a tight bun was ordering a squad of workers. And a bustling contingent of purple spiders.

"That's worth more than you and me put together," Fisher Gesha snapped at a young man unloading a huge wooden chest. "You want me to carry it myself, hm?"

Purple spider-legs of Forged madra stretched out from beneath her, raising her to ordinary height, and a hooked blade of gleaming goldsteel hung on her back. Lindon had seen her only a few days before, but he still wasn't used to feeling her with the strength of a Truegold...although he supposed that went both ways.

"Fisher Gesha!" Eithan said pleasantly. "How wonderful to find you here."

Gesha turned to stare at him through her mask of wrinkles. "Underlord. I can't say that I'm pleased to see you wearing...that. Is this a work visit, then? Are you here for the Skysworn?"

Eithan put on a shocked look. "Fisher, what could you have done to possibly offend the Skysworn? I am here merely to pick up my order."

She snorted. "Only finished this morning, and that was quick, mind you. *Quick*. Should have known you'd be sniffing around two seconds after I..."

Gesha continued grumbling as she dug through one chest after another, placing some gently aside and hurling others away so that they tumbled over

the dirt.

Finally, she emerged with an ornately carved and delicately scripted chest, slightly bigger than Lindon's two hands together.

Eithan reached for it, but she didn't hand it to him.

"I don't want to cast doubt on the Underlord's reputation, but how about payment, hm? Easier for all of us."

"Your words are especially sharp today," Eithan said, which Lindon had noticed too.

"Apologies if I overstep myself," Lindon said, "but it is nice to see you in such a good mood."

Gesha's lips twitched up in the smallest possible smile. She must have been excited to enter the Valley. Or perhaps for the business opportunities in his massive army.

Eithan placed both hands together, exhaled, and then a perfect blue-white scale appeared in his hand. Shaped like a coin, it radiated the power of an Underlord—this would be considered a superior-grade scale in the Blackflame Empire.

A scale had to be the perfect size, quality, and density, which could be measured by several common devices, but Gesha took this one and swept it with her spiritual sense.

The design of the coin didn't matter, but Eithan had managed to Forge a sketch of a face in profile on one side. Lindon didn't have to look any closer to know that it was Eithan's face.

Gesha pocketed the scale, then waited. "Four," she said.

"Right you are," Eithan agreed, and reached into his pocket. "Remember this, Lindon: even if you have the madra reserves to make as many scales as you want, you should never Forge more than a few per day. A properly Forged scale, of sufficient density and stability, is difficult to produce and must be created all at once. It strains the madra channels. Too much can result in permanent damage."

He pulled three more coins from his pocket and sighed. "But it's so much more impressive to pull money out of thin air."

Gesha snatched up the scales, idly scanned them, and then put them in her own pocket. Only then did she hand the chest over to Eithan.

He turned to them, holding the box out proudly. "Gather 'round, children, gather 'round!" he announced.

Lindon could feel Dross staring. Little Blue climbed out of his pocket and

slid up to the top of his head. Yerin looked as though she'd exerted all her effort not to roll her eyes, and Mercy was leaning forward in excitement.

Orthos blew smoke. "Children?" he said, but Eithan had moved on.

"Behold, the wonders I commissioned on your behalf on the very *day* of our reunion, more than eight weeks ago. Four constructs of such power and delicate complexity that they straddle the border between elixir-refining and Soulsmithing itself."

"Made me split the commission with a refiner," Gesha grumbled. "Can't stand working with them, can I? They always stink."

"Ladies, turtle, spirit, one-armed man, for your enrichment and education, I present to you...the Heaven's Drops."

With a flourish, he flipped open the lid of the box.

Four orbs about the size of Suriel's marble drifted up, hovering in midair over the box. They were transparent orbs of a dull gray-green, wrapped in rings of Forged script. Dim color swirled inside, and each orb spun slowly in place.

They looked...bland. As though they'd been made from Iron-level Remnants that weren't quite stable. They felt weak to Lindon's spiritual senses. Even Mercy looked skeptical, but Dross was making appropriately amazed noises. Lindon wasn't sure if he knew enough to really be impressed, or if he was excited by Eithan's dramatic presentation.

"Truly, each of these is a bottled miracle," Eithan went on. "These special constructs can be taken like a pill, even by those who have not opened their soul-space. They will sit in your spirit and improve the quality of your cycling. For those as close to the peak of Truegold as you three, they will help you gain control of your souls in only a few short weeks!"

"...these?" Yerin asked, and the one word dripped with doubt.

"Ah, but these are incomplete! The Heaven's Drops must be catalyzed with a soul-strengthening elixir before they are taken. Depending on the quality of that elixir, the Heaven's Drop can be nothing more than a minor benefit, or a permanent transformation that will reshape your entire soul."

Mercy looked around. "Oh, did you bring the elixir too?"

"I have prepared some," Eithan said, "to the best of my limited abilities and resources. Alas, the supply of truly great elixirs in the Blackflame Empire is...nonexistent. I would certainly be grateful if someone had a soul-strengthening elixir of a higher grade."

Mercy looked regretful. "I'm sorry, but I'm all out. I only brought a few. I

have a few plants left...”

“If only *someone*,” Eithan said loudly, “had access to a substance that strengthens and refines the soul. One that might be prepared in a Monarch’s pocket world, for instance.”

Lindon sighed, reaching out for his void key. He should have known that he could never keep a secret from Eithan.

“Some kind of, oh, let’s say, spirit-enhancing water...”

“Please,” Lindon said. “I understand.”

He would usually be excited that Eithan had found a way to maximize the power of the water, but this time he felt defeated. If Eithan had known, why hadn’t he said anything? And now offering the water to Yerin had meant nothing.

He glanced to Yerin as he opened the void key, and she gave him a sympathetic look. His supply of Spirit Well water was getting low. Yerin had used it only sparingly in the last two months, but he had taken some himself, to push his pure core closer to Truegold. He only had three bottles left.

While he wanted to see the water’s effect on these pills, it was no longer entirely his to give away.

“I promised this to Yerin,” Lindon said. “This is her decision to make.”

Eithan turned gravely to Yerin.

“Would you allow me to use the remainder of this water? I assure you, we will be maximizing its benefits.”

Yerin chewed on her lip for a while, watching Eithan. She wasn’t trying to make up her mind, Lindon knew—she was choosing her words.

“Just so you know, I’d contend that Cassias had a good point. It really scrapes you raw dealing with somebody who always knows best.”

Eithan gestured, and Lindon took the bottles from the void key. Why resist? If the Heaven’s Drops worked as claimed, Eithan was giving them a great gift, even if it still felt like Lindon had lost somehow.

“What about when they really *do* know best?” Eithan asked.

“Even worse,” Orthos rumbled.

“I should have known you’d see the key,” Lindon said, handing over the bottles.

“I tried to respect your desire not to discuss it,” Eithan said. “But now that it’s all out in the open, let me say: you have truly exceeded my expectations. Strengthening your body like that must have been painful. Ghostwater was a treasure trove for you, but I know it pushed you to your limits. I could *not* be

more proud of my disciple.”

He spoke so earnestly that it soothed Lindon’s disappointment. Eithan liked to show off, but he also always pushed Lindon forward.

Eithan threw his arms wide. “And quickening your mind! I had a sixteen-step plan for perfecting you as a Gold, but I couldn’t believe it when I saw you move. Mental enhancement at Gold is a rare and valuable thing. You have a stronger foundation than I ever dared to hope, and thanks to Northstrider, we’re ahead of schedule!”

His phrasing caught Lindon’s attention.

*Dross, has he not scanned you?* Lindon asked.

[You know, I don’t think so, but now I’m questioning it. I’m starting to wonder if he can see thoughts.]

“Once you reach Underlord, then your *real* training can finally—”

With a gentle effort, Lindon pushed Dross out of his palm.

The spirit manifested, one-eyed and purple, and raised one of his stubby arms in greeting.

Eithan froze in mid-speech, his wildly gesticulating arms stopping in the air.

[These things can be awkward, can’t they? I know who *you* are, but I’m not sure if you know who I am. *Do you know who I am?*]

Lindon imprinted Eithan’s expression of pure astonishment in his memory forever.

Eithan slowly lowered his arms. His spiritual sense swept through Dross, and then—in a focused probe—flicked through Lindon’s spirit. He focused especially on the spot at the base of Lindon’s skull where Dross usually lived.

“I had no idea,” Eithan breathed. “Even now...if I couldn’t see you before me, I would have no idea there was a spirit inside him. With a fully formed consciousness and madra system. Tied to...” His eyes widened, and he slowly shut the box of Heaven’s Drops, setting them to one side. “...tied to his brain...”

He waved frantically at the bustle around him, where workers and spiders were still moving around them. Some glanced curiously over at them, but most continued setting up Fisher Gesha’s barn.

“Fisher!” he shouted. “Would you clear the area for us, please?”

Gesha gave a loud ‘harrumph.’ “Underlord or no Underlord, if you’re walking into my place of business and telling *me* to clear out—”

Eithan pulled out one of the sacks of natural treasures, which—at

Lindon's rough guess—was worth enough to buy Gesha's entire business. He shoved it at her, as well as reaching into his pocket and throwing an entire purse of scales after it, and Forging another superior-grade scale out of nowhere. He pushed it all at her, adding, "You can return if you like, but keep everyone else away."

Gesha's eyes bulged almost out of her head. "Right away! Never said I wouldn't do it, did I? All of you! Drop what you're holding! Drop it on the ground and get away!"

As the spiders and workers scurried away, Eithan fumbled behind him for a seat, pulling it up.

"I'm not used to asking this," Eithan said. "What happened?"

So, with a certain pride, Lindon told his story in Ghostwater from the beginning. From finding Dross in the Dream Well, combining him with the Eye of the Deep, to upgrading him over the entire facility. All the way to the end, when they completed Northstrider's grand work.

Orthos crawled off to chew on some nearby lumber—he had been present for the entire story. But everyone else, even Little Blue, listened attentively. He skimmed the parts with Harmony, for Mercy's sake, though that left some holes in the story at the end.

He had shared most of these details with Yerin already, but not everything. He hadn't had a chance. Now, he was glad to have the whole story out there. Fisher Gesha returned at some time in the middle, listening quietly.

Dross popped in every once in a while to add a correction or embellishment, but for the most part Lindon was allowed to tell the story without interruption.

When Lindon finished, Eithan sat quietly, hands pressed together, staring off into the distance. The darkness of the Night Wheel Valley settled around them, the wind cold.

In the end, he turned to Dross. "If I'm not gravely mistaken, then you are only a seed of what you will eventually become."

[I don't like to think of myself as a seed. Not very flattering, is it? Maybe an egg, but a really *nice* egg.]

"Oh, we will make sure you grow. Yes..." Eithan's smile slowly widened until Lindon would have called it manic. "Planted in the fertile soil of Lindon's spirit, we will grow you until you dwarf Dreadgods and tower over Monarchs! The world itself will struggle to contain you! When I fear I have

set my sights too far, I find that I was not ambitious *enough!* Who will *dare* to hold us back when we have such an ally? Let the day you completed Northstrider's work be known as the day that the very foundations of history trembled!"

He cackled like a madman, and Lindon honestly couldn't tell if it was for theatrical effect or not.

A thread of doubt wormed over from Orthos, Yerin folded her bladed arms in front of her, and Mercy looked at Eithan askance. Little Blue pressed herself against Lindon's head and shivered.

Dross, by contrast, laughed along with him. [Aw, go on! No, really, please continue.]

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Eithan spread the four Heaven's Drops before him, hanging gray and dull in the air.

"What you are about to experience is a myth for many Golds. It is their life's ambition. The glory their families strive for."

He lifted a bottle—provided by Lindon—over his head.

"Let's get it over with, shall we?"

He tipped the first bottle over a Heaven's Drop, spilling vivid blue water into the hovering construct.

Lindon, Yerin, and Orthos sat before Eithan in a lonely hollow amidst the darkened woods of the Night Wheel Valley. They hadn't sold any of their natural treasures in the camp, but had instead traded a few. They now had packages that exuded aura of many different aspects waiting for them nearby.

Mercy was next to them, but she didn't sit. She stood, toying with her staff, a complicated expression on her face.

The Spirit Well water fell into the construct and was absorbed, as though the energy drank it down. As the water vanished, the Heaven's Drop grew brighter and brighter, from a transparent and colorless gray-green to an almost blinding emerald. The scripted circles around the outside of the construct spun faster, until it spat out bolts of vivid green lightning.

Eithan stopped his pour precisely at that point, reserving the last of the water in the bottle.

"Orthos, if you would," Eithan said. "Age deserves consideration."

Orthos approached the Heaven's Drop, but not with the excitement Lindon had expected. Instead, the turtle felt resignation, almost fear. As though he had dreaded this day.



Other than when he was forced to fly, Orthos never showed this sort of apprehension. Lindon wanted to ask what was wrong, but the turtle snapped up the Heaven's Drop in an instant.

His madra began to swell almost immediately, growing more dense and potent by the second. Eithan had told them the effects would be quick, but in Lindon's experience, pills and elixirs always took time to cycle. Even the Spirit Well water worked best over time.

Eithan repeated the process with the second Heaven's Drop, emptying the first bottle and beginning on the second. When it shone like a green star and shot out lightning, he beckoned Yerin forward.

Yerin showed all the eagerness that Lindon had expected from Orthos; she couldn't swallow the construct and return to her seat fast enough, taking a cycling position.

While Eithan prepared the third construct, Lindon watched Yerin. He couldn't feel her spirit as clearly as he could his contracted sacred beast's, but he still sensed her growing stronger. In only seconds, her Goldsigns grew more solid and defined, as though they had been cast in real physical steel.

Then they slid back into her back.

More advanced Truegolds gained control over their Goldsigns, but the degree seemed to differ depending on the Goldsign itself. He hadn't imagined that she would be able to withdraw them like that, and seeing her without the sword-arms sticking out of her back felt incomplete. Like he was seeing her without her real arms.

A moment later, the Goldsigns reappeared...

Along with two more.

And two more.

Six arms of sword madra stuck out of her back, stretching farther until the ones on her left side almost stabbed Lindon. He shuffled out of the way, but she was only flexing them as she would her muscles, and had already pulled them back.

Her eyes were still closed in a cycling trance, but there was a gentle, content smile on her face. She looked warmer than she ever did. At peace.

There was another green flash, and Eithan called Mercy's name. Lindon recalled what he was doing and turned to watch Mercy.

...but as she faced down the construct crackling with green lightning, her face crumpled. "I can't," she said. "I'm sorry."

Eithan looked down at the flashing orb in front of him. "This is

unfortunate timing.”

“I know. I'm sorry. I want to keep up with the rest of you, but...” She looked over to the east, where the massive castle took up the entire horizon. “I can't accept this. I would only have to admit my faults and return to my family, and my mother would shower me with resources like this. I can't take a treasure from you to preserve my pride.”

Eithan took a long look at her, then shrugged. “Suit yourself. Lindon?”

Lindon didn't move. “Apologies, but I'd rather Mercy have it.” That wasn't entirely true—he could find room between his cores for a second elixir easily—but he'd made his choice. “If you don't want to go back to your family, you shouldn't have to. Take it. We won't hold it against you.”

Mercy twisted uncomfortably. “It's a little more complicated than that.”

“I know what it's like to not want to return home.”

Eithan pointed to the glowing orb. “I'd really prefer you take this, and then we can debate the next one. This is losing energy by the second.” He added a couple of drops of Spirit Well water to it, sparking up its power again, but he was running low.

“It will be a waste if I take it,” Mercy said.

“That's all right with me,” Lindon responded.

Eithan watched them for another couple of seconds, then grabbed the construct. It hovered in the middle of his palm. “And the winner is...Lindon!”

He hurled it toward Lindon, who really had no choice but to take the crackling globe of energy himself. He swallowed it down, consoling himself with the knowledge that at least Mercy would have a chance with the last one.

Then he dropped into a cycling trance himself, watching the Heaven's Drop sink down between his cores.

[Now, that has a comforting glow to it,] Dross said. [Beautiful to watch. I'd like to keep one around, liven up the place.]

Lindon couldn't spare much concentration from siphoning the energy of the Drop into his channels, but he asked, *Could you use one?*

[Better for me if you have it. I'm basically a parasite infesting your soul.]

Lindon shook aside that thought and focused on the Heaven's Drop. If it was anything like using the Spirit Well water directly, it would slowly nourish his cores and channels, refilling them before...

In an instant, his pure core advanced to Truegold.

It was faster, easier, and smoother than his Blackflame advancement had

been. Comfortable and effortless.

[Almost disappointing, isn't it? Too easy. It's always more fun when I get to watch you suffer.]

Not only that, but the Heaven's Drop spun faster in his spirit, pumping power to every corner of his soul. His madra was already dense and potent, thanks to long treatment by the Spirit Well, but his channels were washed clean, his cores filled to bursting. His Blackflame core advanced to the very peak of what it could contain, a dark sun hanging on one side of his spirit.

The blue-white core on the other side was now just as bright, shining for the first time as an equal to his Blackflame madra. After only minutes of cycling, it too was pushing at the boundaries of Truegold.

Lindon thought back to what Ziel had told him about pills that could take him to the peak of Truegold in minutes.

He never thought he'd see one.

Now that he had reached full capacity in both his cores, he could sense his spirit far more clearly than ever before. His spiritual sense was intensely powerful, and he could visualize his channels as though they hovered before his eyes.

For the next step, opening his soul space, he'd already done some research.

From the Underlord dream tablets he'd found in Ghostwater and questions he'd asked Dross, he already had a sense of what was required. Many Truegolds reached this point in their lives; it was a measure of complete control over one's own spirit.

With his newly enhanced awareness, Lindon focused on a space between his channels, in the very center of his spirit.

Then he flexed his power, as though there were an invisible lung at that point and he was trying to force it to inhale.

It felt like straining to pull a breath of mud, but after a few seconds of straining, the space expanded.

His soul space was a dark hole the size of a thumbnail at the very center of his spirit, but feeling it filled him with light.

He had opened it himself.

Not only that, but now he could hold simple constructs at the center of his spirit. Well, he would have to continue widening the soul space before he could hold a real construct. He could at least start holding soulfire.

Soulfire. The real mark of an Underlord.

He opened his eyes to find Eithan grinning at him. "Well, I see we have a

tie.”

Lindon wiped sweat from his brow—he hadn't realized he'd been sweating—and turned to Yerin.

A scar at the edge of her lips quirked as she gave him a lopsided smile. “I beat you to it,” she said. “Ten seconds to spare.”

Then he saw that Mercy was gone.

The fourth Heaven's Drop was still there.

“Can we save it for her?” Lindon asked, and Eithan shook his head.

“We *could*, but we won't. We have to believe her that it's more complicated than we know.” He upended the last half-bottle of Spirit Well water, shaking it to get every drop into the flashing, sparking Heaven's Drop. “Sometimes, we have to let our friends make decisions that we believe are wrong.”

Lindon was disappointed, but he reached out for the Drop anyway. He could use it to replenish his pure core, or maybe cycle some of it to Little Blue...

Eithan pulled it away. “Yerin,” he said, and she looked as surprised as Lindon was. “If you'd like a quick upgrade to your Blood Shadow, there'll be no opportunity like this one.”

“Step easy,” Yerin warned him. “I've heard everything I intend to hear from you.”

He spread his hands. “No matter which method you pick of shaping your Blood Shadow, this will be nothing but a benefit.”

She watched him and the lightning-flickering Heaven's Drop before finally, with visible reluctance, she summoned her Blood Shadow.

It extended from her spirit, a crimson shade in her general shape. She didn't need to urge it any closer to the Heaven's Drop; it pounced forward like a hungry wolf on raw meat, gulping down the construct. The green light shone from within it as it passed down the Shadow's throat and into where its core should be, hovering there like a masked star.

The Blood Shadow shuddered, and it seemed to look in Lindon's direction for a moment.

Then it collapsed and withdrew back into Yerin's spirit.

Yerin shuddered. “Feels like I'll regret that.”

“Nonsense!” Eithan cried. “But you may want to keep that Shadow under control for now.”

With a last, regretful glance at Lindon, Yerin sank back down into a

cycling trance and closed her eyes.

Lindon couldn't help but be disappointed. He'd been excited about reaching the end of Truegold and opening his soulspace, but now here he was alone in a dark forest with Eithan and a meditating Yerin. He wanted someone to join him in his excitement.

[Wow, *Truegold*?] Dross exclaimed. [Amazing! Compared to when you did it months ago, this was way better. And your soulspace? Incredible. You could probably fit a...maybe a...bean. You could carry around your own bean!]

Lindon actually appreciated that Dross had tried.

"Apologies," Lindon said aloud, "but where did Orthos go?"

He could sense the turtle's location—he wasn't far—but he hadn't noticed when Orthos had left.

Eithan paused while packing up the sacks of natural treasures and the empty box that had contained the Heaven's Drops. "Why don't you go check on him?" Eithan suggested. "We still have to open Yerin's soulspace and get you both weaving soulfire, but there's no rush. Now that the Skysworn have caught up to us, they'll want us working." He waved a hand. "We have a while off, that's my point."

Lindon pressed his fists together. "Thank you, Eithan. I'm eager to continue." If he needed a few weeks to adjust to his soulspace, he would take them, but the Heaven's Drop had worked so well and so quickly that he was impatient to move on.

"Go find Orthos."

Lindon did so, jogging through the shadowed trees. He activated the Soul Cloak to feel his Truegold pure madra, and he marveled at how easy the trip was. For fun, he leaped up and kicked off one tree, flipping over a neighboring branch, then slid down another trunk.

He followed Orthos in the most acrobatic way he could, spinning around, over, and through trees. He fell more than once, but always caught himself and sprung back up.

Little Blue joined him, leaping out of his pocket and scampering over the leaf-strewn forest floor. She laughed like tinkling bells as she danced after him, holding her arms out to the side while she ran. He paused to wait for her whenever she fell behind, and the creatures hiding in the shadows melted back from the feel of his Truegold spirit.

By the time he reached Orthos, he and Little Blue were both tired and

laughing.

Orthos, however, was a somber presence in Lindon's soul. The broad, black turtle stood out as a smoldering red presence against the dark of the Night Wheel Valley. He stood on a hill with the Blackflame Empire camp spread out behind him, looking up into the clouds.

He stared at the swirling purple center of the Night Wheel, and Lindon couldn't tell if he was watching something or simply lost in thought.

Little Blue cooed out her concern, and Lindon scooped her up to carry her closer to Orthos.

"Apologies if we're disturbing you," Lindon said, drawing alongside the turtle.

Black-and-red eyes studied the clouds. "Only a few short years, and you have reached further than many sacred artists ever dream. The heavens have blessed you, Lindon."

Lindon stood next to Orthos, reaching into his pocket. He pulled out the glass marble with the blue candle-flame burning steadily at the center.

"I am grateful," he said. He owed Suriel his life...and a much better life than he would have had otherwise. "Not just to the heavens and their messenger. Without Eithan, or Yerin, or Dross, or you, I would be..."

Dead in Sacred Valley. Dead in the Desolate Wilds. Dead in Serpent's Grave. Dead in Ghostwater.

"...buried somewhere, most likely," he finished.

Orthos gave a deep rumble, and Lindon couldn't tell if it was agreement or correction. "And now, you move on. If at least one of you doesn't end up selected for this tournament, I'll give up my shell."

"We're not Underlords yet," Lindon protested, though privately he felt the same way. Underlord felt closer now than it ever had, and which young Truegolds in the Blackflame Empire had the advantages that he and Yerin did?

"You will be," Orthos said. "Don't pretend you don't know it. Even if you wouldn't fight and claw for Underlord, by now Eithan would drag you there whether you liked it or not. Once you've started to ride the tiger, it's harder to stop."

Lindon didn't like Orthos' tone or the melancholy feel of his spirit. "Why are we talking about me? You're right there with us."

Dross suddenly slipped out of Lindon's soul, hovering on his shoulder. But contrary to Lindon's expectation, he didn't say anything. He only

watched Orthos with his one wide eye.

Little Blue chirped, so Lindon held her close enough that she could pat the wall of black, leathery skin next to her.

Orthos blew a long cloud of smoke into the air, watching it drift up. “Sacred beasts advance differently than humans,” he said.

Lindon’s discomfort advanced to full-blown alarm. “Why don’t we head back to camp? I’m not sure what happened to Mercy, and Yerin is probably finishing up cycling by now.”

“Humans have to discover what drives their souls to action,” Orthos continued. “It’s the spark that starts their transformation. Sacred beasts do not have to discover who we are. We have to choose.”

“Can you choose to become a dragon? That would make it easy.”

Lindon had intended to lighten the mood, but he failed.

“Mmmm. Or a turtle. Or even a man. Traditionally, this involves a journey alongside others making the same choice. But I am the only one.” He turned to Lindon. “Until only days ago, I convinced myself I could make the journey alongside you. But you move so quickly, and I am, after all...a turtle.”

He gave a smile, but Lindon couldn’t return it.

“There’s time until the tournament,” Lindon said desperately. “Months until anyone is chosen. It might not be me! And the tournament isn’t for a year anyway.”

[Good-bye, Orthos,] Dross said.

In Lindon’s palm, Little Blue sobbed with a sound like pattering rain. She leaped from his hand, landing sprawled on Orthos’ head, crying.

“I won’t be gone forever,” Orthos said. “A few years. But by that time, I expect you’ll have left me far behind.”

When Lindon spoke again, his voice was thick. “Where will you go?”

“There are many places that could use a dragon.”

Lindon swept at his eyes, drawing pure madra, trying to keep his emotions under control. Orthos extended his head, resting his forehead against Lindon’s.

“A dragon is not ashamed of tears,” Orthos said.

And Lindon lost control. He threw his arms around Orthos’ neck and wept with Little Blue, as Dross drifted silently overhead.

After a while, a familiar feeling in his spirit drew his attention to the side. Yerin stood there, looking horrified, six Goldsign arms gleaming in the dim

light. She was out of breath, her tattered robes in disarray, and dead leaves in her hair.

“Bleed me, but it looks like you’re trying to sneak off without me,” she said, and her voice quivered.

Orthos shook his head. “I would not dare.”

Lindon released the turtle’s neck only for Yerin to replace him an instant later. She didn’t cry, she just shook, and he murmured something to her that Lindon couldn’t hear.

Only a minute later, Orthos drew back, and Yerin stepped away, rubbing her own eyes.

“A dragon does not wait around,” he said, red eyes passing over them all. “Protect yourselves. I expect you to stay alive until I see you again.”

“What about Eithan?” Lindon asked. “Where is he?”

Orthos snorted. “I’d bet he knew I was leaving before I did. Of all of you, I worry about him the least.” He raised one leg, gently sliding Little Blue off his head and to the ground.

“Farewell, little ones,” he said, and then he turned, walking slowly into the shadows. Lindon watched until the red light faded into darkness. Then he held Blackflame as he felt Orthos’ spirit passing into the distance.

Eventually, Orthos passed through the portal back to the Empire, and was gone.



## Chapter 8

Seishen Kiro's father, King Dakata, had erected a castle in the Night Wheel Valley. Made of raw stone called up from the earth by Ruler techniques, the castle stood in front of their portal, projecting the majesty of the Seishen Kingdom. Or such was the intention. Next to the awe-inspiring mountain-sized fortress of the Akura clan, it looked like a child's toy.

In the heart of that castle, Kiro faced his proud father in horror.

"My King, we cannot *attack*."

His father laughed uproariously, slapping the crude map of the Night Wheel Valley he'd spread across his table. "Why not? We have the chance to drive the Empire out entirely. All the sacred grounds of the Valley would be ours."

Kiro looked over the markers the King had placed on the map. It was a simple plan: a sudden attack, ramming through the Blackflame defenses and shoving them back through the portal. It would work, so long as the Blackflames didn't defend the territory with their lives. If they started retreating to protect the more vulnerable civilians at the heart of their formation, they would have to continue the retreat.

"Of course it will work," Kiro said. "They don't expect us to attack. But they don't expect it for a *good reason*. Even if we avoid wholesale slaughter, this attack will not be bloodless. What if the Sage decides we have pushed too far?"

Daji, Kiro's little brother, lunged hungrily at the map. He had a wolf's smile on his face. "Don't be a coward! The Sage needs to see our overwhelming strength."

King Dakata waved a hand at his second son. "Quiet. This is a matter for Lords."

Daji's face fell. "I have no—"

"*Quiet!*" The King shouted, and Daji wilted back. "Your brother managed to advance where the aura wasn't a tenth as strong as it is here. Can you not

handle even this much?”

Daji's dark eyes flared. It looked like he was trying to stab Kiro through the chest with his glare. Kiro's heart ached, but before he could say anything, Daji had already stormed out the door.

“...he's trying his hardest,” Kiro protested, once his brother had left.

Dakata grunted, returning to the map. “You were worried about the Sage. In my grandfather's day, Akura Charity pitted our kingdom against the Winter's Blade sect. While blood was spilled, she only intervened when they started to kill our children. She accepts a measure of bloodshed as the cost of competition, but we can't weaken the Blackflame Empire too much. *That*, she would see as an affront to the Akura clan's authority.”

Kiro knew his father was more intelligent than his appearance would suggest. He only *looked* like a bear, he didn't think like one. But he was still somewhat surprised that his father knew so much about a Sage.

If he questioned the king too much, he risked punishment, but he dared to push a little harder. “There's still our political relationship with the Empire to think of.”

King Dakata drove a spike of Forged madra through the corner of the map, pinning it to the table. “We have roughly two months remaining before the first day of summer. If we hold the Valley ourselves during that time, we can raise enough Underlords that our ‘political relationships’ will lose all meaning. You can forget about punishment. The Akura clan might even give the Empire to us.”

He surveyed the map proudly, as though looking down on his own newborn child.

Kiro pushed one more time. “This is still a gamble,” he said.

Dakata raised his head, and Kiro knew he'd pushed his father too far. “Even you won't listen to my commands?” he asked quietly. “Even you? If my First Prince does not trust me to lead, how can anyone else?”

Kiro backed away, but his father had risen, his armor adding to his bulk. Kiro considered summoning his from the Divine Treasure in his soulspace, but that would only set his father off even further.

“Forgive me, father, of course I will follow your orders.”

He bumped against the back of a chair, his father looming uncomfortably close. Kiro may have been an Underlord, but his hands shook and his chest tightened.

In the Seishen Kingdom, they entered a period of intense personal

meditation when attempting to advance to Underlord. It wasn't clear what specific change triggered advancement, but the process could last weeks.

On Kiro's successful attempt, he had spent most of the time terrified of his father's reaction to failure. Kiro privately believed that it was fear of his father that had pushed his soul forward.

Dakata gripped Kiro's shoulder painfully tight. "You are the only one I can trust," he said, his voice low. "You are the face of the Kingdom. My words must come from your mouth."

"Yes, father," Kiro said, struggling to maintain eye contact.

Dakata cut off, his eyes sliding to the side. "Tell your gardener that everything is all right," he said.

Meira stood behind the King. She held a long shaft of wood in her hands, and a scythe-blade of green flame extended from the end.

The blade curled into the King's throat, stopping an inch away.

The Underlady's eyes were icy. As always, she wore drab clothes that made her look like she had walked in from the garden only moments before, and the pink-flower Goldsigns shone brightly in her gray hair.

Meira may have been one stage of advancement lower than King Dakata, but from this position, she could at least damage his lifeline, slicing away at his life itself. He would kill her, but she'd take a piece of his lifespan with her. She might even manage to trade her life for his.

And she was ready to try.

Kiro pushed forward, separating them, terrified for both of them. He couldn't allow Meira to die, but King Dakata was still his father. Not to mention the ruler of the Seishen Kingdom; losing him to an apparent coup might cause the Kingdom to collapse.

He bowed deeply at the waist. "I apologize, father, and take full responsibility. Please punish me in her stead."

Meira hadn't withdrawn her spirit. Now that she had been separated, his father could kill her with little effort, but she was still prepared to throw herself at him given the slightest opportunity.

The King stood with his spirit still veiled, but he could erupt into violence at any second. For a long moment, the room was frozen with tension.

"You live," King Dakata said at last, "only because of your loyalty to my son."

Meira nodded, lowering the scythe. Her madra retracted.

Kiro breathed again. His father knew Meira well enough to know that she

had restrained herself. She would not have held back against anyone else that had threatened Kiro.

But he also knew that if anything happened to him, his father would have her executed within the day.

“The attack moves forward,” Dakata said, returning to the map. “Come here, gardener, this concerns you too.” He tapped a section of the map.

“While the rest of us push forward, the two of you will be headed *here*.

“It’s where our scouts have seen the Blackflame boy.”

~~~

Lindon sat cross-legged in the center of the Night Wheel Valley forest, extending his spiritual sense to the vital aura around him. He couldn't open his Copper sight, but he could feel the power of the world pressing against him, and with his senses he could trace each aspect of aura back to its source.

[Follow the unity of aura,] Dross recited. This was a mantra that he had repeated constantly for weeks now. [Each aspect links to the next. Vital aura has no beginning and no end. It is all one. Follow the unity of aura.]

It had been a month since Orthos left.

In the Night Wheel Valley, they had settled into a routine. They patrolled for the Skysworn for most of the day, defending the border of the Blackflame Empire's territory within the Valley. Even at the border, they had only caught glimpses of the Seishen Kingdom's sacred artists. They hadn't clashed with any enemies except the occasional wild Remnant.

When they finished their shift, they followed Eithan or Mercy to unclaimed natural treasure deposits. Then, at night and in the morning, they practiced sensing the unity of aura and burning treasures for soulfire, progressing through the second stage of Underlord advancement.

They had repeated this every day for a month.

Under Dross' chant, Lindon finally felt connected to the whole world around him, from the cold wind to the decaying leaves on which he sat. It was a strange sensation, like he had stretched himself out for five feet in any direction.

It sometimes took him half an hour or more to sense the unity of aura, even when he was fresh—when he was tired, it could take him much longer. Now that he had, he quickly felt the power of the natural treasures lying on the ground around him.

A burning acorn carried the power of fire on his left side, balanced by a bead of spinning water on the right.

A death skull waited in front of him, and a blooming flower teeming with life behind.

In one quick inhalation, he *pulled* on the vital aura link between him and the treasures, reducing them all to ash.

And leaving behind a wisp of colorless flame that drifted into his soul space.

Dross' mantra changed accordingly. [Soulfire is vital aura distilled. It is the power of the world condensed.] Lindon had never asked where Dross found this chant, but the spirit obviously hadn't made it up. It flowed too naturally and made too much sense.

[Feel how it resonates with everything around you, drawing you closer to nature. Now, follow that sensation back into yourself, deep into your soul. Into your mind. Now, tell me why....why do you practice the sacred arts?]

“To protect people,” Lindon and Yerin said at the same time.

Lindon braced himself, straining to detect any change in the soulfire inside him or the aura outside.

What was *supposed* to happen was a transformative resonance. Lindon's personal revelation would connect him to his own spirit, and the soulfire would carry that resonance to the outside world. For reasons he still didn't understand, that would draw on the aura to fuel his soulfire and burn away his old body and spirit, leaving him reborn as an Underlord.

The more soulfire he had inside him, the easier it was to trigger the resonance. Many potential Underlords, Eithan had told them, found their true revelation but failed to realize it because they hadn't gathered enough soulfire.

And the strength of the aura around them played a factor too. It was easier to connect to the unity of aura the thicker the vital aura was, and it made the actual advancement process faster and safer. Since the aura around here was a hundred times stronger than in the Blackflame Empire, it was a hundred times easier to cycle and to feel the unity of aura.

In fact, there had been many breakthroughs in the Blackflame Empire camp. Hundreds—maybe thousands—of Highgolds had broken through to Truegold, and Lindon had heard half a dozen stories of advancements to Underlord. None of them young enough for the competition.

But more importantly to Lindon, none of them were *him*.

He shot to his feet, stomping through the ashes left from his natural treasures. “This is ridiculous. I *know* why I started practicing the sacred arts.

This is why.” He and Yerin had even tried different phrases for the same thing:

*To protect those closest to me.*

*To protect those who can’t protect themselves.*

*To protect friends and family.*

None of it worked. For either of them. Yerin had run down a few very different paths:

*So I can do what I want.*

*To get revenge.*

*Because I enjoy it.*

*To get stronger.*

...and she had sensed nothing. Still, for a change, she seemed perfectly content to take her time. It was *Lindon* who paced and shouted in frustration at the end of every day’s attempt.

[Maybe it’s because my voice isn’t soothing enough,] Dross suggested. [Do you think I should try for a motherly voice?]

Mercy hopped down from a nearby tree, where she had been watching over them. “I found it very soothing!”

With all the shadow aura around, Mercy had broken through to Highgold two weeks before. They had celebrated with her, but Lindon didn’t understand why she wasn’t Truegold yet. For that matter, he still didn’t understand why she had rejected the Heaven’s Drop. She gave up most of the natural treasures she gathered to Lindon and Yerin to fuel their soulfire, guarded them while they practiced sensing the unity of aura, and asked for nothing for herself.

It was starting to get on Lindon’s nerves.

Something tapped Lindon on the shoulder, and he turned to see nothing there. Wind aura.

Yerin sat ten feet away, still with her legs crossed. She wouldn’t be able to infuse her techniques with soulfire until she advanced, but she could still manipulate aura. A little. She was much better at it than Lindon was, perhaps because of her years of practicing a Ruler technique.

“I had a thought to try again,” Yerin said. “You aiming to give it another go?”

“Not right now.” At the moment, he thought he was just as likely to set fire to everything around him as to sense anything. “Do you need Dross?”

“I don’t suspect I do.”

Lindon nodded and strode off. He needed a break. At least when you were cycling aura, there was no chance of failure. Trying to trigger his advancement felt like rolling the dice day after day and getting nothing but losses.

He walked into the forest to catch his breath.

He knew it was Orthos leaving that had gotten him so worked up. He was short with Mercy and Yerin, he quit his cycling early, and he wanted nothing more than a good fight to clear his head.

Even Eithan was gone—either working for the Arelius family or for the Emperor. As an Underlord, he got called away every once in a while to serve the Empire in the fight against the Seishen Kingdom. The fight that Lindon still hadn't seen.

He walked further into the shadows before Dross said, [Hang on. Do you hear that?]

Lindon stopped moving and strained his ears, but the Night Wheel Valley was always full of rustling.

[It's your armor!] Dross said. [The communications construct. I'll boost it, no problem.]

There was a moment of silence.

[Never mind, that makes it quieter. I'll translate. Um, this is an emergency message for any Skysworn, ah, they're under attack, there are some muffled screams, a few pleas for help, and then a lot of sobbing. Not much to go on, really.]

*Which direction?* Lindon asked silently.

[Must be nearby. Not much makes it through shadow aura this thick. Off that way, I'd guess,] Dross said, mentally indicating a direction. Away from their camp.

*We're going to check it out. Can you let the others know?*

[I *can*, but they don't have any way of contacting us back if the range on the Skysworn communications is that low.]

Lindon started sneaking through the underbrush, so Dross continued, [... and I guess I will do that then.]

Creeping through the shadowed forest was like crawling through a nightmare, all shifting darkness and phantom sounds, but Lindon kept his senses focused on the battle ahead. Bursts of light lit up the forest, and the aura was in disarray.

After only a few minutes, he came to the top of a hill, peeking out of the

trees down on a camp below. A wagon was overturned, flames licking up its wooden sides. There were no horses to be seen. The wagon displayed a red blossom: the symbol of the Redflower family.

Half a dozen people with matching Goldsigns stood huddled nearby, the crimson flower on their chests bright. They crouched at the foot of some trees as armored Skysworn fought for them.

And died for them.

A six-man squad had been dispatched here; two Truegolds and four students, one Highgold and three Lowgold. Four of them were still alive.

A Truegold in green armor faced their enemies with a sword in each of her hands and bright yellow spikes sweeping forward from her shoulders.

Lindon remembered her: he had hurled her onto a pile of other Truegolds only a few months before.

He didn't recognize the rest of her squad, though he may have met them before. A young Highgold man stood next to her, holding a Forged sword of pale light in both hands. His eyes glowed as well, and Lindon couldn't tell if that was a Goldsign or an Enforcer technique.

Before them, a corpse in Skysworn armor lay covered in blood. And another body, split almost in half, wearing the pin of a Skysworn apprentice. One of the Lowgolds.

The four Skysworn, including the two surviving Lowgolds, stood facing their opponent: one lone Underlord.

He was at least as tall and broad as Lindon himself, but he wore plates of Forged gray madra over his entire body that made him look even bulkier. His helmet was a rounded fortress that shaded his eyes, and the plates of madra on his body interlocked so tightly that Lindon couldn't see a gap. He held a silver blade in one hand, which crackled with blue lightning. In his other, he held a rock-steady shield carved in the likeness of a lion's snarling face.

Both his weapons were covered in blood.

"Call him here," the Underlord commanded.

"We can't," the Truegold woman said tightly. "The shadow aura is too thick. No one can hear us."

She was lying. Good for her. No reason to give anything away.

*Dross, Lindon asked silently, keep an eye on the Underlord. I want a combat solution as soon as you can.*

[Not a problem! As soon as he uses a technique, I'll keep a record of it. As soon as he does that.]



“Then I'll give you another chance,” the Underlord said, lowering his sword and shield. “Surrender to me. In my name, I will allow you to live, as long as you cooperate.”

The Truegold Skysworn closed her eyes. The Highgold shifted, looking nervous, and the two Lowgolds behind them simply clutched their weapons and stood over the Redflower family.

Lindon wanted to act here, but this was an Underlord. He would have better chances if he went back and gathered the others, and they all fought together. Or better yet, if they could put a call in for backup.

But he raised his eyes, looking over the sea of black trees. This was not the only place where light flashed in the darkness of the Night Wheel Valley. Lights streaked into the sky all around, and—distantly—he could sense power flaring all around him.

[This is not likely to be an isolated event,] Dross reported. [This looks like the Seishen Kingdom pushing against the Empire. Probably. There's a good chance.]

If this was part of a coordinated attack on the Blackflame Empire, then he couldn't expect reinforcements.

He remembered another village he'd visited as a Skysworn trainee; a village that burned because he didn't defend them in time.

*Yerin would fight here*, Lindon said to Dross.

[Good, then let's call her here. While we watch her fight, I can compile a combat solution. I like that plan. In fact, watching this Underlord kill all these other people will give us some *great* information.]

The Skysworn shouted, pushing her swords forward, and a cluster of a dozen deadly yellow-white lights flashed toward her enemy.

The enemy Underlord raised his shield, which projected a half-dome of solid gray madra in front of him. Her Striker technique detonated harmlessly on the shield, the lights cracking like eggs thrown against a boulder.

Still a dozen paces away, the Underlord swept his sword at her. Madra poured from the weapon, Forging in an instant into an extended blade that slashed into her side.

There was a flash of light as she protected herself with madra, but the weapon cracked her armor, sending blood spraying into the air as her body was hurled to the side.

Lindon activated his void key and reached inside.

Stepping forward, the Underlord swept his enlarged sword around,

bringing it down onto the Highgold boy.

The Burning Cloak sprung up in the air around Lindon, and his kick exploded against the ground.

He came to a halt in front of the Highgold, holding up a massive axe in both hands. Lindon's blade caught the Underlord's as it descended.

The Forged gray sword met Harmony's blade and stopped.

The axe's broad, curved head shimmered with a red light that felt like blood, and its shaft was one long bone. To his spiritual sense, the axe felt hungry. His right arm agreed.

[I was wondering when you were going to use that,] Dross said.

The enemy's blow rang through Lindon's entire body, almost driving him to his knees, but he held.

The Underlord pulled his blade back, the extra length dissolving into gray essence and blowing away on the wind. He even lowered his shield.

"Take your Truegold and run," Lindon said to the Highgold beside him. The boy leaped to obey, running to scoop up his leader. Lindon couldn't tell if she was alive or dead, and he couldn't spare the attention to scan her.

His every sense was fixed on the Seishen Underlord.

"If she had told me she'd called you, I would have let her leave," the man said. His helmet dissolved, revealing a rugged, handsome face with piercing eyes and a stately bearing. "I am the Seishen Kingdom's first prince, Seishen Kiro."

Lindon's stomach dropped. A prince. Not only would he have been given the finest tutors and materials since childhood, he also would never go anywhere alone. He would surely have soldiers or bodyguards on the way.

"You should be Wei Shi Lindon."

That gave Lindon a far greater blow. "Apologies; I didn't realize I had done enough to attract the attention of royalty."

Kiro glanced skyward, and Lindon saw a silver-and-purple owl circling overhead. "I have heard of your deeds indeed, Wei Shi Lindon. In the name of justice, and with an honored witness, I have come to punish you."

Lindon now felt like a mouse who had stepped into a tiger's mouth. An enemy Underlord had come looking for *him*.

[Oh no, he's here for justice,] Dross said. [You're doomed.]

Lindon tightened his hands around the axe. He could hear the Skysworn scrambling with the Redflowers behind him; if he ran for help, they would be in the Underlord's way. And what should he have done? Stayed silent and

watched the Highgold get split in half?

*What will the Akura family think of a Truegold who fights an Underlord?*

[If you acquit yourself well, you will be almost guaranteed a spot in the Uncrowned King tournament. Assuming you also make it to Underlord by the deadline, of course. But the question you should *really* be asking is 'What will the Akura family think of a Truegold who recklessly challenges an Underlord and is murdered?']

*Is that your honest estimation of my ability?* If Dross could predict this fight well enough to visualize it ahead of time, and he saw Lindon losing, then Lindon would have no choice but to run.

Dross sighed. [...I don't have an accurate reckoning of the enemy. There is a *chance* you could win, and I don't know how small of one. Probably very small.]

Lindon squared his shoulders, holding the axe before him in both hands, and cycled Blackflame. His eyes burned.

“Ready yourself, your highness,” Lindon said. And with a flare of the Burning Cloak, he launched himself at the enemy.

## Chapter 9

Dross' voice interrupted Yerin's cycling meditation.

[We're catching a Skysworn distress signal coming from close by. Don't worry about us! But catch up as soon as possible if you have any compassion in your soul.]

She extended her spiritual sense, trying to pierce the dark fog around her, and was immediately assaulted by the sense of distant battle. She would wager her sword that the flashing lights on the horizon came from a dozen different fights beyond the range of her senses.

None of them came from Lindon.

She activated the dream binding in her bracer. It gave a squeal—dream constructs didn't like being activated by sword madra—and then conjured a flickering purple butterfly that hovered over her wrist.

“Contact Mercy,” she said. “Mercy, get down here.”

The purple butterfly dissolved, maybe invisibly going to deliver its message, or maybe failing entirely because of the shadow aura. She'd done what she could.

Yerin kept a tight rein on her own fear. If there was a broad attack from the Seishen Kingdom, as she feared there was, then there was no predicting what could happen. Lindon didn't know the limits of his own strength yet. He could easily find himself trapped with no way out.

Mercy dropped from a nearby tree, tendrils of darkness laying her down gently. “I'm down here!” she announced. “What's the problem?”

“We're saving Lindon,” Yerin said, straining her spiritual sense further. She caught something that *might* have been Blackflame madra and advanced toward it.

A cold spark touched her ankle, and she looked down.

Little Blue stood down there, her ocean-blue face anxious. She stared up at Yerin with wide eyes.

Carefully, so as not to startle her, Yerin lowered herself to a squat.

“Easy,” she said. “I’ve got his trail.” She winked at the Sylvan. “Even if he *wants* to die, I’ll drag him back by his tail.”

Little Blue peeped, and Yerin thought she heard agreement.

Yerin sensed a change in the forest and rose to her feet. “Mercy, hold on to the little one. It’s about to get heated.”

From the darkness of the trees, a pale green light began to shine. That light brought with it an ominous weight, a phantom sensation of dreadful power. It was coming from a different direction than she thought Lindon had gone, which gave her a breath of relief.

A few seconds later, a woman stepped from those shadows. She was dressed in threadbare clothes—a colorless dress torn at the hem, no shoes, and sleeves shorter on one side than the other. Her gray hair was woven through with vines and pink flowers of madra, and her gray eyes were cold.

In her hands, she held the source of the light: a long wooden shaft with a scythe blade made of pale green flame.

She was doing nothing to veil her soul, and her spiritual pressure reminded Yerin of a vast, untamed forest. A life artist. And an Underlady.

“Where is Wei Shi Lindon?” the woman asked softly.

Yerin cycled her Truegold madra, releasing all three sets of her Goldsigns. She held her master's sword out in one hand, feeling the aura around it. “Mercy,” she said.

Mercy settled Little Blue into her void key with one hand, transforming her staff into a bow with the other. “Yes?”

“Can you cover me?”

“Of course!” Mercy said, full of confidence.

“Good.”

Because either way, Yerin was going in.

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Kiro was surely blessed by the heavens.

He and Meira had split up to look for the Blackflame boy. Their information had suggested he was close to the border of Empire territory, which suited them; they were not allowed to risk themselves by delving too deep into enemy control. His greatest fear was that Lindon would have sensed the rest of the attack from the Seishen Kingdom and retreated. And his second fear was that Meira would find the boy first.

She would surely have contained Lindon and gone to contact Kiro, in order to give him the credit. That would have stained him with shame and

guilt he could never wipe free; he would have enough trouble repaying the debts he already owed her.

But the heavens had favored him. He had been the one to find the Blackflame, and quickly at that. The Sage was watching him through her owl. He was being given a chance to prove his worth.

And Lindon had not only stayed to fight, but had charged straight at him.

He re-formed his helmet. His armor was a Divine Treasure that he kept in his soul; all he had to do was feed it madra from his Path of the Steel Guardian, and it would rebuild itself. The Treasure was created to work alongside his Goldsign: the breastplate and centerpiece of his armor.

The Truegold moved with explosive speed, his red-ringed eyes burning, a blazing black-and-red aura around him marking his Enforcer technique.

Kiro activated his Forger technique: the Titan's Blade. It flooded into his sword, quadrupling the weapon's size in an instant with condensed madra. His blade met the bone-hafted axe an instant later, Kiro striking with all the force of his Underlord body.

The axe was an Underlord-level sacred instrument, Kiro could feel it. Which meant that Lindon couldn't control it yet. He would likely not be able to activate it at all, and even if he did manage to, he would be crippled for the rest of the fight. The axe was nothing but a weapon. And Lindon obviously wasn't familiar with it; his motions had all the subtlety of a servant chopping wood.

Kiro hit the axe with the Forged blade of his extended sword, intending to sweep through the axe and chop Lindon in half.

His blade ran into Lindon's...and his arms rang with the impact as his blow was thrown back.

He managed to hang on to his sword, staggering back a step. The Forger technique around the blade cracked.

Lindon reeled back himself, gripping the haft of the axe in two dark green gauntlets. He raised black-and-red eyes to Kiro's, and Kiro felt his mind flooding in shock.

How was this the strength of a Truegold?

Kiro's Mountainroot Iron body activated, increasing his weight and keeping him bound to the earth. It made him heavier and more stable all the time, but when he poured his madra into it, a team of rampaging horses couldn't pull him from his feet.

This time, with his stance steadied, he raised his shield against Lindon's

next attack.

Lindon lifted his axe in his white Remnant hand. He brought the other palm up to point at Kiro, and dark fire kindled.

Kiro had been waiting for this. This was the Path of Black Flame he had come to counter. He used his Titan's Blade again, this time focused on his shield. This was one of the most versatile Forger techniques known to his Kingdom, and would enlarge any weapon. His shield was built to work with the technique; artists on the Path of the Steel Guardian were known as impenetrable bulwarks.

A half-dome of earth and force madra burst into existence around his shield, blocking him from Lindon. He was ready.

The bar of Blackflame madra, a liquid-looking stream of black and red, slammed into the barrier above his shield.

In an instant, the layers of madra began to dissolve. Essence flew away as particles of silver light, and the technique shrieked as the power of destruction eroded his protection.

If not for instinct pounded into him by years of drills and training, the bar of Blackflame would have blasted straight through his shield. On the reflex his tutors had created in him, he drew on his reserve of soulfire.

Colorless flame flickered through the shield in an instant, and his half-dome barrier went from a hazy gray light to a dome as solid as a stone wall. The Blackflame technique ended, leaving essence drifting up like smoke, but it didn't break his protection.

He released the shield to attack, but defending himself had taken too much out of him. He was a split second too late.

Now Lindon was bringing the axe down on his head, and he had to use his sword to defend.

Once again, the weapon came down with enough force that he would have sworn it came from an Underlord, but this time Lindon was swinging one-handed. Kiro was still stronger, and his stance was solid as stone.

He held off the blow, punching out at Lindon with his shield. Lindon caught the edge with his left hand, his white prosthetic arm straining to push his axe down, the other wrestling with Kiro's shield. Kiro looked into the man's black-and-red eyes and snarling face, and he thought he understood why the Sage of the Silver Heart had taken hostile notice of him.

He had the bearing of a violent demon, a savage fixed on violence. Akura Charity's nephew must have met a horrible fate at this brute's hands.

But Kiro's body had still been bathed in soulfire, and Lindon's had not. In a few more seconds, the prince would win this contest.

Then Lindon's eyes cleared. The black and red bled out of his eyes like ink being wiped away. The aura around him faded away, and the pressure on Kiro eased up. He didn't understand why Lindon would drop his Enforcer technique, but he wouldn't miss an opportunity when he had one; he shoved the axe away and pushed harder with his shield, intending to bowl Lindon over. The Blackflame began to slide back.

A new aura of light surrounded Lindon, this time a nimbus of hazy blue-white madra. Lindon stopped sliding back, holding the shield. Only a second later, he was standing upright.

Kiro felt a chill. The other Enforcer technique had given Lindon explosive strength and speed, but this brought the feeling of *steady* strength, like a placid lake.

He was matched.

He swept down his sword, but Lindon reached up with one fist and struck his wrist. There was a pulse of madra, and Kiro's hand went numb.

The crackling light surrounding his sword went out. It was no longer drawing on his madra. And it felt *heavy*, as though his Enforcer technique could no longer reach it.

That was one mystery too many for Kiro. How had a Truegold met him in strength? How was he using what seemed to be an entirely separate Path? The Sage had mentioned nothing about that. How had he negated Kiro's madra? And how had he managed a hit like that in the first place? Hitting Kiro's wrist as he struck with his sword sounded easy, but doing so in an actual battle required inhuman levels of control. Or insanity.

Burning his madra for a burst of strength, Kiro shoved himself away from Lindon, taking two steps back. The Blackflame didn't pursue him, burning with that cold light, waiting for Kiro to make a move.

Watching him.

Kiro held up his sword and shield, keeping the fear from his voice. "Who are you?"

Lindon's eyes started to bleed black-and-red again, the pale haze around his body fading away. "*You* came looking for *me*." Coming from that face, the words felt somehow like a threat.

"Are you the grandson of the last Blackflame Emperor?" Kiro had come up with all sorts of theories ever since Charity had pointed out Lindon's



existence. “Are you a secret weapon of the Naru family?”

He didn't entirely expect an answer, but sometimes pride got the better of sacred artists. Maybe Lindon would let something slip.

And he *had* to know. There was no way a Truegold that fought like an Underlord could come out of nowhere.

“Who sent you after me?” Lindon asked. “Tell me that, and I will gladly tell you about myself.”

He spoke pleasantly, even politely, but Kiro's spirit warned him. He extended his senses to the aura around him.

The darkness of shadow aura had retreated before a slowly swirling tide of smoldering red. The Redflower family wagon was still burning. Still releasing aura of fire and destruction.

And Lindon had been gathering control of that aura the entire time. It was spinning slowly, all around him, like a newborn whirlpool. And like the Night Wheel overhead.

Kiro had no time to say anything, only time to react. He threw himself to the ground, ducking under his shield, activating the Titan's Blade and covering himself in a shield that he poured soulfire into.

As he did, Lindon clenched a fist and activated the aura.

Kiro was consumed in swirling black-and-red fury.

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Yerin dashed at the gray-haired woman, whipping a Rippling Sword Striker technique at her. The wave of sword madra and aura exploded forward, slashing a groove in the soft forest floor, and Yerin ran in its wake.

Mercy suddenly emanated the power of a Truegold. Yerin didn't have to turn to feel her conjuring an arrow on her string, and an instant later that arrow blasted toward the Underlady.

The woman raised her blazing green scythe, then pounded it against the earth.

Black roots shot up from the ground like Striker techniques. They wove thick as a web in front of the life artist, burning with the vibrant energy of Lord-level madra.

Mercy's arrow shattered into specks of shadow on the first root. Yerin's wave of sword madra cut through the first layer, but broke on the second.

Yerin hit the wall of roots herself and kicked off, flipping back to land on her feet.

The roots retreated to reveal the woman's face. It was so blank as to be a

mask. "I am Riyusai Meira, keeper of the Seishen royal garden. Tell me now: where is Wei Shi Lindon?"

Yerin used the Endless Sword technique, activating the aura around her body and her six Goldsigns. They erupted into a storm of uncontrolled slashes; Yerin didn't bother focusing on making her technique like the wind. She didn't need one specific cut, but a host of aura blades to slice through a forest of brambles.

Mercy lowered her bow and actually responded to the Underlady.

"No!" she shouted.

And that said it all, really.

Meira reversed her grip on her scythe, leaning forward like she was about to use quarterstaff techniques. Yerin had trouble thinking of a scythe as a practical weapon, but the difference in power would make up for that.

"Where is he?" the Underlady asked.

The pressure from her suddenly flared, green light wrapping around her feet, and she dashed forward.

A blink later, Yerin was staring into empty gray eyes from five feet away, with a fiery green blade sweeping up from below.

Yerin jumped to the side, lashing out with the Endless Sword as she did so, and there was a sudden heat on her sword-wrist. Then a chill.

The green flames of the scythe had brushed past her skin. Without even cutting her, it had taken away a chunk of her life aura.

She didn't know much about her lifeline, but she didn't want to lose any of it. It represented the power of her life force itself. Had she lost a day off her lifespan? Or would she be weaker for the rest of her life, if she didn't replace it? She didn't know.

But she wasn't about to take a solid hit from that scythe.

She opened her Copper sight for an instant, bearing the pain that came from opening it in the Night Wheel Valley. She caught a glimpse of a green ball of liquid-looking green life aura hanging in the air where it had been chopped away from her. Meira's scythe swept after it, still hungry, looking for more of Yerin to cut.

Yerin activated the Endless Sword.

The silver aura around her sword rang like a bell, sending force resonating out. Yerin controlled it, directing it like a gust of wind, so an invisible blade struck the haft of Meira's scythe.

The Underlady's blow was knocked backwards, but Meira spun with it,

reversing the scythe and bringing the butt of the weapon up toward Yerin's chest. One of Yerin's sword-arm Goldsigns swept up to intercept, and another lashed forward, sending a Rippling Sword technique at her opponent like a deadly crescent moon.

With one sweep of her scythe, Meira knocked the Goldsign aside, crushed Yerin's technique, and forced Yerin back a step. Her strength wasn't too much greater than Yerin's—her Iron body obviously specialized in something different—though she had been reforged in soulfire.

But Yerin wasn't alone.

Mercy stepped up, radiating the power of a Truegold, firing black arrow after black arrow into the enemy. They seemed to blast from the surrounding shadows, impacting Meira's wrists like ink stains. They didn't seem to hurt the Underlady, but they slowed her down, forcing her to spend time and madra burning them away.

Yerin let madra flow into her sword. “So you know, you should keep away from that scythe.”

Mercy gave her a sidelong glance. “I planned on it.”

Light flashed like a green sun rising.

Meira stood, surrounded by a vibrant aura, her blazing scythe held in both hands. Around her, vines rose from the ground; some of them looked to be black roots manipulated by a Ruler technique, whereas others were clearly Forged of life madra.

"Where is he?" Meira asked again. "Where is he? Where is he? Where is he? Whereishewhereishewhereishewhereishe?"

Her gaze was no longer dead. Now it was feverishly hot.

More vines, both black and green, shot up from the ground. The pressure around the Underlady grew stronger and stronger.

"She's got one too many cracks in her head," Yerin muttered.

Mercy poured all her spirit in to a single arrow that grew darker and darker as it absorbed layers of shadow madra. “Would you mind keeping her off me?” Mercy asked, voice tight with strain.

Would have been easy enough if their opponent wasn't a Lady. A tidal wave of plants slammed into them with the force of an Underlord soul, and Yerin pushed her Endless Sword as hard as she could. An invisible wall of sword aura churned the physical roots to mulch like a thousand spinning blades, but the bright green vines of madra were unaffected. They slithered through like hungry snakes, and Yerin had to slash and spin with her white

sword and her six Goldsigns, keeping them away from Mercy.

After only a breath or two, Yerin was about to be overwhelmed. She pushed herself harder, but her madra channels were strained, and she was moving too fast.

Finally, when she could hold no longer, she leaped out of the way.

Purple eyes shone as Mercy faced the enemy, a black arrow thrumming with power sitting on the string of her bow. The weapon, taller than Mercy, was woven from slick black strands knotted like vines. Its violet-eyed dragon's head sat in the center of the bow's shaft, the arrow emerging from the dragon's mouth. This was the weapon Mercy had inherited from her Monarch mother. She called it Suu.

Without a word, Mercy loosed the arrow.

It blasted through the air, growing in power as it went, until it flew like a dark and hungry void toward the Underlady. She stood with a loose wall of roots around her, and for whatever reason—whether she didn't sense it coming in time, with all the shadow aura around, or whether she didn't consider it a threat—the arrow struck Meira in the chest.

It slammed into her with what Yerin would describe as a flash of darkness, sending a chill through her spiritual sense.

...and it did nothing.

Mercy drew in a breath.

The black arrow stuck from Meira's chest, but she glanced down at it dispassionately. A moment later, a flash of green reduced the weapon to essence.

Mercy's spirit faded from Truegold back to Highgold. Her weapon shifted from a bow back into a staff, and she leaned on it, sagging down.

Yerin didn't know if Mercy had truly given up, or if she was counting on her identity to save her. But Meira turned her attention to Yerin, which left Yerin with precious few options.

She looked within herself, to the red mass of ravenous power that had been strangely quiet throughout the fight. As though it had been waiting for her to call.

Yerin turned to the ball of life aura that hung in the air nearby, slowly dissipating. Vibrant green aura was running through her arm again, replacing what she'd lost, but it had come from the lifeline running down her spine. That line was getting noticeably thinner. Which couldn't be good.

But there were chunks of her life lying around. She might as well put

them to use.

“You hungry?” she asked.

The Blood Shadow surged out.

It was a featureless copy of her, like a rough model of red clay, and unlike the last time she’d seen it, six red blades stood out on its back to mirror her own Goldsigns. The Heaven’s Drop had increased its power to dangerous levels. And here she was, giving it more.

The Shadow flowed toward the life aura in the air, greedily trying to take it. And failing.

Meira lowered her scythe, preparing to dash forward.

Desperately, Yerin cast back in her mind for the method the Blood Sage had outlined for feeding his Blood Shadow. Her control over life aura was poor, her ability to weave soulfire only basic, but she strained to reach out to the life aura that had once belonged to her. To *push* it into the Blood Shadow.

She still felt a connection to the severed aura. She couldn’t swallow it—it was separate from her now and couldn’t be reclaimed. The Sage of Red Faith’s dream tablet had been very clear about that. But it had still come from her. She could choose to feed it to the Blood Shadow.

It was only that getting it to move with her pathetic control was like trying to tip over a bottle by blowing on it.

The hazy globe of green drifted slightly...

And the Blood Shadow snapped it up like a bird taking a fish.

She’d barely had to touch the aura at all. The Shadow was greedy for it, and the sense of its presence swelled as it slurped up the life aura. Its hair, a mass of red color, split into strands. Lines appeared on its face; suggestions of eyes, a nose, a mouth.

It was still tied to her by a strand of madra that extended to her core, and she could feel it suddenly pulling through that strand like it was inhaling through a reed.

Not life, this time. The aura in her blood. The strength of her body.

Weakness flooded her, and she fought back by powering her Steelborn Iron body with madra, but the Shadow was taking from her spirit too. Even the pathetic few wisps of soulfire she had managed to gather in her soulspace slipped away, devoured by the parasite. Its blades were becoming sharper, its eyes clearer. It was draining her dry.

The Blood Shadow had slipped its leash.

## Chapter 10

As the Underlord hunkered down under his shield, hiding from the Void Dragon's Dance, Lindon begged Dross for a plan. His madra channels were strained by the use of so many techniques so quickly, his spirit burning with the effort. His body ached, and he panted for breath even after such a short fight. He'd been strengthened in Ghostwater, but not enough to take on an Underlord for long.

[I've built a very nice model of Prince Kiro's behavior,] Dross said. [If he doesn't have any more combat techniques, then it will be *completely* accurate! But he absolutely does. No question.]

Lindon finally couldn't hold the Void Dragon's Dance any longer. The furious cyclone of fire and destruction would continue for a few more breaths, but then it would run out. And if the Underlord wasn't seriously injured, then Lindon was almost out of tricks. He had madra to spare, enough to drag the fight out for twice as long, but he'd been forced to push his body and spirit past their limits to keep up with an Underlord. He wouldn't be fighting at his peak condition, so he had no confidence in being able to kill or outlast the prince.

But the Skysworn and the Redflower family had gotten away.

*Mission accomplished*, Lindon said to Dross. He opened his void key for an instant, tossing Harmony's axe back inside. Eventually, his soul space would be large enough to hold the weapon, but he hadn't reached that point yet.

After closing the void key, he ran.

Behind him, the Void Dragon's Dance began to fade away as Lindon sprinted into the shadows of the forest. The Soul Cloak sprung up around him as he ran, though his channels ached with the use of more madra. He would have to ask Little Blue for help after this.

[You were amazing back there, by the way. That ambush? And the way you hit him with a sucker punch before running away! Honestly, you've

exceeded my expectations. Well done.] He sounded completely sincere.

Lindon felt a thrill as he ran through the forest of shadows. He'd done it. Ever since he'd traded blows with Naru Gwei, he'd wondered if he could stand up to an Underlord. And he had; he was no Lord yet, but he was standing on the stage.

How strong would he be once he finally advanced?

Having Dross in his head was the edge he'd needed. The way the spirit smoothed out his thoughts was a subtle advantage, but noticeable when he fought someone who had him outclassed in both power and speed.

Lindon vaulted over a fallen tree, ducking a shadowy creature that he couldn't quite see. *It was thanks to you*, he said in his head.

[Aw, don't mention it. I mean don't mention it to me, because I already know. Do mention it to others. Spread the word.]

A moment later, he added, [And also, this is entirely up to you, but you might want to consider running faster.]

Lindon extended his spiritual sense behind him. Sure enough, there was a heavy presence crashing through the forest, barreling through trees like an ox through tall grass.

Kiro had recovered.

[And would you look at that, he *does* have more techniques! I knew he must.]

Yellow aura surged beneath Lindon's feet, and the earth surged up into a wall, trying to block him in. Lindon leaped, powered by the Soul Cloak, and the Ruler technique couldn't catch him. He rode on top of the wall for a moment as it rose, then jumped down.

A needle of gray madra speared through the wall of packed soil where he had stood a moment before. A Striker technique to follow up the Ruler technique.

Lindon kept running, glancing back to see Kiro crash through layers of stone, armor glowing with a silver-and-yellow corona. He didn't even slow down as the earth wall that he'd created slowly collapsed behind him.

[Oh, this is fascinating stuff. It's all going into my model of him, let me assure you.]

Kiro thrust his sword forward, and the blue sparks on the blade flared. A lance of smooth blue lightning flashed forward; it clearly wasn't the prince's madra, so it must have been the binding in his weapon. It struck at Lindon's feet, and the ground beneath him burst.

Thanks to Dross' existence and the flexible power of the Soul Cloak, Lindon reacted even before he thought. He borrowed the force of the explosion, leaning forward, twisting in the air and grabbing a branch overhead, then swinging on the branch to throw himself forward.

[Woohoo!] Dross shouted. [Oh, that was amazing! Go back, let's do it again!]

*Do you have a plan ready yet?*

[I'm running on the excess dream aura produced by *your* mind, so I wouldn't say I'm *drowning* in power up here. I'm most of the way done, though. Call it sixty percent.]

Lindon spared some attention from his Soul Cloak to send a trickle of pure madra to Dross at the base of his skull. He wasn't sure it would work, but it was similar enough to how he had cycled the power of the Spirit Well to Dross before.

[I appreciate that, I do, but it's not really helping. Sorry. If you could upgrade your brain, that would really be ideal. Or some dream elixirs, those would be good too.]

Lindon resolved to get Dross some dream elixirs. So long as Kiro didn't catch them.

He heard a distant echo in his thoughts as Dross began to speak again, suggesting he was contacting the others. [Hello! Hello out there, we could use some backup. A little help would be nice before we're killed by this big armored man. Any assistance you could spare would be greatly appreciated. Any at all. Very soon.]

Lindon had been fleeing in the direction he'd come from, so hopefully they were close enough that Yerin and the others could hear them now. The shadow aura muffled everything, but maybe...

His thoughts were interrupted by a wall rising in front of him. He jumped and grabbed a fistful of compact soil in his Remnant hand, which sunk in more easily than his hand of flesh, but walls were rising on his left and right as well. He started climbing, but he felt danger behind and released his grip.

Gray madra speared through the wall again, and Lindon drew on Blackflame. His madra channels burned, and he spun around as he landed, unleashing a bar of dragon's breath two fingers thick. He swept it behind him blindly.

The attack splashed into Kiro's shield less than ten feet away and dissipated, leaving the metal glowing with heat. Lindon backed up, gathering



more madra, but Kiro closed that gap in no time. He loomed, his bulky armor making him a massive silhouette, and then slammed his red-hot shield into Lindon's chest.

The impact crushed Lindon into the packed earth and stones, clipping his chin, bruising his ribs, and driving the breath from his lungs. He opened his void key, reaching for the axe with his left hand, but Kiro kicked his hand away. He couldn't reach, and after a moment he lost concentration on his void key and the opening vanished.

Pushing the shield against Lindon's chest, Kiro stabbed him.

He was aiming for the neck, but as the blade approached, Lindon twisted with all the strength he could muster, getting his left hand up and trying to push away the blade. The sword sliced into his shoulder, the inside of his arm, the palm of his hand.

He screamed at the pain, his mind fuzzing, but his body wouldn't let him lose consciousness. If he did, he would die.

So he lashed out with his right hand.

The fingernails of his Remnant arm were slightly tipped like dull claws, and they dug into Kiro's helmet. The Underlord ignored them for a moment...until he noticed that the hunger binding was active, drawing madra away. And his armor was made entirely of madra.

Lindon scooped away a handful of his helmet like butter, peeling it away from his face. The veins of his white arm filled with gray.

Kiro instinctively jerked back, pulling away.

And Lindon vented his arm.

Whatever Kiro's Path was, it had aspects of earth and force, so even aimlessly shoving it out carried a kick like a horse. The Underlord staggered back, giving Lindon an opening.

Though it burned his spirit, Lindon kindled the Burning Cloak and kicked away, shooting out of the earth walls that blocked him in on three sides. He fled as fast as he could without looking back, trying to ignore his agonizing wounds. He left blood trickling behind him.

[Oh! There's somebody! Hey, help!]

Dross' voice gave him new strength, and he looked up, fixing on the new figure.

It was Mercy.

Her purple eyes were wide as she popped out of the shadows, riding on her staff, pulling it to a halt as she saw him. Her hair had grown long enough

to cover her ears now, and it whipped in the wind of her movement.

Lindon himself skidded to a stop. He took quick stock of his injuries.

Then he kicked off in another direction.

She may have demonstrated the power of a Truegold before, but she was still only Highgold. He couldn't put her in danger.

He glanced back to make sure that Kiro was following him. He hadn't gone far; he could still see the three-walled prison of earth through the trees, and the armored Underlord running away from it. But he wasn't running for Lindon.

He headed for Mercy, shield and sword in hand.

Lindon shouted to draw his attention, Burning Cloak flaring in spite of his madra channels' protest. He dashed back the other way, throwing himself at Kiro. With a quick motion, he reached into the void key and pulled out Harmony's axe.

Kiro reacted as though he'd expected Lindon to return all along, pivoting smoothly and bracing his shield for the impact.

Though his shoulder screamed in pain, Lindon hit the shield with his axe and all the explosive force of the Burning Cloak, slamming the Underlord backwards.

Or so he intended.

Instead of flying away, the Underlord stood as though he were nailed to the ground. The force transferred through him, kicking up a savage wind behind him that tore up soil and leaves, even stripping bark from nearby trees.

Undeterred, Kiro struck out with his sword, and Lindon raised his Remnant arm to protect his face. It wouldn't hold, but maybe it would prevent the Underlord from splitting his skull.

The sword rang like a bell, jerking backwards as though Kiro had struck an invisible stone.

Though Lindon couldn't see Kiro's expression, the prince must have been as shocked as Lindon was. He looked around for the new enemy, giving Lindon space.

Before Lindon could move, he was grabbed and tugged backwards. Black strings of Mercy's madra pulled Lindon away, and he let them pull him behind a large tree. Mercy crouched next to him, looking over him with worried eyes. She paused a moment when she saw the weapon in his left hand, but shook it off, wadding up a purple cloth to push against his injuries.

Lindon didn't spare another thought for her. His Bloodforged Iron body was pulling madra to his wounds, and he was trying to ignore his aches and pains and watch Yerin's fight. But it wasn't Yerin.

Not entirely.

Yerin's Blood Shadow stood before Kiro. Red robes flapped in the wind, a five-fingered hand held a pink-bladed sword, and six sword-arms stuck out from her shoulders. Yerin's eyes—painted in crimson—watched the Underlord, and Yerin's smirk was on her face.

Lindon had never seen the Blood Shadow with such detail before. At first, he was relieved; Yerin must have had a breakthrough of some kind in order to get her Shadow to this level.

But that wasn't the only possibility.

A shiver of dread passed through him, and he watched the trees behind the Blood Shadow. If the parasite completed its goal and devoured Yerin completely, it might have looked like this. If she were still alive, she'd be following soon.

“What is this?” Kiro asked. “Have you bound a Remnant to your service?”

The Shadow's red smile grew wider, and she beckoned Kiro with her sword.

A green light blossomed from the darkness behind her, and another woman came rushing out. She was gray-eyed and gray-haired, wearing a shabby dress, and she carried a scythe with a blade of green flame.

She looked only a little older than Lindon, and her spirit carried the weight of an Underlord.

She passed the Blood Shadow without a glance. Though the Shadow struck out with a Goldsign, the woman evaded without a thought, landing on one knee at Kiro's feet.

“First prince,” she said, “this place is not safe for you. Please leave it to me.”

He let his helmet vanish, giving Lindon a clear look at his face. He seemed surprised...and he was sweating. Maybe Lindon had pressed him harder than he'd thought. “Meira? Did you—”

He cut off, conjuring his helmet again, as a silver-and-black blur followed Meira out of the forest. Yerin hurled a wave of razor-edged madra at her prey, but Kiro protected the kneeling woman with his shield.

Yerin landed, panting. Her hair was in disarray, her Skysworn armor

chipped, and her skin was pale. She breathed heavily, her eyes sunken, like she'd been fighting for days. Her appearance reminded him of the time he'd met her, after she had been on the run for weeks.

But she was still alive. She hadn't been swallowed by the Blood Shadow.

Lindon struggled to his feet, but he was in no shape to fight. He would have to find a way to distract the other two so they could retreat. But how would they escape from two Underlords?

"Dross," Lindon said aloud, "keep calling for help."

Neither of them knew if there was anyone in range, but Dross kept trying. They were closer to the Blackflame lines than the Seishen Kingdom, so there should be help coming. If only they could hang on.

And if the attack wasn't as broad as he feared it was. Even now, he could hear distant, deafening explosions.

The gray-haired Underlady peeked over the edge of the shield. "You found the Blackflame? I will take care of him, my lord, don't worry."

Yerin glanced over at Lindon.

Lindon hefted the axe. He still had madra left; his shoulder was already knitting together, and he couldn't stand still. He walked out from the trees, gathering Blackflame into his left hand and holding his axe in the right.

[If Lindon fights again,] Dross said to her, [he'll last...ten seconds? Five seconds. I'm betting five.]

Yerin turned away from him, holding her sword up to bar his way. "Catch a breath or two. You've had your turn."

Lindon stopped. "He's exaggerating. It isn't that bad."

"Yeah, I'd bet on ten seconds myself." She tapped the bracer of her armor with one finger. "Caught two scraps of a message. It's crumbling to pieces out there, but Underlords are heading to bail us out. Just have to hang on."

"You can dance a round after you catch a breath or two. Hop in when you feel like I could use a ten-second holiday." She strode forward, moving more naturally in the Skysworn armor than she ever had before.

As part of the same motion, Yerin and her Blood Shadow spread out, walking to either side of the Underlords. "You've about drained me dry," Yerin said, looking across at her opposite. "Now let's see if you can bury me."

Both versions of Yerin raised their swords.

Meira laughed and brushed her hand to one side in a negligent gesture. Life madra flashed, affecting the aura, and branches twisted unnaturally down

to grab at Yerin and her Shadow. Trees bent all the way over to snatch them. Then they burst into chips of wood.

Entire trees exploded under the Endless Sword resonating from two sources, releasing a deafening roar like a million logs chopped at once.

Yerin dashed in, slashing at Kiro, who met her sword with his.

Her Blood Shadow lunged at Meira.

And in the first second, Lindon would have sworn he was watching a fight between four Underlords.

He had personally felt how strong Kiro's blows were. Without the enhancement of the meat from Ghostwater or his own full-body Enforcer techniques, he would have crumpled under a single strike. But when Yerin's sword clashed with his, the Underlord was the one under pressure.

Yerin struck more than once in every exchange. As he defended with his shield and inflated his sword to massive size, plunging it down on her, she ducked to one side, slashing grooves into his armor with the invisible claws of the Endless Sword. At the same time, she lashed out with a Striker technique that blasted at his eyes, forcing himself to raise his shield higher. She never stopped. Her every move flowed seamlessly into the next without a blink in between; when he raised his shield, she was already striking at his feet, moving to attack from a different angle, drawing her sword-arms back for a follow-up strike. She was a spinning, flashing whirlwind of destruction.

She held nothing back, throwing herself into the fight as though this battle were her last.

And her Shadow was her equal.

Lindon had heard that the Blood Shadows of Redmoon Hall made them worth two sacred artists of their level, but he'd never seen that to be true. Yan Shoumei, the Redmoon Truegold in Ghostwater, had used her Shadow as an extension of her sacred arts, like a cloak or a weapon. He'd never seen her fight all-out, but he couldn't imagine that the Shadow gave her enough of an advantage to count as a true copy of herself. At most, it would give her an edge over other sacred artists at her level.

Longhook, the Redmoon Underlord, had fought with his Shadow in the form of a weapon as well. Lindon had seen him overpower Eithan with it, but not to the degree that Lindon would have expected from a two-on-one fight.

But here, for the first time, he caught a glimpse of what the Blood Shadow could be. It fought like a mirror of Yerin focused on a different opponent. It sent silver-and-red crescents flying at Meira, tangling her scythe in sword-

bladed arms and invisible clashes from the Endless Sword, cutting her like dozens of invisible knives. They didn't cut the Underlady's skin deeply, but left shallow gouges all over.

Her dress was still intact, as was the haft of her scythe, but wounds still appeared on her skin. This was the effect of blood madra; it affected flesh more easily than anything else. The Blood Shadow might have trouble cutting a tree, but it would have no trouble slicing through a cow.

Lindon wasn't sure if the Shadow was weaker than Yerin or if it had a more troubling opponent, because it was pressed on the back foot more often than the real Yerin. Meira pushed it back, shoving it away, keeping it on the defensive. Until it backed into Kiro.

Then, as though they'd planned it all along, the Blood Shadow spun and refocused on a new target.

Yerin struck at the same time, sending seven individual slashes of sword madra at Prince Kiro—one from her sword and six from her Goldsigns. Each crackled with aura, until the prince faced a silver storm. He flooded his shield with madra, calling up the gray half-dome in front of him that he'd used to defend against dragon's breath.

And behind him, the Blood Shadow drove its sword through his back.

The Underlord stiffened, his shield faltering. The last dregs of Yerin's techniques pushed through the fading wall, lashing him, stripping pieces of his armor from his back. That armor had prevented the Shadow's sword from penetrating all the way, but it still stuck about six inches into the back of his ribs.

Lindon only caught a glimpse of the wound for an instant before Meira, shrieking, hauled the Blood Shadow back. Her arms were shredded by the Shadow's retaliation, but she ignored her wounds, tossing the spirit one-handed into a nearby tree.

Her screams turned into sobs as she saw Kiro, and she dropped to her knees.

Green light flared around her. Roots and grass rose from the ground, weaving together in a wall, shoving Yerin away. The pink flowers in her hair shone, and vibrant green aura engulfed Prince Kiro's wound. A second later, he drew in a deep, shuddering breath.

Lindon released a bar of dragon's breath.

This wasn't a game. The two had attacked without warning—attacked sacred artists younger and weaker than they were. Lindon might not have

been able to keep up with the fight in his condition, but one technique was enough. He had been waiting for the opening where it might do some good.

The fire punched through the roots easily enough, and he poured the technique through the barrier, drilling a hole.

When the Blackflame ended, he looked through the new gap in the wall. He saw only green.

Leaves of emerald madra spreading from the Underlady's hand had blocked his attack. Their edges danced with soulfire that they greedily absorbed. The black fire should have driven a hole straight through the leaves, but instead, the fire madra was dispersed into essence.

Hurriedly, Lindon readied another blast.

The green light around Meira blazed up into a column that stretched into the night sky above her. In an instant, the column bloomed into branches and resolved into the image of a tree; a massive, mythical tree that rose over the rest of the forest.

Lindon's gut tightened in fear.

Meira looked at him through the hole, her eyes absolutely empty. "You are all dead," she said quietly.

Then she raised something in her fist: a loose blue stone that looked like a gritty ball of sand. A gatestone.

She crushed it, and in a flash of blue, she vanished.

The wall of roots fell when she disappeared, which allowed Lindon to see that Kiro had gone too. That was a pity; he had hoped to kill one of them. Now they would return.

[Here's some good news,] Dross said. [If they do come back, I have a combat solution prepared for Prince Kiro. One hundred percent ready to go! It wasn't too complicated, as these things go. I have a partial prediction for the one called Meira as well, though if you could spare some more Dream Well water, then I'd *really* knock your feet off.]

Lindon walked out, looking from Yerin to her Blood Shadow.

"Gratitude," he said, though his feelings were more complicated than that. He *was* grateful, but...he had also thought he'd caught up to Yerin enough to fight beside her. He felt useless.

"I've never seen you fight like that," he said. "You were..."

He trailed off as Yerin's eyes rolled up in her head and she collapsed.

He was there in an instant, catching her in his arms. Her master's sword fell from limp fingers. Her breathing was rough, her skin pale and cold. She

weighed practically nothing.

Before he could ask Mercy to grab Yerin's sword, the Blood Shadow appeared next to him. It looked into his eyes, and it was like he could see a spark of the real Yerin in them. It was unnerving.

He dipped his head to her. He wasn't exactly sure how to address the parasitic spirit living inside Yerin, but it was best to be polite.

"Thank you for your help," he said.

The Blood Shadow smiled again, gave him a wink, and then crumpled. It coiled into a rope of red light and slithered back into Yerin's spirit.

Had it really winked at him?

It wasn't the time to worry about that. Yerin was in danger.

He looked back at Mercy, who had picked up Harmony's axe and Yerin's sword, putting them into her own void key. He couldn't unravel her expression, except that she looked pained.

[Oh, I think I caught a bit of that message she mentioned,] Dross announced. [Blackflame Underlords are on their way! Two or three minutes, I'd say. They're gathering us up for the...oh. For the general retreat.]

~~~

The Seishen Kingdom's attack had come out of nowhere.

The Blackflame Empire wasn't entirely caught unprepared. Most of the Skysworn were acting as scouts, so they had taken the brunt of the attack, with some of their individual squads folding back to warn the major clans. The Empire had engaged their major defenses: boundary fields that created walls of wind, huge launcher constructs that could destroy even Underlords at a distance, and the Blackflame Underlords themselves.

But the suddenness of the assault had done its damage. No one had expected the Seishen Kingdom to launch an all-out *attack* at all, just to skirmish over resources. They hadn't thought the Akura Sage would allow it.

The Empire's border in the Night Wheel Valley had collapsed, the Kingdom's forces pushing through. Blackflame defenses crumbled, and the shadow aura made it difficult to coordinate an organized retreat.

Cassias stood on a Thousand-Mile Cloud, spreading his awareness around him. Now that he was a Truegold, his spiritual sense and his bloodline powers had both expanded, leaving him feeling like he had eyes in the sky for miles. The deep shadow aura restricted him as well, but it was still a difference of night and day compared to his Highgold senses.

He caught glimpses, not full pictures, but he could piece them together. If



there was a bright side, it was that the Blackflame losses were relatively small—the Seishen Kingdom would be afraid to push the Sage too far. They were pushing forward to gain territory, not to kill.

Though lives were still lost.

The Emperor had sounded a retreat soon after their outer defenses failed. Now, it was a mad scramble to get back through the portal.

But Cassias was far from there. He had been left where the fighting was hottest. And the more desperate the battle, the more restraint began to slip.

His wife, Naru Jing, hovered next to him. Her right wing glistened emerald green—the Goldsign of the Path of Grasping Sky. The other was an almost skeletal orange-yellow, built out of madra, a prosthetic replacement created by Soulsmiths. Her left eye was the same color, taken from the same Remnant. She waved a hand, and her wind madra cut a volley of Enforced arrows from the sky.

She had been powerful before, as the top-ranked Highgold in the Empire. Now, the two of them had taken the opportunity to train in a place where the aura was richer than ever before. He doubted they were the top two ranked among Truegolds—there were some real monsters among the Truegolds of the Blackflame Empire—but he suspected they would be in the top two or three hundred. If the heavens were kind, they might even break through to Underlord before the end of this contest.

But with that power had come extra authority, and with the authority, duty.

Cassias relayed the situation he'd seen to Jing, who informed her father via courier. Her father was a significant figure in the Naru clan, and had taken to directing their defenses.

This hilltop, the headquarters of the Naru clan on this side of the shadowy portal, was the last site of fierce fighting. The Emperor and the Underlords were fighting elsewhere, and while they would likely return, the winged members of the Naru clan were being pushed back. Their losses were still manageable, but they had no one to match the enemy's Underlord: a woman with long, burning hair who shouted loud threats as she burned her way through the forest.

Cassias was singlehandedly doing the work of twenty scouts, and might have been the only reason they were able to maneuver around the fiery Underlady. Wherever she was headed, they gave ground, reinforcing their lines elsewhere. No matter how much stronger she was, she couldn't be

everywhere.

The Naru clan could outpace her, falling back through the air, but it would mean leaving their servants and workers undefended. Servants like the Arelius family.

A fireball streaked like a comet through the air, and it took all of Naru Jing's attention to disperse it. Through his bloodline ability, Cassias saw the Underlady's fix on him, drawing a spear of burning madra from thin air. He pulled his awareness back.

"Time to leave," he said. He ordered his Thousand-Mile Cloud to plummet downward, pulling out a caged purple butterfly as he did so. He whispered a quick message to it, informing the Naru clan that he was repositioning. He wouldn't last long with an Underlord-level sacred artist targeting him.

He regretted the full retreat. Though he trusted the Emperor's judgment, every day they stayed in this aura-rich environment was a fortune to their sacred artists. If they stayed here long enough, he might even reach Underlord himself.

He was focused on delivering his message when his wife tackled him.

The cloud he had been standing on exploded, the focus of not just the Underlady but her contingent of Truegolds. They fell, Jing's wings straining to hold them, her artificial eye blazing with effort.

Then, suddenly, Cassias landed.

It confused him, because he was sure they had not come close to the ground yet. And the landing felt as soft as if he had landed on a pile of pillows. He looked down and saw the emerald green cloud that had appeared beneath him.

Then he looked up, to the Skysworn armor. And the man wearing it.

Eithan shook his head, closing his eyes as though he couldn't bear to watch. "Shame. It's such a shame that I am duty-bound to the scouting mission the Skysworn have given me. I can't possibly help you."

Cassias sagged back in relief, leaning into his wife's arms. She let out a long breath.

"If *only* I were the Patriarch, my spot would be here beside you, but alas I was ousted from my rightful position..."

Cassias raised the purple butterfly, using a brief flicker of madra to scramble the message from before. Instead, he spoke a new message clearly into it: "Re-form the lines. Rescue has arrived."

Eithan opened one eye. “No, no, I couldn't possibly help you. How could I ever—”

Cassias opened the cage, and the butterfly construct flew off.

“...they have an Underlady,” Eithan pointed out. “She looks dangerous.”

Naru Jing waved to her courier. “The fight is over!” she shouted. “Tell my father to regroup and prepare to transport wounded.”

“Am I being ignored?” Eithan asked.

“Now you know how it feels,” Cassias muttered.

“It would be more fun if you sobbed out your apology and begged me for my assistance.”

“Don't you have some work to do?”

Eithan's mouth quirked into a familiar smile. A spark returned to his eyes.

“Well then. I suppose I do.”

## Chapter 11

Outside the walls of Blackflame City, hundreds of medical tents had been set in long rows. The Lowgold injured shared huge tents with dozens of people, the Highgolds and members of important families had tents with only a few others, and the Truegolds and children of large clans were allowed into the hospitals within the over-crowded capital city.

Or that was how it was supposed to be. The Seishen Kingdom had continued pushing to the very edge of the portal, and the number of wounded flooded their capacity. The tents were stuffed with beds, and mats when those ran out. Wounded were shoved into whatever space could be found regardless of rank, and Brightcrown healers scurried from one battered sacred artist to another, trying their best to conserve madra.

The most important among the wounded, the ones who would usually have been given rooms inside the city, were still given special attention. But they couldn't get through the walls. Even the sky over the walls had been locked down after too many cloudships had run out of power and been forced to make emergency landings.

Lindon had heard that the Seishen Kingdom attack hadn't cost too many lives, as these things went, but hearing the moans and screams from agonized wounded, it was easier to imagine that the Blackflame Empire had been massacred.

Though Lindon could see nothing of the suffering patients, because he had a tent of his own. And a bed. A bundle of yellow-striped flowers on a table beside him, radiating calming dream aura that even soothed his spirit. Steady rain pattered down, but the fabric of the tent was flawless.

A medical attendant from the Brightcrown family stood inside his tent, attending to Lindon alone, hands folded in front of him. Lindon had wondered about the family name before he'd seen one; each member of the family had a floating golden crown over their heads. As the Arelius family commanded the cleaning crews and maintenance workers all across the

Empire, so the Brightcrowns controlled organized medicine.

Lindon made a show of rubbing salve over his wounds again. The wounds were still raw, but it had been about twelve hours since the battle—his Bloodforged Iron body had taken care of the worst of his injuries already.

“I'm really feeling much better,” Lindon said, twisting his left arm to demonstrate. It stung, but he didn't show that on his face. “I think it's time for me to leave. I can only imagine how busy you are.”

Somewhere nearby, a grown man sobbed.

The Brightcrown healer—a small, tidy Highgold with gray at his temples—bowed to Lindon. “To answer the Truegold, I could not live with myself if I allowed you to leave before your treatment was complete, especially not in this rain. The reputation of my family is at stake.”

Extending both hands, he sent a breath of golden madra toward Lindon. It not only eased his wounds, but gave him a pleasantly peaceful feeling that made him feel as though he'd had a long night's sleep.

They'd had this exchange a dozen times already over the course of the night. Lindon had returned with Yerin in his arms, both of them covered in blood, with Mercy stumbling exhaustedly after them. Lindon had no idea where Mercy had gone since, but she was unhurt.

He'd kept his spiritual sense locked on Yerin, who was in a tent of her own only two hundred yards away. *She* needed the attention.

But the Brightcrowns had scanned him, then immediately shuttled him into this tent, with a personal attendant.

“I do not need all this,” Lindon said firmly. He had initially considered his wounds merely scratches, but the course of the night had made him realize that they were deeper than he had imagined. And there were more of them. Even so, he should have been in and out in two hours.

“You are a Truegold ranked among the top one hundred combatants. It is my duty to return you to battlefield condition as soon as possible.”

That was new. “Top one hundred?” Lindon asked.

The man smiled proudly, brandishing a sheet of paper. “I received confirmation only minutes ago. The oracles convened last night, examining what they could of the battle.”

He bowed, ushering the raindrop-stained paper to Lindon. It was a listing of one hundred names, in order; at the top were the words “Truegold Combat Ranking 1-100.”

“Pardon me if you were already aware, but this is an incredible honor.

There are fewer Truegolds than Highgolds, certainly, but the top one hundred is even more competitive than the Highgold list. The truly talented do not stay at Highgold; they spend most of their lives at Truegold. And this list does not discriminate by age. The top ten are all old monsters that can compete with some Underlords.”

Toward the bottom of the list, Lindon saw his name: *Wei Shi Lindon Arelius, Path of Black Flame. Age: Eighteen. Backing: Arelius family. Number ninety-six.*

[Eighteen years old?] Dross said. [Sorry, I know I’m supposed to be focused on your rank, but...are they sure? I thought eighteen-year-old humans were supposed to be fresh-faced and youthful.]

Lindon was surprised by his age, too.

By the standards of Sacred Valley, he would be considered seventeen still, so these Blackflame oracles must have scanned his biological age. Even so, he couldn’t believe that his second autumn since leaving home had ended while he was in Ghostwater. In all that time, he had climbed higher than he had ever imagined.

Ninety-six. It was only a ranking, and he still had a long road to travel, but his spirits lifted. This was proof of how far he’d come.

He pulled on the shadesilk ribbon around his neck, hauling out the golden hammer badge. Soon, he would be trading it out for...what was the color of the badge that represented Underlord? He would have to check.

[Oh, and look who's eighty-seven!]

Drawn by Dross, Lindon scanned up the list until he saw another name.

*Yerin Arelius, Path of the Endless Sword. Age: Nineteen. Backing: Arelius family. Number eighty-seven.*

Nine places higher than his.

[You’re closing in!] Dross said. [And just to think, you've come so far since you started. I imagine.]

Lindon stared at the number next to Yerin's name. It wasn't jealousy he was feeling. He knew his power wouldn't stay the same for long, and Yerin wouldn't care what some paper said her strength was anyway. If he had to put a name to it, he would call it despair.

He had foolishly thought they were on even footing.

With her Blood Shadow, she had fought two Underlords to a standstill. Her image, spinning and dancing in sync with her Shadow, had haunted him all night. It was the most extraordinary thing he'd ever seen from her.

And they were at the same stage of advancement. He'd known he was neglecting real combat training, and now he'd dropped the entire burden on her.

Yerin's madra spiked, and his dark thoughts were cut off. She was awake.

The Brightcrown stood in front of the tent flap, bowing to him. "Pardon me, Truegold, but I couldn't possibly allow—"

Lindon pushed him aside.

He passed an open-sided tent, filled with bleeding and groaning figures as well as exhausted healers mixing concoctions or forcing out their madra. The area beneath the tent was packed solid, so there was barely room for them to walk between the beds. The steady rain soaked the feet of those on the edge, who couldn't entirely fit under the covering.

The Brightcrown man stumbled after Lindon, who marched straight for Yerin. Some of the other Brightcrowns and their assistants—each bearing the crest of a crowned oak tree—hurriedly bowed as soon as they saw him. He even saw a few servants in the dark blue Arelius uniform dragging bloody laundry.

Lindon's healer tried his best to stop him without touching him. "Please, this will ruin my reputation. I beg you to return to your tent."

"Put someone else in my tent," Lindon commanded. It was easier to assert himself, he found, when he was focused on something else. "Take three or four people out of the rain."

"Your tent has to be empty and waiting for you when you return."

Lindon still didn't look at the man. He was concentrating on a tent that looked identical to his, but which held slowly cycling Endless Sword madra.

"If I return and I find that tent empty, I will find whoever is in charge and demand that you be punished," Lindon said. Then, because he couldn't help himself, he added, "Apologies."

The man sputtered something, but he ended up leaving Lindon alone.

Lindon would have to get used to the new truth about himself. He wasn't the same person he'd been before. He was a Truegold now, and a highly ranked one at that. He could go wherever he wanted.

A young woman in the brown robes of a servant stood in front of Yerin's tent, her hair tied back in a rag, damp from the rain. She held her hands up for Lindon to wait, but Lindon brushed past her. He felt a little uncomfortable doing it, but he had to adjust to his new status. *He* decided where he could go, not her.

He ducked into the tent and froze.

Yerin sat on the bed, staring to one side. The tent was crowded with three more Brightcrowns, all sporting the glowing Goldsign, all of them women. Lindon was looking between them, so he saw Yerin in glimpses. Her tattered black robes were folded on a chair next to the bed, and her armor sat in a pile.

She had blankets pulled up to her waist, but otherwise she was completely bare. Her body was slender, her skin pale in the light of all the golden crowns, thin scars glistening in the light.

Lindon took one glance and immediately pushed back out of the tent.

Lesson learned. He couldn't go *anywhere* he wanted.

The Lowgold servant woman outside the tent gave him an icy stare. She couldn't say anything to a Truegold, but she clearly wanted to.

"Apologies," he said, bowing to cover his burning face. "I, ah, should have listened."

[Why?] Dross asked curiously.

Lindon did not answer.

Only a minute or two later, the other three healers emerged. They were led by an older woman, a Truegold with her gray hair tied up in a bun. She turned to Lindon with a serious expression.

"Lindon Arelius?" she asked. Lindon wasn't sure when that name had become commonly known, but he nodded.

"Her lifeline is severely damaged," she said in a low voice. "We have stabilized her, so it will not be extinguished tonight, but we cannot fully repair the life-force she has lost. With regular elixirs and infusions of life aura, she can live her remaining time normally, even return to the battlefield if she must."

"How much..." Lindon began, but his voice caught, and he had to start over. "How much time?"

"Two months," the woman said. "Maybe a little more or less. Then her life will be exhausted. It will be painless."

Lindon stared at the healer's face. He kept staring at the same spot even when the woman said something to comfort him, told him a treatment plan, and walked off. And when the Lowgold Brightcrown asked if he needed anything. He meant to respond, but somehow he didn't.

There was a question he wanted to ask, but he couldn't bring his thoughts together.

*Dross*, he said, and the spirit filled in the blanks.



[I know,] Dross answered, his voice uncharacteristically grave. [Yes, this is exactly what the Life Well was meant for. It would heal her. It could even take that blood spirit of hers up a notch.]

*How much would she have needed?* Lindon asked.

It didn't matter. He hadn't saved any. But he wanted to know.

[One spoonful.]

Every question he asked sharpened the pain, but he pressed on. *How much did I drink?*

[Fifty or sixty times as much, but your lifeline was healthy. Most of it went to waste, but the rest of it did reinforce you.]

Mercy had commented on his lifeline already. He had known.

*So, if I had taken those hits instead of Yerin...*

[You would have shrugged it off,] Dross said. [I'm sorry. I didn't know how much damage she'd taken before we saw her.]

Dross was using Lindon's senses. And Lindon hadn't opened his Copper sight, because the aura was too strong.

Lindon felt like he was being crushed beneath the pressure of an Underlord. He had made sure that Dross and Orthos had all the water they needed from the Life Well, because they could use it. He had ignored the rest because he hadn't seen any use for himself.

[Uh, Lindon? Are you feeling all right? I'm growing alarmed. Alarmed is a good word. 'Afraid' is another one.]

Without looking, Lindon reached out with his right arm and seized the Lowgold Brightcrown. She shook as the Remnant hand closed around her upper arm.

He turned to her, and she flinched back. Was he squeezing her too hard? No, he was being gentle. Maybe it was his face. Still, he withdrew his hand.

"A new lifeline," he said. "How do I get one?"

The Lowgold girl looked from side to side. "It's not something...I mean, you can't replace it. It's a representation of how strong your life is."

"So I could pour more life aura in?"

"Ah, no. That's like filling broken madra channels with more power. It won't fix the damage. The power will only leak out."

"*Something* restores broken lifelines," Lindon said.

The Life Well did. Northstrider can't have been the only one to have done so. And he wasn't the only Monarch in the world.

The girl rubbed the back of her neck. "If she were Lowgold, I would say

advancement. That helps everything a little, even your lifeline. But she's Truegold. This is as far as she goes.”

She looked at him as though expecting him to be angry, but he felt as though she'd pushed a mountain off his shoulders.

From her perspective, no one could count on advancing to Underlord. By most common sense, the journey of a sacred artist ended at Truegold.

But not for Yerin.

Just in case, he checked with Dross.

[Oh no, advancing to Underlord is *worlds* better than advancing to Highgold. Your body and spirit are remade.]

“Gratitude,” Lindon said, and she looked confused.

Lindon started to push his way into the tent, but hesitated. “I'm coming in,” he called, waiting for Yerin's response before entering.

She sat in the same position as before, though now she had a loose brown robe wrapped around her shoulders. She stared into her master's sword, its white blade sitting in her lap.

“I heard,” she said. “Nothing like a deadline to push you past your limits, true?” Her tone was supposed to be light, but she was forcing it.

Lindon sat on the edge of the bed and put on a brave face. “Who needs two months? You fought two Underlords at once last night. You'll be breaking through any time.”

Yerin pushed out a smile. “Yeah. Cheers and celebration for me.” Her eyes were sunken, and her face was paler than usual.

She still hadn't looked at him, staring deep into her master's blade. She was gripping the hilt hard...too hard. Her knuckles stood out white, and from Yerin, Lindon suspected that meant she was squeezing hard enough to crush rocks to dust.

He put his hand over hers, partially to comfort her, and partially because he was afraid she would hurt herself. Her grip relaxed, at least a little, and she looked up at him.

He looked into her dark, questioning eyes, and racked his brain for something to say.

What *could* he say? What could he do?

Lindon's mouth spoke before his brain had entirely confirmed the idea. “...I want to go back home.”

Her expression turned confused.

“After we're Underlords. We won't be strong enough to fight off a...

monster, or a Dreadgod, or a Monarch, or whatever's coming, but we can hold our own in the world out here. Even if nobody listens to me, we can grab my family and get out. Take them to the Blackflame Empire; Underlords here are treated like kings. We could even wander around, like you and your master used to do."

The look in Yerin's eyes shifted over a long moment, like a ship slowly turning to another course. "We've got to fight in the tournament."

"Why? We can advance on our own terms."

Anything to keep her talking.

"Did that prince chip your head? Steel sharpens steel. You want to toss away a chance to cross swords with the best in the world?" Her grip on the sword loosened further, and she was sitting straighter. "My master lost in the solo matches to Del'rek of the Shann. Said it was the sharpest battle of his life; worth more than ten years of practice on his own. And Del'rek joined up with the Eight-Man Empire."

"I *would* miss the prizes," Lindon said. Though no one had explained what the actual prizes were, they had to be substantial.

"It'll be a tall cliff to climb, but worth every inch. You make it past the first round, and the Ninecloud Court make a floating castle just for you."

Lindon started. She actually knew what the prizes were? Why had he never asked?

"If you survive the second round, you get an Archlord weapon that makes that castle look like a pig pen. Third round, that's a gift from some other faction. One of the ones you didn't come from, if you're following me. Factions compete over who can give the best gifts, so you'd be looking at the storm phoenix feathers, fruit from the Heart-Piercer Tree, thousand-year spirits...my master got a dream tablet showing a heavenly messenger swinging a sword."

"And after that?" Lindon asked. He had intended to distract Yerin, but now he was getting drawn in.

"After three rounds, we've whittled it down to eight fighters," she said. "From there, they fight solo matches, one-on-one. Everybody who makes it into the top eight gets the mark of the Uncrowned. It's like a tattoo of a broken crown, and it's unique in all the world. Anchors to your spirit, so it can never be removed. Somebody wants to fight you, you show them that, and they'll think twice. On top of that, you get personal lessons from a Sage."

"Not a Monarch?"

Yerin's head jerked back as though he'd slapped her. No, if he'd slapped her, she wouldn't have budged an inch. "You think Monarchs are like dirt farmers? If one or two of them show up to watch, and you hear a whisper of their voice, you'll be lucky. Add to that, Sages don't take disciples, so this is a once-in-your-life chance."

At Lindon's look, she added, "Most Sages. You can't pass on Sage techniques, but they're still peak Archlords. With my own eyes, I've seen my master turn down land, cloudships, Remnants, secret Path manuals, and a fistful of marriage proposals from Ladies who wanted his word on their techniques."

Yerin pulled her hand away, setting her sword aside. Some color had returned to her cheeks, and she was moving her hands when she spoke, eyes sparkling. Like the Yerin from yesterday.

She continued without his prompting. "That's top eight. Now, top four? My master talked about top four, but he scraped himself to the bone making it to the solo rounds at all. The honor and glory from top four are more than nothing; they'd stretch your name all across the heavens."

"Honor and glory are—" Lindon began, but she cut him off.

"Not your sorts of prizes, that's a truth. See if this doesn't light a fire in your shoes: the top four each get a gift from *all* the other teams. Seven gifts, each one hand-picked with your name on it. Not even mentioning that *everybody* who has ever made top four in the Uncrowned King tournament has ended up as a Sage, a Herald, or ascending to the heavens."

"What does the winner get?" Lindon asked. He realized he was leaning forward, waiting for the final prize.

Yerin leaned back against the stack of pillows behind her, folding her arms. "You're asking me, but who am I supposed to ask? Sure as the sun rising, they get something worth burning your own soul for, but I don't know what it is. And I'm not likely to find out."

Lindon's breath stopped. Had she given up? Did she expect to die before the tournament?

"First place is just a dream," she went on, and Lindon started breathing again. "Akura Fury won one year, and he's a legend. Reigan Shen won, and *he* ended up as a Monarch, though that was an age and a half ago. First place is for freaks who were born eating Truegolds alive."

"I'm surprised to hear that coming from you," Lindon pointed out. "Why fight if not to aim for victory?"

“*Victory* is making it to the solo fights at all. That's as far as my master made it, and he was older than me when he did. If I pushed that far, he'd be...I mean, I'd...”

She ran a hand roughly through her hair. “Ah, bleed and bury me if I know what I mean to say. Too soon for me to be dreaming about eighth, anyway. I've got a long trail to walk before I'm the eighth strongest anything in this Blackflame corner of nowhere.”

“Underlord is the first step,” Lindon said, as casually as he could manage.

Yerin nodded along. “Yeah, and you've got a wall in front of you, that's sure and certain.”

“*Me?*” He'd been trying to keep her from realizing how difficult *her* journey looked; he hadn't expected her to turn it around on him.

“Somebody stitch your ears shut? That prince and his...crazy bodyguard, or whatever she was...they were after you. Don't want you to make it to Underlord, I'd say, though I couldn't tell you how the prince of another country heard your name in the first place.”

Someone had directed them to him specifically, but he didn't know anyone who had contact with the Seishen Empire. It could have been Akura Charity, but she wouldn't need to act through surrogates.

“They failed,” he said. “Next time I see them, I'll be an Underlord.”

“You sound sure and certain, but they knew where to find you. Best make preparations for them to pop up at the worst time. And I...” Her face fell. Her gaze grew long again. “...you might be walking alone this time.”

Lindon spent a long moment wrestling with his thoughts, trying to figure out what to say. Dross stayed quiet and let him think, for which he was grateful.

What does he tell her? Does he say he can't go on without her? Or how there was no need to worry, because they'll make it?

He realized she had returned her hand to her sword, and he had never moved his. His fingers rested on hers.

She looked into his eyes again. He couldn't read anything from her expression, but she was waiting for him.

[He is truly an artist when it comes to lurking outside doorways,] Dross said. [Do you think he'd teach me?]

Though Dross had to use Lindon's senses, the spirit seemed to get far more use out of them than Lindon did. Lindon felt nothing until he directed his perception backwards and found a presence of pure madra poised outside

the tent. There was a train of people, of all different strengths and madra types, stretching out behind him.

Eithan was waiting for his opportunity. He was going to burst in.

That would be a relief. Lindon wouldn't have to figure out what to say, and it would be Eithan's fault.

*Tell him to wait*, Lindon said. He couldn't use the Underlord as an excuse. He had too much to say to Yerin, and now was the time. If he didn't say it now, he wasn't sure he'd ever get the chance.

Dross projected something to Eithan, and Lindon could feel Eithan's surprise. The Underlord didn't enter immediately, which meant Lindon had his moment. He had to say something now.

"Yerin," he said, "this won't stop us. You're going to be fine."

It wasn't what he needed to say.

He could feel it, and so could Yerin. She forced another smile, pulling her hand back. "Couldn't beat me this easy."

The silence after her words seemed to stretch. His hand sat dead and heavy on the sheets next to her.

[I don't know what the right thing to say was, but that was wrong.]

The entrance bulged inward.

Lindon stood up and sent a pulse of unshaped pure madra at the entrance. "Stop!" he shouted.

Eithan slowly retreated, the flap sliding back into place.

Yerin was frowning at the entrance, but Lindon sat down and grabbed her hand in both of his. He thought he might have been better off using only his real hand rather than his Remnant replacement, but there was no turning back now. If he lost his courage, he'd never regain it.

"Yerin, I don't know *what* I'd do if you were gone. When I think about the future, you're in it." He didn't know what he was trying to say, but the more the words spilled out, the easier they came. "I don't care if we go home, or stay here, or end up wandering in the wilderness, as long as you're with me."

He was surprised to realize that his eyes were hot. "Please...I don't want you to leave me behind."

He was shaking, and every word had felt wrong. He had messed it up, and now he couldn't read her expression, so he didn't know how badly. She hadn't pulled away from him yet, so maybe he'd have another chance.

"Well," Eithan said from behind him, "I think—"

One of Yerin's Goldsigns emerged from her back, pointed at the

Underlord. "Eithan, keep your teeth together or I will skin you like a deer." She looked back at Lindon. "I want to meet your family," she said. "And I want to see the parts of Sacred Valley that aren't trying to kill me."

Hope sparked inside him, and some of his nerves faded. Her gaze was intense, and her grip on his hand was slowly getting tighter. "I've never seen much of it outside the clan."

"I don't care. *And* I want us both in this tournament. Wishing for top eight might stretch the heavens, but top sixteen would be a gem and a half."

"...out of how many?" he asked, but she was already moving on.

"And I need you to be an Underlord. Get your brain spirit to dive around in there and dig up whatever you need, or I'll be squeezing your soul for secrets myself."

"You first," he responded seriously.

She gave him a lopsided grin, and the old Yerin was back once again. She squeezed his hands one more time, then released him. "You've grown some kind of spine, if you think you've got room to worry about somebody else."

Lindon felt something and turned to see Eithan leaning over them, his fingertips pressed together, smiling like a madman. "Yes," he hissed. "Good, good, *very* good."

[You know, it's nice to see someone with such a positive outlook on the world,] Dross said. [Positivity, that's what you need.]

*Would you call that positivity?*

A second Goldsign emerged from Yerin. "I thought you put a higher price on your skin."

Eithan recoiled. "Not my skin! It's my second-best feature!"

Lindon still felt at least a dozen presences waiting outside, so he stood up and pushed open the tent. It was something to do to distract him from thinking about the fact that Eithan had heard every word he'd said. If he dwelled on that too much, his shame would burn him up from the inside out.

"If you don't mind me asking, who are all these people?"

A long train of servants in dozens of different colors wove throughout the rows of medical tents, each of them carrying a tray piled high with food. Some of them pushed carts.

Eithan followed him out of the tent, holding it open so Yerin could see. "I was hoping to pop in with a surprise. On our way out, I came across an Underlady from the Seishen Kingdom who had been preparing herself a personal feast from the bounty of the Night Wheel Valley's forests. After we

had a little talk, she kindly donated it to our cause.”

Lindon felt a silent moment of pity for the unknown Seishen Underlady.

“It is time, everyone!” Eithan announced, directing the servants one-handed as though he were conducting an orchestra. “Come, come, these people are hungry!”

Servants slid between and among the wounded, handing them plates of food. Lindon expected the healers to protest, but he could sense the spiritual weight of the food himself: slices of meat rich with strengthening blood aura, crystalline vegetables woven with healing strands of life, shining fruits that nourished the soul, jugs that emanated the feel of elixirs.

Eithan held out his free hand, and a servant in Arelius colors delivered him a massive platter piled with enough food for at least five people. A jeweled pill sat on a satin cover, glistening like a ruby. A stoppered bottle sat next to it, leaking shining green smoke.

He swept back into the tent, trusting Lindon to follow. He replaced the flower next to Yerin's bed with the tray, setting the plant on the ground.

“The meat increases the density of blood aura, strengthening the body. The vegetables cleanse the body, the fruits cleanse and restore the spirit, and also there's some rice in there. Rice is good for you. The pill is a Flowering Heart pill, and the bottle contains a Lifeseed Elixir. This will give you more life and blood aura than any single human body could possibly hold.”

Lindon saw a faint hope in Yerin's eyes, and it reflected what he felt himself.

She sat up straighter. “Will this...”

“Heal you? I'm afraid not.” He didn't sound terribly concerned. “Damage to your lifeline is not so easily cured. What it *will* do is get you back into fighting shape quickly...and more than that. It will contain excess aura that you can do with as you wish; feel free to feed it to whichever spiritual parasite you'd like.”

He swept a hand toward the tray. “Eat, my child! Eat and grow strong.”

*How much power is in that meat?* Lindon asked Dross, watching Yerin tear a chunk off a bone with her teeth. He had passed out the first time he had tried a bite of Silverfang Carp meat.

[A little less than in the Carp, but still a deadly dose,] Dross said grimly. [She's in for seizures, organ failure, paralyzing pain...]

Lindon tensed, but he held himself back when Eithan looked calm.

Yerin took another bite. Then another. Then she took a sip of elixir-laced



water.

[...unless she has a stronger body than you did, of course. Then she'll be fine. You're very tense right now; you need to relax.]

Lindon accepted a plate of his own, which was less than a quarter the size of Yerin's, and dug in.

Eithan sidled up next to him, whispering into his ear. "By sheer coincidence, I have also stumbled upon a gift for you."

Lindon edged away from him. "Please don't whisper like that."

"I wasn't talking to *you*. To your purple friend."

Dross slid out of Lindon's spirit, materializing in his floating one-eyed form. His mouth—full of tiny fangs—moved when he spoke, even though he spoke in the mind and spirit as always. [For me? Oh, that's flattering.] He glanced from side to side. [It's not *food*, is it? Not that I don't appreciate food, but I don't have a stomach, that's all. Or a digestive system of any kind.]

Eithan flourished his arm in a grand gesture. "This is too humble a place in which to present your gift, but not to worry: I will bring you to the proper stage!"

Dross made a disgusted sound. [Where am I supposed to put a stage?]

## Chapter 12

Mercy had worked hard to find a spot to herself. The land around the Blackflame capital was packed for miles, and she didn't want to go too far from Yerin. She ended up worming herself between medical tents, sitting with her back against a pile of supplies.

She spread a cloth beneath her so she didn't have to sit directly on the mud, draping another over her head to keep off the rain. Cold water still seeped through, but it was as dry as she was going to get without taking up space in one of the tents.

She cradled Harmony's axe in both hands, eyes and perception fixed on the feast happening only a few dozen yards away.

Yerin was seriously injured. She needed to advance, or she would die. Mercy yearned to help...and there was *one thing* she could do to make a difference.

But she couldn't bring herself to do it.

Mercy consoled herself with the thought that surely, Yerin wouldn't need her help. She would reach Underlord soon, and everything would be all right.

Guilt pricked Mercy like a thorn. For the sake of her own selfishness, she was leaving a friend to suffer.

A silver-and-purple owl fluttered down to land by her.

"Are you after him because he killed Harmony?" Mercy asked quietly.

"He or that beast of his left him to die," the owl responded in Akura Charity's voice. "They sealed the exit."

Another thorn pierced Mercy's heart. Before they had reached the island, she'd had no idea that anyone in the Akura family would be anywhere near Ghostwater. Even if she had known, there would have been nothing she could do about it. But she still felt somehow responsible.

"Was it my fault he was there?"

The owl flapped up to land on something invisible in midair...and then the veil was lifted, and Akura Charity stood with the owl perched on her

shoulder.

She wore the ordinary, even rough, clothes of a peasant worker. A cloth belt tied around a brown dress, with a rag to keep her hair back. With her spirit so thoroughly veiled, she might have been a young Lowgold servant.

“If you hadn't left the family, it's possible you would have been sent in his place,” the Sage told her. “But it's also possible we would have sent him to gain experience on his own. *You* didn't need any help to reach Underlord.”

No, she had needed help, just not in the same way Harmony did.

Mercy looked to Charity. Her 'aunt' was actually her grand-niece, but the Sage was so much older that she had always referred to Mercy as a niece. Mercy felt more comfortable with this arrangement. It would have been too strange to have a woman a hundred and fifty years older than her call her 'Aunt Mercy.'

“Are you all right?” Mercy asked. Harmony was Charity's grand-nephew. She had watched him grow up. It must have gouged out her heart to be right there and unable to save him.

Even though the Heart Sage should have absolute control over her own thoughts and feelings, she was still human.

Charity looked away, revealing an unusually troubled expression. “Lindon could not have stopped me from saving Harmony. Nor, I think, would he have wanted to. I could not see into Ghostwater clearly at the end, but I believe it was Harmony that pushed their conflict to the level of a feud. You know he could be...competitive.”

Harmony had shattered a statue and denounced her publicly, breaking off their engagement when she had defeated him in swordsmanship in front of a crowd. It had been embarrassing, but also a relief.

Harmony had not lived up to his name.

“Someone stopped *you*?” Mercy asked. Who even could?

“I suspect Ghostwater's owner is still alive,” Charity said grimly, and Mercy's eyes widened.

Northstrider, the legendary dragon-eating Monarch. He had been a walking myth since before Mercy's own mother had risen to power.

“Poor Harmony,” Mercy said. She hadn't liked him much, but she had known him. She didn't want to think of him locked in a crumbling world.

Charity nodded. “Whoever was at fault, the Blackflame boy still intervened with the Akura clan. He needs to know that he cannot get away lightly.”

Mercy held out the axe. "Take this back. Please stop sending the Seishen Kingdom Underlords after him. That's not teaching him a lesson, that's just cruel."

The rain running down Charity's face made her look more real than she often did. More mortal. She tapped her chin thoughtfully. "Do you think I am a cruel person?"

"No, I don't mean that. But...I think you can be, if you want to be."

"I did not send young Meira and the prince after Lindon as a punishment. I am finding the best competitors for the Uncrowned King tournament. Eithan Arelius' two apprentices are the most appropriate opponents for the two Seishen Underlords. It will push them all forward, resulting in a net gain for us. Indeed, it has already done so."

Mercy's guilt turned to anger. "Yerin was badly hurt."

"Advancing will heal her. I cannot imagine a better incentive to reach Underlord quickly."

Mercy was familiar with Charity's Book of the Silver Heart. It contained seven techniques of shadow and dreams, so Charity lived in a world of abstractions. Of thoughts and visions. Her plans were so far beyond Mercy that Mercy could never comprehend them, but she tended to lose sight of other human beings.

Mercy's anger faded as quickly as it had come, as it usually did. "I would call *that* cruel. And no matter how you look at it, you put two Underlords against two Truegolds. That's not a fair competition."

"You were there."

"I don't count," Mercy said bitterly. There was a lot to enjoy about her exile from the family, but it was tough to relish the feeling of helplessness. And yet, if she were to take advancement resources from Lindon and Yerin, she would feel like a rich woman robbing a pauper.

"Of course you do," Charity said. "And the Truegolds acquitted themselves well. If the roles were reversed, with your friends at Underlord and their enemies at Truegold, how do you think their skirmish would have gone?"

"Yerin and Lindon would have left them in pieces," Mercy said with a sigh. They could be ruthless, at times, but no more so than her own family.

Charity reached up to run a hand down her owl's back. Maybe the spirit was more than a technique after all, because it leaned in to the motion, cooing softly. The rain passed straight through it. "Kiro has a noble bloodline and the

finest tutors his nation can afford, but he is at the end of his mentality and his talent. He may reach Overlord someday, but barring a substantial evolution, that will be his limit. Meira's talent and skill are exceptional, but she is blinded by obsession. She has created chains in her own mind that are difficult to break. I would like to use them to push your teammates to advance, which would fill my quota. Or perhaps they will be pushed to the brink instead and exceed my expectations of them. Who can say?"

"It seems like a lot of suffering," Mercy said, looking out over the tents full of wounded. The rain had slackened slightly, and the food Eithan's servants brought had done much for the atmosphere. And maybe for the injuries; Mercy heard fewer groans now than before.

"They compete because there is a limited opportunity, and everyone wants it badly enough to spill blood for it. Not because I make them."

Mercy looked at her skeptically. That was not a strong argument. "When you throw a steak between two starving dogs, is it their fault for fighting over it?"

She turned, brushing water from her forehead, and looked in the same direction: at the many tents. "I concede that I *may* have leaned too hard on your friends in part because of your relationship to them."

Another thorn jabbed into Mercy's heart. She wanted to be outraged, but she wasn't entirely surprised. That was as much Mercy's fault as Charity's; the Sage could afford a heavier hand, because Mercy could embrace her former power and save Lindon and Yerin whenever she wanted. Mercy's mother would encourage such tactics.

"Therefore," Charity continued, "I acknowledge that I owe you a favor. Call it in as you wish."

Mercy looked up to the other woman in surprise, watching Charity's flawless face looking down on the mortals in front of her. A favor from a Sage was no small matter. This had to be a concession on Charity's part.

"Thank you, Aunt Charity."

"The boy still owes the family for Harmony. I can't let that go entirely, and he may be useful."

"I understand," Mercy said. As long as Charity took a strict stance, to show that the Akura clan can't be opposed lightly, Lindon could be let off with nothing greater than a proverbial slap.

Mercy had thought the Sage would melt back into thin air at that, and so she was surprised when the other woman spoke. "You were young for the last

Uncrowned King tournament.”

“I was eight,” Mercy said, smiling at the memory. She had spent most of the tournament in the head family's floating platform, watching a projection of the fights. She hadn't been interested in the fighting at all, and had spent most of the time trying to catch a glimpse of her mother. Who, she later found out, had never come in the first place.

“This will put the last one to shame. All of the current Monarchs will be in attendance.” Charity looked deeper at Mercy, as though to ensure that her message was clear. “All of them.”

Mercy shook. It was hard enough for her to get an audience with her own mother. She didn't know if anyone alive had ever been in the presence of *all* the Monarchs at once.

“What's happening?” Mercy asked.

“The movements of Monarchs are beyond even my understanding, but something last year disturbed the flow of fate. Many things that we once thought were certain are no longer so. One Dreadgod has risen early, and the others are stirring.”

Charity's purple eyes shone through the rain. “We have no records of the last time all four of them rose together. It resulted in the eradication of the previous generation of Monarchs.”

That was too heavy for Mercy, and fortunately far above her level. So she kept her tone light. “Good thing we're having a tournament to keep everyone's spirits up!”

At the moment, Charity looked as though she had never heard a joke in her life and wasn't looking forward to the first time. “War is coming. If not with the Dreadgods, then with each other; now that the future is uncertain, there is no trusting anyone. This is our chance to demonstrate our power and to raise up a new generation of warriors.”

“...I was only joking,” Mercy muttered.

“We must *at least* fill one spot in the top eight of the individual matches, to show that our next generation is as strong as that of the others. That is no small order. That would be a challenge even for you at the height of your power, because you can be sure that the others will do everything they can to put forth the winning candidate. This is also a chance to take power from the others, in the form of the prizes. If we do not hold to at least that standard, it will mean losing territory. We will have less of a voice in the operation of the world. And perhaps it will mean a loss to humanity as a whole.”

Charity was nothing if not vigilant against the non-human factions, but Mercy understood why. The Akura clan were not the only Monarch faction on this continent; they shared it with Seshethkunaaz, King of Dragons. His territory was a lawless jungle where the weak were food, and only strength reigned.

Not somewhere where human civilization could flourish.

“You only need three!” Mercy said brightly. “Between the Blackflame Empire and the Seishen Kingdom, there must be three that won't embarrass us. And who will care about the vassal states, anyway? There are plenty of extraordinary talents in my generation of the family.”

“There was *one* extraordinary talent in your generation,” Charity said.

Mercy coughed and shifted her eyes.

“Your mother won't say so, but she regrets letting you go. When she did, she thought we had plenty of time and that a journey on your own would be good for you. We no longer have such luxury, but she cannot revoke her given word.”

Charity was none-too-subtly trying to guilt Mercy into embracing her destiny and returning, and it was working. At least a little. It hurt to think that she had pushed her responsibility on others.

“How's my brother?” Mercy asked.

“He feels that his sister abandoned him,” Charity said, the owl on her shoulder giving a whistle. “He is in pain, and he has let that pain drive him to try and fill your shoes. In doing so, he has worked tirelessly, and has finally reached Underlord.”

Mercy let Harmony's axe slip. She tried to rise to her feet, stumbled, and ended up having to brace herself against a barrel. “Underlord! That's amazing! Can he compete?”

“He is currently fighting the heirs of the other family branches for the right to fight on the Akura team.”

Mercy's heart was now so full of spikes that she could tear it out of her chest and call it a hedgehog. She *had* abandoned her little brother.

But no matter how Charity framed it, Mercy had plenty of reasons to walk away from the Akura clan. At least for a time.

Mercy met the Sage face-to-face, staring her down as though they were equals. “You know it isn't healthy. The family isn't fighting for a cause, like you or Uncle Fury. We're fighting to keep power over those beneath us, and for approval from those above us. That isn't right.”

Charity met her gaze, and Mercy felt the strong, gentle, ocean-deep power of the Heart Sage behind it. “You could change that. You could lead the family in a better direction, regardless of their personal motivations, as Fury and I do. On your own, you lead only yourself.”

Mercy stayed silent. Charity's words battered at her.

“If you returned without being forced, it would go a long way toward demonstrating your maturity. You are not the only one who has had trouble facing the truth of yourself on the brink of becoming an Underlady.” The face of a Sage cracked, and then Charity was a concerned aunt looking down at her niece. She placed a hand on Mercy's arm. “And you must surely be frustrated by these restrictions. Such a weak soul. A body you can barely control. Come back.”

Mercy pulled away, thoughts whirling.

She liked it on her own, but she still wanted to go back. Was she fooling herself by thinking she could accomplish anything out here?

“I can't lead anyone,” she finally said, “if I'm always fighting for mother's approval like the rest of them.”

Charity tucked a stray strand of hair behind her ear, still looking at Mercy with motherly concern. “The revelation is nothing more than a trigger. It means accepting who you *are*, not who you will always be. You can still grow and evolve afterwards.”

“But I *don't* accept myself the way I am.”

The peaceful sounds of the rain settled around them, along with the murmur of the people in the tents nearby. Those had gradually transformed from the cries of the wounded to the laughter and muttered conversation of a feast.

Charity shook her head, letting out a long sigh. “I suppose I understand. We all need to see the world outside the family sooner or later. But it's a shame.”

Shadows started to devour Charity from the feet, slowly moving up. Mercy sensed nothing; either this was one of her mysterious Sage powers, or her madra control was at such a level that she could completely avoid Mercy's senses. Probably both.

“Fury has yet to make his selection for our primary team, but you were to lead, and I had chosen Harmony to be the second. If your brother Pride can replace you, that still leaves an empty space for Fury. And one for me.”

The shadows had reached her neck, and her face started to fade away.



“And I can fill that slot however I want...”

Her vivid purple eyes faded last, along with the echo of her voice.

Mercy shivered. “That's spooky, Aunt Charity, stop that. And what do you mean?”

She was probably still around, veiled and invisible, but Mercy could neither see nor sense anything.

Only the wind answered her.

“Aunt Charity? ...Charity?”

The silver-and-purple owl fluttered and flew away.

## Chapter 13

Since flying was temporarily forbidden, it took Eithan all day to lead Lindon through the massive camp outside the city walls and to Fisher Gesha. By the time they arrived, the sun was setting.

Dross had spent the entire journey trying to guess what his gift was and trick Eithan into giving him hints. His guesses had ranged from ‘a mind sword’ to ‘an egg that hatches into a monster.’

During their time in the Night Wheel Valley, Fisher Gesha had finished constructing her barn...and, in fact, had mounted it on massive purple spider legs like the ones she used to walk. Her mobile Soulsmith foundry had roamed around to provide service to the entire Blackflame camp.

Now, the barn sat with its legs withdrawn amidst the packed sea of refugees around Blackflame City.

Eithan ignored the 'Closed for Business' sign and pushed through the door, striding in as though into his own home.

Gesha stood hovering in the middle of the room on her spider-drudge, which was suspended from the ceiling by its own extended legs. She held a lens up to one eye, through which she examined a dangling Remnant's corpse. It looked like a donkey fashioned of rainbows, and it bled motes of multicolored essence up into the air. If not for the scripted strips of cloth she'd wrapped all over it, the dead matter would have dissolved completely.

The tiny woman spoke without looking. “Are you trying to get beat, hm? Closed! The sign says closed! I do not work at night.”

When she did finally look at them, her one eye magnified because of the lens over it, she seemed disappointed. “If a customer was rude enough to come in at this hour, I would give them a beating. Who should I beat now?”

Eithan gestured grandly to Lindon. “By all means, satisfy yourself! But meanwhile, I have an experiment for you.”

Gesha's drudge released the ceiling one leg at a time, driving its spiked feet into grooves in the walls as it slowly made its way down. Its central body

remained steady as it lowered.

After only a breath or two, the construct reached the ground and skittered over to Eithan. The legs extended, raising Gesha until she could squint into Eithan's face from equal height. "You have another Underlord for me to shoot, do you?"

That caught Lindon's attention, but Eithan laughed it off. "I'm afraid I'm not up to anything quite so much fun. Dross, it's time."

Dross spun out of Lindon, his single eye shining. [Oh! Is it a horse? I bet it's a horse.]

Eithan reached into his outer robe and pulled out a shallow, slender box. It was so wide that Lindon wondered how Eithan could possibly keep it in a pocket without it showing.

It was impossible, he realized. And this wasn't the first time that Eithan had pulled something seemingly out of thin air.

He was either hiding these things somehow, or he had a void key of his own. And drawing from his pocket was his way of disguising the key itself.

Lindon needed to figure out a way to do that himself.

Eithan met Dross' eye, resting his fingers on the top of the box. "Within this box rests the key to unlocking your gift."

[You know what, never mind, I couldn't do anything with a horse. Stupid idea. If it's a horse, don't tell me.]

With a grand gesture, Eithan whipped open the lid, revealing two rows of scales. Ten in total. They were shaped like coins and stamped with the crest of the Blackflame Empire, Forged from purplish madra that swam with vague images. They gave off a hazy, illusory light. Dream madra.

They radiated the power of a Truegold, which made them high-grade scales. Valuable, but not the best Eithan could have afforded.

If Eithan had made them travel all day and visit Fisher Gesha just so he could hand Dross a box of scales, Lindon was going to set him on fire.

[Ooooooh, dream madra! This is...very exciting, but...are you sure there isn't more to it?]

Eithan picked up one of the scales and held it out to Dross. "Why don't you try cycling one? You might like it."

Dross' eye swiveled to Lindon as though looking for approval, but he snapped up the scale between his teeth before Lindon could say anything.

[Mmm ga mmph muph,] he said.

Did having something in his mouth really stop him from talking clearly?

Or was he imitating humans?

Dross slurped up the scale, making an exaggerated gulping sound and then closing his eye. He started to shimmer with a violet light, and Lindon could feel madra passing through his channels and into his core.

[Yes, yes, I think I *do* like this. It's kind of a tingly feeling.]

“This is only the key,” Eithan reminded him. “I want you at your peak condition before I try my experiment. Can you show Lindon an illusion?”

Gesha let her drudge walk her over to a nearby table, where she started polishing a tool. “Do they need to be in my place of work?” she said loudly. “No. Bothering me at all hours. Could have come and found me when I was needed, done all the rest of this outside.”

[Anything specific?] Dross asked.

“Dealer's choice,” Eithan responded.

Dross thought for a minute, and suddenly Lindon saw a horse burst through the doors. It wasn't a very convincing horse; it was largely transparent, and as it tossed its head, sparkles flew from its mane. It trotted around the room, demonstrating that it was as long as a wagon train and had sixteen legs.

[Majestic creatures.]

“How is it, Lindon?” Eithan asked.

“It's a beautiful horse,” Lindon said to Dross, “but it isn't quite realistic.”

[Well, maybe I didn't get the shading down. Or the shape. It's really a lot easier if I have something to model it on.]

“Keep cycling,” Eithan instructed, then turned to Gesha. “Fisher, I apologize for the delay. Could you give Lindon a project he might complete, given a little experimentation? Something with the materials you have here.”

Fisher Gesha grumbled, looking Lindon sharply in the eye. Without a word, she let him know that if this ended up being a waste of her time, he would be the one to suffer.

But in the end, she popped open a series of boxes, laying out the ingredients for a simple construct. First, a crimson Truegold-level fire binding shaped like a thin, twisting corkscrew, which hissed as it sat on the table. Second, three collections of dead matter, like piles of Remnant bones: one pile white, one gray, and one striped in multiple colors that she had no doubt stripped from the rainbow Remnant that day. Finally, she set down a Forged circle of madra the rough size and shape of a scale: the sample of the customer's madra.

“The customer would like an explosive construct that will detonate when he wants it to, with minimal power loss, and of course without exploding in his pocket, hm? However, he has brought us only one binding to work with. What would you do?”

Lindon knew the problem. He had to test the interactions between the binding, his own madra, and the sample from the customer without destroying the binding itself. Then he had to try it with all three types of dead matter, choosing the best one. Incompatibility might result in weakening the binding to Highgold or Lowgold output, effectively wasting the Truegold technique. But instability could result in the construct exploding on its own.

If he had three bindings, he could be fairly confident of success. If not in his own safety. With only one...

“Apologies, but I can't do it. I would need a drudge.” A drudge would be able to test each sample in detail, giving him a much more thorough understanding of the composition and how they should interact.

“Hold that thought!” Eithan said. “Instead, use your perception to sense each piece deeply. Get a complete feel for it, and how they relate to one another, as though you were the drudge yourself.”

A still-cycling Dross cracked his eye and drifted slightly closer, as though he found the task intriguing but didn't want to admit it.

This was an exercise in futility, and Lindon looked to Fisher Gesha for support, but she gestured for Lindon to get on with it. He would never be able to duplicate all the functions of a drudge himself. If he could, there would be no need for drudges.

But he tried, spending five minutes apiece on the binding, the customer's sample, and all three piles of dead matter.

At the end of the process, he had a guess, but it was like guessing how to glue together a broken vase using only his sense of touch. One of the piles had come from a force Remnant; would force madra add the right punch to the fire binding, or so much that it canceled out the flame? Would the rainbow Remnant's lingering resentment spitefully interfere with the bomb's activation, or not? He couldn't tell.

He pointed to the third pile, the white parts that looked like a disassembled claw and felt like razor-sharp wind. “This matter in a shell around the binding, bound with pure madra, should have minimal interference with the customer's madra.”

Gesha's wrinkled face was a mask, giving him no hint if he had succeeded

or failed. She turned to Eithan.

“Dross,” Eithan said, “did you still sense what Lindon felt?”

Dross' eye opened, and he frowned at Eithan. [How could I? I'm all the way over here. I would have to reach into his memory and...oh, never mind, I actually did. Sorry, I was paying attention to something else.]

“If you would, please simulate the experiment in Lindon's head.”

Dross helped Lindon visualize the experiment. Lindon saw himself taking the white Remnant pieces and Forging them into a shell around the corkscrew binding. The whole thing turned a pink color, bound with his pure madra, and sealed into a shape like a lumpy stone. He rolled it across the floor and activated it with the sample of the customer's madra, and it detonated violently, blasting a crater into the floor and cracking the walls and ceiling, filling the room with smoke.

In the vision, Lindon felt no impact, only observing the successful explosion.

[It's a very nice image,] Dross said, [but I couldn't tell you if it's what would *really* happen. Here, look at this.]

The scene repeated successfully with the gray dead matter. And with the one made out of rainbows. *And* when Lindon sealed the construct with Blackflame, which changed the entire nature of the experiment.

[See, I can make it show any result I want. Couldn't even tell you which one was most likely to work.]

Lindon sighed and opened his eyes. “He will tire himself out at this rate. The only way he'll be able to accurately project the experiment is by using my senses to understand all the madra completely. And if I could do that, I wouldn't need him.”

[That seems deliberately hurtful.]

“He's still a great help,” Lindon hurriedly added, “just like before. But he can't replace a drudge.”

Eithan smiled as if Lindon had stepped into his trap. “So he's lacking knowledge of madra aspects and how they interact.”

[You know, it's nice that someone pays attention and speaks properly. Hey, what do you have there?]

Eithan held up a ball of spinning copper plates. He caught a glimpse of colored lights flashing from between the plates themselves.

Lindon's heart leaped. The Arelius family library had all the information about Paths and techniques they had collected over generations. It could

simulate hundreds, maybe thousands, of different Paths and their permutations. Lindon had missed it ever since leaving Serpent's Grave.

"I was surprised to find it here as well," Eithan said. "Cassias carried it with him when he left Serpent's Grave, and I...borrowed it. This is your gift, Dross." He held up the ball of copper in one hand. "Dive in, and learn what you can."

With a gasp, Dross gleefully leapt in and vanished, like a child into a pond.

The light at the center of the spinning copper turned purple, and Lindon heard Dross' exclamations of wonder echoing out from the ancient construct.

He couldn't help but worry. "He has consumed a lot of other memory constructs. You don't think he'll empty it out or ruin it somehow?"

"If he can break this," Eithan said, "then he is welcome to do so."

Dross emerged from the library, gasping like a drowning man. [No, this is too much! It's too much! It's like being part of the tree again, only there's no space for me, and everything's moving too fast! I think I'm going to be sick.]

Eithan shoved another scale into his mouth. "The deeper you can go, the better."

Many of the information constructs that Dross had absorbed back in Ghostwater were left by Soulsmiths, so he had a solid foundation in Soulsmithing, but their memories were fragmented and often contradictory. The more Dross learned, the more connections he would be able to make. Or so he and Lindon suspected.

Dross spent a few moments gasping for breath—though surely he neither needed air nor had any lungs—then nodded, diving back inside.

A few minutes passed, during which Lindon and Fisher Gesha speculated on what changes Dross would experience, while Eithan sat nearby with a content smile. Then one of Dross' stubby purple arms emerged, quivering, from the construct. He seized the edge of the copper, sluggishly dragging himself out.

Lindon extended a hand, and Dross rested limply on it, face-down. He felt like a damp rag, and was a little too big to fit entirely in Lindon's hand, but he wasn't heavy.

[No more,] Dross said. [That's all I can take. I need to digest.] He groaned.

"While you're digesting, why don't you try our little experiment again?" Eithan suggested.

Dross slowly dissolved, slipping back into Lindon's hand and up to his spot at the base of his skull.

Dream madra filled Lindon's head.

Fisher Gesha and Eithan vanished. Otherwise, the room existed in complete detail, so that Lindon couldn't tell whether his eyes were open or closed. He moved over to the table, closing one hand around the binding.

This time, he could visualize the experiment with perfect clarity. The white madra was actually a dud, and would not detonate at all. He tried it with the force madra, and the bomb went off early.

He repeated the experiment six more times.

The actual solution was a shell of the rainbow madra, but if he used too much, he would smother the binding and weaken the explosion. The shell should be mostly hollow, with only a few columns connecting the binding inside to the outside. The whole thing transformed into a smooth ball that was fifteen different shimmering shades of red.

Completely stable, totally compatible with the customer's madra, and it expressed a power even greater than the binding alone.

Dross released him, and Lindon could feel the spirit's exhaustion after holding the simulation for so long.

Eithan and Gesha both asked Lindon how it had gone. Without answering them, he moved to the table.

He had to be very careful to move exactly as he had in the vision, which was trickier than he'd thought. Without the enhancement Dross' presence gave to his concentration, he would have slipped and blown up the table.

In fact, Fisher Gesha tried to stop him more than once; he wasn't supposed to actually perform the experiment without safety gear. Eithan stopped her, and Lindon continued working. He was afraid that if he let his focus slip for even a moment, he'd lose what he had learned.

He finished in only a few minutes, and the final product looked exactly like it had in his dream. It was so smooth and easy, it was like magic.

He stared at the construct. Gesha stared at it. Her spiritual sense brushed out.

"Beautiful," she said. "Did you take in the Remnant of some famous Soulsmith, hm?"

Together, they stared at the bomb some more before she halfheartedly smacked his arm. "This is a cheat. You're cheating."

"Apologies. I will—"



“No, no, cheat some more.” She cackled, rushing to another box. “We're making another cannon!”

Lindon's thoughts ran to what Yerin had said. What if he *did* have to fight Kiro again before reaching Underlord?

He looked down at his right arm. The jagged, angular Remnant arm was losing its luster. The white material was patchy where he had hastily repaired it with hunger bindings taken from dreadbeasts. It had been effective in peeling away Kiro's armor, but he was supposed to lose it when he advanced to Underlord.

He would rather keep it. He and Fisher Gesha made it together, and hunger madra was supposed to be special. He had ideas for it.

Dross was murmuring something in his head about sleep, but he asked the spirit one last question.

*How do I reinforce my arm to withstand the advancement to Underlord?*

[Easy question. No problem. You need a source of Lord-level hunger madra. Now be quiet and let me soak up the aura around your brain.]

Gesha was still pulling pieces out of various crates, laughing to herself, and Eithan looked like a cat who had delivered a dead mouse to its owner.

Lindon pressed his fists together, saluting Eithan. “Gratitude. This is more than I can repay.”

“It's more than you can repay...right now.”

That had an ominous ring to it, but Lindon pushed through. “Nonetheless, though I am ashamed to even ask, I must beg you for one more favor. Would it be possible for you to get me the Archstone?”

Eithan's eyebrows went up, and his gaze shot to Lindon's arm.

“I know you want to keep the arm, but that's quite a request. You're talking about a potent weapon stolen from an ancient, cursed labyrinth and confiscated from a traitor to our Empire's leadership. It's in the Emperor's personal vault. Do you think I can do the impossible?”

Lindon had known that was unlikely. “Apologies. In that case, do you know another source of Lord-level hunger madra? Maybe a powerful dreadbeast?” No sooner had he asked the question than he realized he should have asked Fisher Gesha; she used to hunt dreadbeasts back in the Desolate Wilds.

Eithan looked unaccountably disappointed. “Wrong!” he shouted. “You were supposed to say, 'Yes, Eithan, of course you can do the impossible.' I'll have it to you in a few weeks.”

Lindon stared at him doubtfully. Cut off from the Arelius family as he was, he was having trouble raising money for their regular advancement resources. If he had a strong enough connection to the Emperor to get a treasure from his personal vault, how could he be lacking scales?

Though he had no choice but to rely on Eithan. Dipping his head, he said, “Thank you. That is more than I deserve.”

Eithan folded his arms and looked down on Lindon proudly. “I look forward to the day when you and I can stand together as equals.” He pointed one finger to the ceiling. “Now, I have not a moment to delay if I am to rob the Emperor blind! To the vaults!” He turned and strode out of the room, his turquoise outer robe shimmering behind him like a jeweled cloak.

Leaving Lindon and Gesha in the foundry, to explore the limits of Dross' newfound power.

Gesha clutched so many tools, pieces, and containers to her chest that Lindon couldn't see her face. She spilled them over the table, revealing a wild expression.

“Sacred instruments,” she said. “Can he make weapons, hm?”

“Can you help me make weapons?” Lindon asked aloud.

[Let me sleeeeeeeep,] Dross moaned to both of them. [And of course I can. So long as I have blueprints.]

Lindon wasted not a second in tearing open his void key. “I'm getting my Skysworn armor.”

She rubbed her hands together, laughing gleefully. “Thanks to the Emperor, I've got enough blueprints to choke a dragon. Boy, you are going to make me a fortune.”

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Yerin stared up at the ceiling. Lindon had been gone for hours, and even the Brightcrown healers had drifted away. For the first time since the battle, she was alone with her thoughts.

At least, she *wished* it was just her thoughts.

She had stuffed herself with the food and elixirs Eithan had sent her, and they'd done a mountain of good, but she hadn't finished even half of the platter. The rest sat there, cold now. And every few minutes, her Blood Shadow would try to lunge for it.

This time, instead of holding it back, she let it go.

The Shadow surged to life, flowing into a red mirror of her. It wore her sliced-up robes, not her Skysworn armor, and it held its six bladed Goldsigns

out like the legs of a spider. It dove for the food, seizing a pitcher of life-infused water and pouring it into its mouth. Its jaw extended unnaturally wide, and it drained the pitcher in seconds, tossing the empty vessel aside and snatching up a muddy brown gourd. It took a bite with crimson teeth.

Yerin thought she might empty her own guts all over her bedsheets. Watching this parasite gorge itself with *her* face was all her childhood nightmares come at once.

She could still remember the Shadow tearing its way through her family. Their faces had become blurred with time, but the *feeling* remained crisp and vivid. She made it from day to day by not thinking about this thing living inside her, because when she thought about it too much, she wanted to gouge it out with her bare hands.

But she couldn't get rid of it. It might be her way forward.

It kept scarfing down food. The Blood Sage's tablet had talked about this. It could sometimes feed on its own, which should be encouraged, but only rarely. If the Shadow was allowed too much freedom, it might break away.

Yerin stood; she wouldn't face this monster lying down. She tightened her brown patient's robe and walked forward until she was only a few inches behind it.

It turned around lazily, still chewing, holding a roasted hunk of meat in one hand. It gave her a lopsided grin.

This *thing* even had her scars.

Yerin had to stop herself from pulling her master's sword and carving it up. She didn't know what that would do to herself, but she was willing to roll those dice.

Instead, she spoke. It had enough of a mind; it should understand her well enough.

"Why didn't you end me?" she asked.

It could have. She had lost control of it completely. It could have hollowed her out from the inside and made her into a nest.

Instead, it had released her after only a few seconds, suddenly loyal as a dog. It had even fought beside her, and she didn't know why.

The Blood Shadow's grin widened, and it took another bite of meat. It made a low, growling noise, almost a purr.

The sound sent another shudder of disgust through Yerin, but she sensed satisfaction. The Blood Shadow was satisfied with the way things were going, it had just been a little hungry. It was happy to be growing physically,

spiritually, and mentally.

If it had killed her, it would have had to feed itself.

Yerin ground her teeth. This was why she hadn't wanted to develop the Shadow according to the Sage's instruction. She knew, as Eithan had said, that turning it into a clone was her strongest bet. She wasn't so blind that she couldn't see the advantages of a second copy of herself, but every inch she gave the Blood Shadow was a loss. One step at a time, she was bringing a monster to life.

But when she'd already lost the life aura, she hadn't seen any other choice. Now she was committed.

With every mouthful, the Blood Shadow became a shade more solid, a notch more *real*. Its eyes had a glimmer of life to them.

Yerin stepped closer until their eyes were only an inch apart. Of course, it was her exact height. "We're hitched to the same wagon now, but heaven's truth, I will bleed and bury you given half an excuse."

The Blood Shadow lifted the meat to its mouth and took a huge bite, chewing loudly. It didn't back down or look away.

"If I don't advance, you're going off this cliff with me," Yerin said. "No more free meals."

It continued chewing, but she thought it was listening.

Yerin would try to advance there in the Blackflame Empire, but if she couldn't make it before too long, she'd have to go back through the portal. The Seishen Kingdom would have guards or walls built, but she'd risk it. Lindon would go with her; she hadn't talked it over with him yet, but he would. The two of them could punch through and sneak around the Valley until she advanced.

Or they couldn't, and she'd be doomed. No matter what they tried to do, she couldn't afford to have a stranger fighting for the reins of her soul.

"You want us both to live?" Yerin went on. "You listen to me like I'm the voice of heaven. I say frog, you jump. I say snake, you crawl. I say dog, you —"

A nightmarish voice scraped out of the Blood Shadow's throat.

"Woof," it said.

Then it gave her a bloody grin.

## Chapter 14

Back in the Starsweep Tower in Stormrock, Lindon sat cross-legged on the carpeted floor of his room among the Skysworn. Full Skysworn got much better rooms than trainees—his previous quarters had been little more than a closet with a bunk crammed in.

He sat with natural treasures strewn around him. A knuckle-sized black skull, glowing with the power of death, sat to his left. A budding flower sat to his right, vibrant with life. Before him, a bottle of water that swirled on its own, occasionally rising into the shape of a curious face. Behind him, a crystal containing a spinning red flame.

He found it easier to follow the aura when they were arranged in contrasts. Reaching through the fist-sized ball of gray soulfire swirling inside him, he extended his senses. The treasures radiated great power, but it was still nowhere near as easy to sense as it had been in the Night Wheel Valley.

He traced the lines of color back to their sources, but stretched further. To the yellow veins of the stone beneath him, the green feathery breath of the air around him, the faint heat radiating from his own body. He could feel the connections, the subtle blending as one power became another. He was ready.

Lindon focused inward.

*I need the power to protect my family,* he thought. He filled himself with the desire to protect, focusing on the horror he'd felt as Suriel had shown him Sacred Valley, on his desperation to save Yerin.

Nothing happened.

He strained to detect any change in the aura. If some Truegolds who were qualified to be Underlord missed it, then it must be a subtle change.

[Yeah, but you're thinking of backwoods Truegolds from an aura-poor nation with only a handful of Underlords,] Dross said. [They missed it because they were...I don't want to say they're stupid. Ignorant? Poorly educated? Backwards savages stumbling through their Paths like blind men?]

Lindon's balanced sense of aura trembled, threatening to collapse, the fire

aura suddenly much more vibrant than the others. He steadied himself, calming his emotions, holding his perception in place.

"I fight to save my family," he said, this time aloud.

Had the earth aura beneath him shaken? He focused on it, which caused his spiderweb-thin meditative state to crumble. His perception reeled back in, the vital aura a mishmash of disconnected colors again.

Lindon kicked to his feet, scattering the natural treasures and not bothering to pick them up. He strode over to a table against one wall. He had already arranged tools and boxes here to give himself something to work on. He needed to focus on a problem that was possible to solve.

Dross spoke in a soothing, even voice. [Take deep, calming breaths. Relax. That's it...relax. Breathe deeply. You have three whole days left! You could do a lot in three days. Like reaching Underlord! Theoretically.]

Lindon grabbed a yellow-and-black striped binding shaped like a blooming flower and demanded Dross make a Soulsmithing model. He had spent much of the last eight weeks with Fisher Gesha, crafting constructs; if Yerin hadn't been dying, the Fisher would have chained Lindon to her foundry and worked him to death.

A certain failure rate was inevitable in Soulsmithing, because every sample of madra was unique. Even an experienced Soulsmith like Gesha tried to prepare two samples of her materials when she could, because she'd fail two or three out of every ten times.

So being able to run the experiment in his mind, as many times as he wanted, was the Soulsmith's dream. It exhausted Dross, and there were still madra interactions Dross was unclear on—if Fisher Gesha's success rate for simple constructs was seventy-five percent, Lindon's was now ninety. Not one hundred percent, but miraculous nonetheless.

However, there was more to Soulsmithing than simple constructs. Sacred instruments—like weapons or the Skysworn armor—were beyond him. At least for now.

Once Eithan returned with the Arelius technique library, or Dross had the chance to absorb dream tablets from more Soulsmiths...Lindon couldn't imagine all the possibilities.

This time, Lindon was working with a common binding and a type of simple construct he'd made before. He only needed to run it through in his head once before he could pull the ingredients together on his table, Forging them into a shimmering red-and-orange ball.

He was working inside a protective script, this time. A ninety percent success rate still meant a ten percent rate of failure, and he *was* making a bomb.

When he was finished, he placed the bomb into a scripted case with the others.

He would not return to the Night Wheel Valley unprepared.

A knock at his door surprised him. Yerin should have been trying to advance, and who else would come visit him?

He opened the door warily to see Mercy standing there, eyes shining, her hair long enough that she could pull it back into a ponytail again. She wore her smooth purple breastplate over a black-and-white set of sacred artist's robes, so she looked just like when he'd first met her. She leaned again on Suu, the dragon's head at the top hissing at his presence.

"Hi! Are you meditating? Ooooh, no, you're Soulsmithing! Can I watch?" She stepped forward, and then hesitated. "Ah, can I come in?"

He ushered her inside politely, but was still unsure. Mercy had never visited him before.

She ran over to the table, stumbling once but catching herself on the edge of the bed. When she got to his Soulsmithing tools, she picked up the goldsteel-plated tongs for holding tricky pieces of madra and held them up to the light, examining them.

"I always thought it would be fun to be a Soulsmith," she said. "But I never had the knack for it. My sense for Forging is good, but shadow madra isn't the *most* widely compatible, and my tutors said it was better to concentrate on my talents."

"My mother was a Soulsmith," Lindon said. "It's always been an interest of mine. I have to say, I didn't expect to see you here." He didn't want to be rude, but he did want to steer this conversation toward a quick conclusion. Every minute wasted was a minute Yerin moved closer to the edge.

She placed the tongs back down and faced him. "How are you?" she asked.

He almost started to talk about *what* he was doing, the preparations he was making, but he stopped himself. He knew what she meant.

"I should be Underlord by now," he said at last.

He expected her to say that he shouldn't be upset. Many people went their whole lives without the chance to reach Underlord. Instead, her eyes went wide in sympathy, and she nodded. "It's the most frustrating advancement.

Some people go from Truegold to Underlord in an afternoon. I had a cousin who spent five years chasing sillier and sillier truths about herself before finally figuring out that her real revelation was that she practiced sacred arts for no reason. She just enjoyed it. Once she admitted that, her way was clear. It's hard, because you can never figure out when you're on the right track and need to push deeper, and when you're totally wrong."

"Yes!" Lindon said. "Until now, advancement has been clear. You make yourself one step stronger every day, keep practicing and cycling aura and strengthening your spirit, and it adds up. Now, all of a sudden, it's different."

Mercy pulled out the chair beneath the table, sitting down and leaning her staff against her shoulder. "There are a lot of sayings about it, at least in my family." She imitated a deeper voice. "'To know the world, you must first know yourself.' 'You must deepen your connection to your own soul if you wish to command the world.' 'Underlord is the end of the path you walked for others, and the beginning of your own path.'"

"She waved a hand. "They make it sound like it fits, but they're all guessing. I did get one practical piece of advice from my tutors, though."

She leaned forward, looking deep into his eyes. "Follow your fear. It's a trick that sometimes helps to figure out your revelation. A lot of people push themselves into deadly situations, to figure out what they care about enough to die for, but you've done plenty of that. Obviously that isn't it for you. So...follow your fear."

"I'm afraid of a lot of things," Lindon said. Especially at the moment. Losing Yerin, failing to advance and being left behind, failing his family. He was afraid he had left home for nothing and was wasting his time out here playing at being a sacred artist. He was afraid Eithan would see his effort on Lindon as a waste, afraid that Orthos would never return, afraid that Dross would somehow grow out of control and consume his mind, afraid that Blackflame madra would one day scorch his soul with damage he couldn't heal...

"Too many things," he added.

Mercy thumped the carpet with the end of her staff. "Let's try it now! We don't have much time left, so it's worth a try, right? Cycling position!"

It was somewhat embarrassing to start meditating on command in front of someone like this, but it wasn't as though she hadn't seen him cycling before. He climbed back down, sitting and closing his eyes.

"Now, follow your fear. Trace it back to the beginning. What are you



*really* afraid of, underneath it all?”

Feeling self-conscious, Lindon traced it back. He was afraid of losing Yerin.

[Ah, but is that what you're afraid of?] Dross asked. [Maybe you're *really* afraid that she might not be around to protect you anymore.]

Lindon searched his soul.

*No, that's not it*, he said.

[Well then, I'm out of ideas.]

It connected, at least as far as he understood it, to his attempted revelation earlier. He wanted to protect the people around him. He had left Sacred Valley because he was afraid of losing his family.

“I'm afraid of losing people I care about,” he said aloud, “but isn't everybody? That can't be unique to me.”

“Your motivation doesn't have to be rare, just personal. Hm. Was your fear of loss what drove you to practice the sacred arts?” She sounded like she was imitating a wise old elder asking probing questions.

“I left home because I was afraid of losing my family.” That was at the center of his motivations. It was what had made him want to pursue the sacred arts enough to leave.

Mercy made a curious noise. “If that was all you wanted, then wouldn't you have stayed home? To be closer to them, to protect them?”

*I would have if I could*, he thought, but he quickly realized that wasn't true. Protecting his family was his goal, it wasn't his motivation. It was what he walked toward, not what pushed him from behind.

He'd left because, back in Sacred Valley, he was the least. The weakest. He had wanted to escape.

So what was he afraid of now? What was his fear telling him about his family, about Yerin, about Eithan and Orthos?

That he was *still* weak. Powerless. That he was still the same useless Unsouled who could change nothing.

Lindon reached out with his spiritual sense, connecting to the aura around him. It was easier this time.

*I fight so I won't be worthless anymore*, he thought. It felt the same as the hundreds of other declarations he'd made over the last two months, spoken and unspoken, calmly or desperately or burning with quiet hope. He still wasn't sure if his answer was correct.

But this time, the soulfire in his spirit quivered, and the aura around him

shook with it. He would have never noticed if he hadn't been paying attention. At that moment, he had enough of a connection to the vital aura that all he had to do was pull...

Something slammed into him, knocking him to his back, breaking him from the trance and pushing him down. His eyes snapped open.

Mercy lay on top of him, her breastplate pressed against his chest, her nose an inch from his. "Stop!" she yelled into his face.

Lindon withdrew his spiritual perception, looking into her panicked face. "Did I do something wrong?" he asked.

She gave a relieved sigh, leaning both black-gloved hands on his chest and pushing herself up. She wobbled as she got to her feet, but then moved back to her chair. "If you trigger the advancement now, in this weak aura with only these few natural treasures, the transformation will occur slowly over two or three weeks. And once you start, there's no ending it early. Sure, that's better than nothing, but you know what your revelation is now, don't you?"

He nodded, both excited and embarrassed. He was on the brink of Underlord, but he couldn't help but feel that his motivation was...pathetic.

"Then you should wait until you're in the Night Wheel Valley. If you're planning to go back, then advancement can happen like *that*." She tried to snap, but the Goldsign on her fingers was too slick. Giving up, she clapped her hands together instead. "Like *that*. Sometimes. It could take longer, but still faster than here."

As he thought, his embarrassment retreated and his excitement grew. He was there. He had reached the final step.

He looked at her with new respect. "I should have trained with you from the beginning."

"If I had known I could have helped, I would have said something the first day!" She waved a hand. "I didn't think it would work. There's no trick that works for everyone."

"What about you?" he asked. "You've helped me. How can I help you?"

Mercy shifted in her seat. "No, no, don't waste anything on me. My family used to give me the best resources and instruction, so I'm passing along what I can."

He stood up, meeting her eyes directly, though now that he was standing, he loomed over her. She shifted her gaze. "Do you have any of those resources left?" he asked.

“...no.”

“And you would have to return home to get more?”

“...yes.”

“But you don't want to do that. And you don't want to take ours because you feel like you're stealing from us.”

“Not *stealing*, exactly.”

Lindon held out a hand to her. “Now I owe you. Next time, you won't have to worry about taking anything from me, because I'll be repaying your favor.” She took his hand, and he pulled her to her feet. “...two favors, actually. I'd like to ask you for one more.”

~~~

Yerin knew her advancement would take longer if she triggered it here, but that didn't matter anymore. If she only started the transformation, her soulfire would begin rebuilding her lifeline. She could afford to take a month to become an Underlady, because the advancement itself would extend her lifespan.

But that was only if she could do it.

She was surrounded by eight natural treasures, the most powerful she and Lindon could gather that would stay relatively balanced. Her perception was absolutely focused on feeling the unity of aura.

It was useless.

The aura back in the Blackflame Empire felt even weaker after staying in the Night Wheel Valley for so long. Here, she wasn't sure she'd feel the advancement even if she did trigger it.

She focused on her desire for freedom, to become so powerful that she could do whatever she wanted, go wherever she wanted, with no one to tell her no.

She meditated on the joy she felt in a fight, the satisfaction of seeing her skills grow and her strength improve.

She concentrated on the contentment of traveling with her master, and the old and faded love of a real family. The pain of losing them. The desire to protect the people in her life now.

All around her, the aura didn't change.

None of those were her revelation, unless maybe they *were*, and she hadn't pushed them hard enough yet. Or maybe the response from the soulfire had been too subtle and she'd missed her opportunity.

She trembled with the effort of holding her perception in place without

losing the hazy sense of aura merging into one. Sweat rolled down her face.

Then, down the hall, she sensed Lindon.

His spirit had swelled for an instant, then ebbed. Had he done it? No, he hadn't broken through, or she would sense his power as an Underlord. What had happened?

She took a moment to unravel herself from the nearby aura; losing the sense of aura all at once could be disorienting. Then she rose to her feet and left. Maybe distracting herself was the answer. She could still afford to lose a minute or two, right?

As soon as she looked toward Lindon's room, she saw Mercy rushing toward her.

The Akura girl held her staff over one shoulder, apologizing to the other Skysworn she brushed past. When she saw Yerin, she waved eagerly, coming to a stop carefully to avoid pitching over on her face.

Lindon ran up behind her, and she could read his excitement. But he hadn't broken through.

Had he figured it out?

"Follow your fear!" Mercy shouted, pushing Yerin back into her room. "I didn't think it would work, but it did!"

Lindon followed, carefully shutting the door behind him. "It did. I felt it."

Yerin's fist tightened. "Don't ease me along. What happened?"

He looked suddenly hesitant, glancing at Mercy and then down at the floor. "I...don't...want to be useless. I move forward to prove that I am...worth something, I guess."

Mercy visibly softened, reaching up to pat him on the shoulder.

His words pierced Yerin. That was stupid. He wouldn't be useless, even if he stayed at the same level he was forever.

But hadn't she treated him the same way?

She'd been afraid he couldn't keep up with her. Afraid she would have to leave him behind, or that he would leave her behind. Even in her own mind, she'd thought of their advancement as the most important thing about them both.

She wanted to tell him that wasn't true, and even to apologize, but she couldn't put words to the feeling. Then Mercy was in her face, gripping her arms.

"Now you try!" The Akura girl said. "Cycling position!"

With one last look at Lindon, Yerin sat on the floor. She would have

plenty of time to untangle her words later, once she didn't have to worry about the threat of death hanging over her head.

“Trace the aura,” Mercy said, not that Yerin needed any instruction. She had already settled into sensing the unity of aura, her perception bleeding into the world around her.

“She's so much faster than I am,” Lindon said.

Dross' voice echoed in all their heads. [And I've been speeding you up. There's no substitute for good training. Or practice. Or talent, can't forget about that.]

A smile threatened to break Yerin's concentration.

“Now,” Mercy said, “what are you afraid of?”

She drilled down into herself. Her desire to protect people probably stemmed from a fear of loss, and her desire for freedom maybe sprang from the fear of losing that freedom to the Blood Shadow. Though the Shadow had been mostly docile, ever since she started training with it regularly, it was still there. Lurking in the back of her spirit. Waiting to take even her body from her.

But in the end, one fear outshone all the others.

Sensing the vital aura around her, she was too aware of the line of green life aura running down her spine. The dim, crooked, flickering line of light that could go out at any second.

Trying to think about other fears while her life hung by a frayed thread was like trying to see the stars with the sun in the sky.

Maybe that meant it was her revelation. Was survival the desire that drove her to the sacred arts?

That rang false. She wasn't fighting to live forever, or she wouldn't be so reckless with her life.

Mercy continued talking to her in a low, soothing voice, but Yerin grew increasingly frustrated. Her touch on the aura shook, the sense of unity growing thin.

This wasn't working.

When her meditation was interrupted by a flare of wind and dream madra and an alarm echoed through the room, she was relieved at the excuse to drop her trance.

Mercy looked disappointed, but Lindon was watching the echoing bell-shaped construct on the ceiling.

“Yerin,” Naru Gwei's voice said, “come see me. And if the Blackflame

boy and the Akura girl are with you, bring them. They're not in their rooms."

The construct—which had emerged from a shining script in the stone of the ceiling like a suddenly appearing weed—shrank back into the rock. The script faded away.

Yerin rose to her feet, brushing dust from her knees. "More *orders*. Bleed me dry if I have anything better to do."

~~~

Naru Gwei surveyed Lindon and the others lined up before him. His burn scar pulled one eye into a wince, and his limp gray hair hung loose around him. He was unshaven, and looked as always like he hadn't slept for a week.

"The Blackflame Empire is giving up on the tournament."

Lindon started to protest, but Naru Gwei held up one battered gauntlet for silence. "We're not formally withdrawing our candidacy. It's up to the Sage, whatever we say, and she might still pick one of us. But there's nothing we can do in three days that will improve our chances."

"At least Yerin and I could go back in," Lindon said. "You've been sending scouts, and they've returned. Only a day or two inside, and maybe you'd have two new Underlords."

Naru Gwei reached up to the map that hung on his wall, pulling it down and spreading it over his desk in one motion. It was a map of the Blackflame Empire.

To the east, his finger traced the Wasteland, a largely blank stretch of empty paper that looked like desert. "The Wasteland. Their sacred artists are the farthest thing from unified, but they're a thin fence against the dragons even further east. After the Dreadgod attack, we've lost contact with much of our territory against that border. The Wastelanders could be moving in even now, claiming whatever territory they want, and who's to stop them?

"Beyond them are the dragons," he said, gesturing beyond the scope of the map. "They stay away because of a few real monsters in the Wasteland, and out of respect for the Akura family." He jerked his chin at Mercy. "Our favor with your family tells the dragons how important we are. If you all like us, then you'll respond quick. If you don't, then maybe you'll look the other way while they push through the Wasteland and snap up a few villages."

He turned his attention to the south, which was mostly covered by trees. "The jungle only stays peaceful because of constant Skysworn supervision. I've left a few teams down there, but most of us are here over the capital. The longer we stay here, the more towns and sects and schools and villages will

be swallowed up by the jungle.

“To the north is the Trackless Sea, the widest ocean we know. Covers half the world, by our maps. The Kotai clan mans this wall—” He traced a long shape down the beach. “—which keeps the ocean tribes out. Those enemies are glad to know that we’re focused somewhere else. They’re hungry for the land.”

Naru Gwei kept talking, but Lindon focused on the west. He saw the Desolate Wilds, marked as a black smudge, and recognized a range of mountains by the coast. Closer to the western sea than he’d ever realized.

It was unnamed. The map had it listed as “Restricted Territory—Dangerous and Forbidden,” next to the seal of the Akura family: one big star and two smaller stars over a mountain range.

That’s where Sacred Valley was.

His eyes moved across the Wilds to Serpent’s Grave. Then to the capital, where he was now. He had skipped across dozens of regions, towns, notes and names scribbled on the paper. Names he’d never heard of, places he’d only passed over without thinking.

He was a long way from home.

Naru Gwei stared over the map, his usual weariness taking on a melancholy tone. “Empires are fragile things. They are prone to fall.”

Lindon’s eyes were locked onto Sacred Valley as he processed. “Apologies, but why does the tournament matter so much to the Empire?”

“Contact with the other nations and major factions of the world is more valuable than you think,” the Skysworn Captain said, feeding a long leaf between his teeth. “Usually, we only hear from our neighbors on this continent. The Akura family all the way to the south, their other nearby vassal kingdoms, like the Seishen Kingdom. Our enemies, the dragons, who own the east. We can contact the Arelius homeland every ten years, and there are a few other connection points.” He sighed. “Establishing trade or any relationship is worth a great price. And if we can distinguish ourselves in front of the world, we can show them that we’re strong enough to defend ourselves.”

He looked to Mercy again. “Not to mention that your family promised us a hundred million high-grade scales for each qualified competitor we provide, and further gifts if they give a good performance in the tournament. If the dice had fallen right, we might have gained ourselves glory we haven’t seen for hundreds of years.”

Naru Gwei straightened up from the map, looking back at them. “Now, it's too late. Rather than ‘giving up,’ it’s more accurate to say we’re finally admitting our loss. Got more Underlords than we lost, and that will be good for security.”

Yerin had withdrawn her Goldsigns, but the sword-arms started peeking out of her back again, which meant she was distracted. “You're not spewing at the mouth for no reason. What do you want out of us?”

He locked eyes with the three of them in turn. “I want to know if you have any input on the movement of the Skysworn.”

Lindon wondered if there was some hidden meaning in the words, or if Naru Gwei was really asking them for advice.

“The Empire is sending everyone home from the capital, that's decided,” the Captain said. “Too late to do anything else. If the Sage picks one among us to fight for her, that’s good enough for us. But the Skysworn can move independently, so I wanted to know if you had any thoughts about our withdrawal or our strategy going forward.”

He watched their faces and grumbled around the leaf in his mouth. “I asked all my Truegolds this same question. And she's the only Akura in the Empire, so maybe she knows something worth hearing.”

Mercy frowned at him, pinching her chin as though deep in thought, but Lindon was still staring at the map. They had three days left, and the Seishen Kingdom had used their last two months to mint Underlords. They would have been desperately improving their power, showing off to the Sage.

He had to save Yerin...but he *wanted* to win. Was there a way to do both? To seize and hold a piece of the Night Wheel Valley, increasing her chances of advancement, and also show they were the best the vassals of the Akura family had to offer?

His first thought was assassination. If they killed Kiro and Meira, that would be two of the Kingdom's star Underlords out of the running. But not only did they have an Overlord defending them, Lindon also wasn't happy about assassination being his first answer. And the Sage of the Silver Heart had restricted bloodshed.

Then he remembered something he couldn't believe he'd forgotten.

He turned on the spot and seized Mercy.

Her purple eyes widened.



## Chapter 15

Though there were sixteen Underlords in the Empire now, only eleven of them could be gathered on short notice, including Naru Gwei. They were squeezed around one side of a table in one of the larger Skysworn meeting rooms, rubbing shoulders as they faced the end of the room.

The Emperor was seated in front of them, in as close to a throne as the Skysworn had been able to dig out from storage. He was dressed plainly for an emperor; his iridescent wings were nowhere to be seen, withdrawn back into his spirit, and he wore sapphire robes wrapped around with dragons. A shimmering cap on his head was his only headdress, and his bearded face was neatly trimmed. Lindon could only see the back of him, but Naru Huan still radiated a heroic air; maybe that was Lindon's spirit warning him against the only Overlord in the room.

The rest of the room was jammed with Truegolds.

They stood packed in behind the Underlords, many of them in Skysworn armor. Lindon hadn't worn his, so now he was shoved between the shoulder pads of an armored woman and Yerin's Goldsigns, which she had kept out in order to keep people from crowding her.

They had organized themselves by combat rank in order to save room, so Lindon and Yerin found themselves close to the front. Only a few white-haired men and women stood in front of him, and he could see over their heads.

At the very end of the room, speaking to all of them including the Emperor himself, was Akura Mercy. She craned her neck to look to the back.

"It seems like we're all here. Can we begin?" She spoke as brightly as ever, and Lindon was surprised that she was so comfortable addressing everyone. But then, to her, the Emperor of the Blackflame Empire was one of her family's servants.

"You may," Naru Huan said.

"Our family regularly harvests the Night Wheel Valley," Mercy said. "We

keep the excess natural treasures in a vault, which we use periodically for training or Soulsmithing. But natural treasures can lose their power over long travel, so that vault is located inside the valley itself.”

There was a stir in the room, and some of the Underlords muttered to each other. Naru Saeya, the Emperor's sister, perked up in her seat. The peacock feathers over one ear bristled.

“Thank you for bringing this to us,” Saeya said, “but why now? The secrets of your family should be shared lightly, but if you were going to tell us, then why not when we could reach them?”

Mercy smiled. “Now, Akura Charity owes me a favor. She owns the Night Wheel Valley, and the vault itself. She might not *give* me the treasures, but if I took them, she would look the other way. It would be a nice consolation prize for being forced to leave.”

“Too shaky,” said a large, bearded man with a hammer on either hip. The stormcloud hanging over his head reminded Lindon of Renfei’s Path of the Cloud Hammer. “No offense to you, Akura, but we cannot rob a Sage based on your judgment of a relative's possible actions. What if you are wrong and she kills us all?”

“Oh, she knows who is responsible,” Mercy said, waving a hand. “The punishment would fall on me, not you.”

She had treated his concern too lightly, Lindon could feel it in the room. They didn't believe her, thought she wasn't taking the situation seriously. It didn't help that she lurched in place a moment later, steadying herself against the wall.

“I think we can do it,” Saeya said, leaning forward. “All at once. Scouts show that the Kingdom isn't holding our portal tightly. They're concentrated on the center of the Valley, where the aura is thickest. We punch through, everything we've got, and seize the vault. Where is it?”

“Even better news!” Mercy said. “It's slightly closer to us! Just outside the southern walls of the house.”

The room went silent as they all pictured the imposing Akura nightmare fortress that had taken over an entire mountain.

Naru Saeya leaned back.

But her older brother spoke up. “This could be done,” the Emperor said. “They have only one Overlord, and he cannot come alone. It will take them time to gather their forces. At our maximum speed, we could be in and out in two hours. Long before they can gather enough strength to challenge us.”

He laced his fingers together. “However, we will not act without the Sage's permission. With her mediation, even if we fail, we will only be sent home in shame rather than annihilated. And only with her approval can we be sure we will not face her wrath, even in victory.”

Mercy shrugged. “Then ask her.”

Her eyes rose up to the corner of the room.

Everyone in the room turned. There, in the high ceilings, waited a silver-and-purple owl that none of them had seen.

Naru Huan stood and bowed. “The Emperor of the Blackflame Empire greets the Sage of the Silver Heart,” he said.

Seeing the Emperor doing so, everyone else in the room except for Mercy stood and bowed as well.

“This is how she monitors the battlefield,” Mercy said. “She has seen and heard everything. If she allows us to move forward, then she approves.”

The owl gave a soft rustle, like wind through leaves.

The gray-skinned Kotai Underlord, an old man with a stone gauntlet for a hand, snorted. “How could we be sure this is really—”

The owl turned its eyes on him. There was a flare of dream aura, tightly concentrated, and the Underlord's eyes went out of focus for a second.

When his consciousness returned, he trembled, pressing one giant fist against one normal-sized one and bowing deeply. “I apologize for questioning the Sage.”

There were a number of questions directed at Mercy, which she answered as she could, but the tone of the room had shifted. The Underlords were gathering themselves. Lindon could feel their spirit slowly turning. None of them had liked retreating and waiting around either, and now they were restless for the chance to return to battle.

Finally, Naru Saeya slapped a hand down on the table and stood up. “What time do we leave?”

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All the Lords, Ladies, and high-ranking Truegolds of the Seishen Kingdom had been gathered on top of their castle in the Night Wheel Valley. The roof had been turned into a celebration banquet, and even the gloom of the Valley was dispersed by shining scripts, lights, music, and soaring bird-Remnants of every color.

Seishen Daji, Kiro's little brother, stood on a platform of Forged madra that lifted him above all the others. He wore traditional robes of Seishen

royalty, which were plated to give the impression of armor, and a silver crown gleamed on his head. He looked out over the crowd with a triumphant, arrogant expression.

And he did nothing to restrict his spirit, which pulsed with the power of a newly minted Underlord.

The other important members of the Seishen Kingdom were taking turns standing up to lavish the second prince with praise, whereupon he would respond with either false humility or praise in return. With every word, Daji puffed up further, shooting the occasional glance at his father. King Dakata stood to the side of his son's stage, the very picture of pride.

Kiro leaned against the wall, out of the center of attention, watching.

A hand gently brushed his back. "Are you not feeling well?" Meira asked, a hint of panic in her eyes. She set aside the bowl of food in her right hand, beginning to conjure life madra.

"I've been fine for weeks," Kiro assured her. She had healed the stab wound in his back instantly, and the Kingdom healers had given him far more medicine than he could possibly have needed.

He had passed out during the healing process, and later found that his father had been furious. Meira might have been executed, if she hadn't been even more distraught than King Dakata himself. He had been forced to personally restrain her to keep her from diving through the Blackflame Empire portal and attacking all on her own.

Instead of picking her bowl back up, Meira chewed on her thumbnail, her gaze growing distant and empty. "We could demand her as our prize," she said. "The Sage would give us one sword artist."

"We won't see her again," Kiro assured her. As far as he was concerned, that was a good thing. The young woman with the sword and blood techniques scared him as much as Lindon did. He had been skeptical of his father's plan to drive the Blackflame Empire away, but if it had prevented those two from becoming Underlords, then it had been worthwhile.

Meira finally picked her food back up and started eating, tearing into her food as though it had personally offended her. She was disappointed that they wouldn't get a chance for revenge; she and Daji were alike in certain ways.

Suddenly, the colorful lights and the music dimmed, as though the shadows of the Night Wheel Valley had crept inwards.

The woman who had been giving a speech about Daji froze, her drink raised. Conversation died, and Kiro couldn't tell if it had happened naturally,

or if the shadow was dampening sound.

King Dakata stepped forward, unleashing the spirit of an Overlord, but the shadows deepened in front of him. They melted together and rose into a lump of darkness.

Akura Charity stepped out of the dark, face-to-face with the Seishen King.

Hurriedly, Kiro and everyone else there swept into a bow. Charity looked Dakata up and down, then turned her attention to Daji. He had bowed only reluctantly, with a clearly resentful look on his face.

The Sage of the Silver Heart raised her delicate hands in front of her and, after a long pause, clapped exactly three times. The sounds echoed through the silence.

“Congratulations to the Seishen Kingdom,” Charity said. “It seems you have benefited greatly from my garden.”

King Dakata had already withdrawn his spirit, controlling his madra. He recovered quickly from his surprise, laughing loudly. “Of course, of course! How could any land of the Sage’s be less than extraordinary? There were a few pests, but not to worry—we drove them out for you.”

He laughed even louder at that. A handful of brave souls joined him.

Charity looked out over the crowd. “Hm. Bold of you, to drive them out as you did. You pushed at the edges of my command for restraint.”

Her words were completely calm, but Kiro thought his father was about to start sweating nervously.

“We were very careful not to do anything that might weaken fellow servants of the Akura clan,” King Dakata assured her. It was strange to see him taking such a submissive stance, like seeing a tiger acting like a lapdog. “But we knew bold action was necessary to grasp the victory.”

Charity’s eyebrows raised. “Victory?”

For a long moment, silence reigned.

Dakata laughed awkwardly. “Of course. We have produced many Underlords since then. Surely more than the Blackflame Empire. You may take your pick of our youth.”

Charity raised one finger on each hand. “This is the current...score, if you would like to put it that way. There is one young Underlord from the Blackflame Empire who has been my choice all along. And I have had my eye on one young Lord or Lady from your Kingdom from the beginning.” She lowered her hands, folding them together. “None of your actions have changed the situation. It remains as it was months ago. There is still no third

person at the Underlord level who meets my requirements.”

Daji stepped forward, anger clear on his face, and Kiro knew he had to act quickly before his little brother got himself killed.

“Honored Sage,” Kiro blurted out, “is there nothing we can do to distinguish ourselves in your eyes?”

He had been speaking mostly to draw Charity’s attention away from Daji, but she surveyed him for a long moment. After a second, she produced a folded sheet of paper from nowhere, flicking it toward him. The letter soared gently on the breeze, landing in his hand.

“The Blackflame Empire will return,” the Sage said. “The details are contained within.”

Kiro unfolded the paper. It was a map of the Night Wheel Valley, much more detailed than the one his father had cobbled together, with a single location circled. He read the label, as well as the instructions below.

Then he looked back to Charity, shocked.

She met his eyes calmly. “Send your three candidates to the location I have indicated and follow the directions I have left for you.”

The letter predicted everything the Blackflame Empire would do. As well as the actions of three of their young Golds.

The Sage wanted to see another competition.

“This time,” Charity went on, “I want to see you demonstrate your skills fairly. Hold nothing back. I have only one reminder for you.”

Kiro knew what she was about to say. It was written on the bottom of the letter, in large characters, circled for emphasis.

*“You should not harm Akura Mercy,”* the Sage said.

The same words were repeated on the paper beneath the map. You should not harm Akura Mercy.

The phrasing bothered him, but before Kiro could question it, King Dakata pounded a fist against his chest and boasted, “We will not let the Sage down!”

Charity looked back to Daji. “Truly,” she said, “I hope you don’t.”

Then, without warning, she faded back into shadow, leaving silence behind her.

The celebration had been ruined. Most of the bound Remnants had fled or quivered in fear, the musicians were too paralyzed with shock and fear to touch their instruments. The guests only murmured to one another, their food forgotten, and Daji clenched his fists in rage on the stage.

Dakata strode over to Kiro, plucking the Sage's letter from his hands. He read it once, his back straightened, and he read it again.

He slapped the paper back into Kiro's hands. "This time, you will meet them with our full force. Everything we can spare. You will grind them into dust!" Finally, he barked orders to his servants. "Tell the Soulsmiths I need that new armor finished within the day. We will spare no expense."

The closest servant cringed. "How many sets must we prepare, Your Highness?"

"Two," the King commanded, "one for each of my sons. If we have to use up every treasure we've gathered since we came here, I want them finished by dawn."

"Not two suits," Kiro corrected. He kept his gaze on Meira's face, drawing from her the strength to correct his father. "Three."

Her gray eyes widened with shock, and his father swelled with fury. Still, he kept himself fixed on Meira.

"I don't want you behind me any longer," he said quietly. "I need you by my side."

"I will not fail you again," she swore.

She thought he was giving her the means to serve him better. It was the opposite; he was trying, for once, to serve her.

"You've never failed me," he said.

Between his fingers, he gripped the Sage's letter tight.

*He* was the one who couldn't fail again.

## Chapter 16

Just outside the walls of Blackflame City, the Imperial cloudship waited.

It was a hundred paces long and forty wide, with three levels, and it rested on a bed of shimmering jade clouds. Mounted on the back were five scripted tubes that looked like backwards-pointed cannons. Those contained spinning wind constructs that thrummed with an Overlord's power, and the scripts around them shone green. A brief question of Dross informed Lindon that they were there for propulsion; this was the fastest cloudship the Empire possessed.

Forty-eight of the strongest Blackflame Truegolds were gathered on the deck, as well as thirteen of the sixteen Underlords. Eithan stood chatting with Naru Saeya, who leaned against the railing suppressing a smile. Naru Gwei spoke with a veiled Underlady Lindon didn't recognize and the Cloud Hammer Underlord, Chon Ma. Four or five of the gathered Underlords stood in a separate group, bristling with pride—those must be the newest additions, who had advanced in the Night Wheel Valley. None of them had less than a full head of gray hair.

Mercy and Yerin stood with Lindon, all wearing their Skysworn armor. Lindon had made some modifications to his, only a few of which were obvious to the naked eye. There were lines of script running down many of the armor's joints, and the bracers and greaves on his right arm had been removed, leaving his white Remnant limb bare.

Over the heads of the crowd, Lindon spotted Cassias and his wife, moving over to greet them. Cassias was excited that Eithan had made up with the family leadership and wanted to know what had prompted that decision. Lindon had no idea what he was talking about, and said so.

Together, they discussed their situation. Fueled by the Emperor's power, they were supposed to dash through the portal, head straight to the vault, empty it, and return. The Seishen Kingdom had erected some defenses on the other side, but they were token efforts at best, and the scouts were certain



they'd spotted them all.

It wasn't as risky as it sounded, Cassias assured them. The Seishen Kingdom could not have time to mobilize a force like theirs, and the strongest sacred artist on their side—the King—would be overwhelmed by sheer numbers. If they had an Archlord, this would be suicidal. As it was, they had little to lose.

Lindon understood all that, but he couldn't help a case of nerves. Yerin's life was riding on this.

He, for one, intended to attempt advancement as soon as they were on the other side. As for Yerin's revelation...he knew it would be easier to sense the unity of aura on the other side. Maybe she would have the insight she needed. And maybe they could loot enough natural treasures that they could replicate the aura-rich environment on the other side.

But the hourglass was running down, and Lindon couldn't think of anything else to do. How could he push someone else toward a personal revelation?

Mercy waved good-bye and headed off to the Emperor—she was to be the native guide on this expedition. And, Cassias informed them, Eithan and Naru Saeya were serving as navigators.

Lindon glanced around to where he'd last seen Eithan and instead found the Arelius Underlord standing not three feet away, grinning at him.

Startled, Lindon took an involuntary step back.

Eithan reached into his robe, withdrawing an object with a flourish: a smoky orb a little smaller than a man's head. Shapes seemed to eddy and shift in its misty depths.

The Archstone.

Lindon could feel a resonance with the hunger madra in his arm, as though they longed to reunite.

The Truegolds around them exclaimed, parting to create an open space around Eithan, and the binding wasn't even activated.

"You have no idea the things I had to do to procure this for you, my beloved disciple," Eithan announced clearly, so that the entire crowd could hear. "The indignities I had to suffer, the depths of depravity to which I had to sink."

Lindon reached out to take it, but Eithan pulled back.

"*Truly*," he cried, "the heavens must have wept the day they created a man of such generosity, such selfless spirit, as your master! Please, do not

weep! Instead, take this gift and know that I would gift thee with my very *beating heart* should you request it.”

With that, he bowed low, extending both hands and offering Lindon the Archstone.

The Underlords at the front of the ship, no doubt used to Eithan, shook their heads and returned to their conversations. The Truegolds clearly had no clue how to respond. Some of them applauded. A few looked curiously at Lindon. He spotted Bai Rou against the railing, his yellow eyes burning beneath his wide straw hat. It was hard to tell, but it looked like the man was glaring at him.

Face burning, Lindon took the Archstone. He wanted to open his void key, but he couldn't reveal its existence to this many people.

Instead, he drew it into his soulspace.

It was somewhat like devouring madra through his hunger madra arm, but when he looked within and inspected his madra, he could see the Archstone floating among his madra channels with perfect clarity. It hung above his cores, a white moon above a blue star and a dark one.

He had practiced bringing objects in and out of his soulspace ever since he'd opened it, but he hadn't determined what to keep there. Maybe, if he ever learned to use a weapon and bonded one, he would store a sacred instrument. Or maybe he wouldn't fill it with anything permanently, but would keep surprises in there. The Archstone counted.

“Gratitude, Eithan,” he said, trying to ignore the stares. “Please, lift your head. Really, *please*.”

As though he had done nothing out of the ordinary, Eithan straightened up. “I would wait to break that until you're ready to Forge it, by the way,” he said, sweeping his long yellow hair back over one shoulder. “You don't want the madra to lose any potency, and you never know what it will do if you break it uncontrolled.”

“I'll keep that in mind.” He saluted, fists together. “And I am truly grateful.”

Eithan accepted that and said a few words to Cassias and Naru Jing. But as he turned to go back toward the Emperor, he paused as though he had forgotten something and turned back. To Yerin.

He placed a hand on her head. “Be calm, little sister,” he said quietly. “You have many years ahead of you.”

Then he spun and walked away, waving behind him as he did so.

Yerin looked as though she had seen the heavens and earth flip upside-down. Lindon moved to stand next to her.

Cassias tightened a glove. "One day, I will see him truly surprised. I think the shock of it might kill me."

The wind picked up, swirling around them. Power gathered to the propulsion constructs in the back of the ship, until the entire vessel thrummed with palpable force.

All eyes naturally turned to the front. To the Emperor.

He had changed clothes again, and this time looked like he belonged on the battlefield. He wore green sacred artist's robes, his wings spread behind him, and he gave off the air of a warrior king. He spread his arms, and in Lindon's Copper sight, the aura around him burned a pale green.

The ship lifted up, the propulsion constructs gathering even more power. Lindon could hear them now, like spinning blades.

With one gesture of the Overlord's hand, the cloudship *shot* forward.

Mercy stood to his left, tethered to the deck with Chainkeeper madra. Eithan and Naru Saeya stood on his right, each peering forward.

As they blasted away from the Blackflame capital and into a column of dark power.

Yerin's face was tight, her spirit in chaos. The lowest pair of sword-arms had driven into the wood of the deck, but the others had been withdrawn. She stood with hair whipping in the wind of their passage, eyes focused on the darkness.

Lindon had knelt, letting his Remnant fingers stick into the wood and materializing them enough that he could get a grip. He held himself in place as they flew, reaching the portal in only a few breaths.

Underlord waited on the other side.

As they passed through the seemingly endless darkness, the others faded from Lindon's perception. He took the moment to steady his own breathing.

*Are you ready?* he asked Dross.

[Ready? Of course I'm ready. I'm looking forward to it, actually. A bit of excitement. I'm a lot more worried about Yerin. She could *die*, you know. And it's all on her, whether she makes it through or not. We're completely powerless. *Nothing* we can do to help.]

Lindon couldn't feel much of his own body, but he was sure he had tensed up.

[But I'm sure she'll be fine,] Dross added.

Slowly, the world returned.

They emerged from the column of shadow far faster than Lindon ever had before. Eithan and Naru Saeya were pointing and shouting to the Emperor, though Lindon couldn't make out what they were saying over the wind.

A massive wall of light, knitted together from strands of silver and yellow, barred their way. It encircled the Blackflame portal, covering the space from earth to clouds, radiating eternal force.

The Emperor's voice boomed out. "Chon Ma. Kotai Reina."

The Underlord of the Cloud Hammer school pulled both hammers from his belt, the stormcloud over his head flashing with lightning. He leaped forward, ahead of even the ship.

He was joined a step later by one of the new Underlords, an Underlady with gray skin and long, flowing silver hair gathered behind her in a purple ribbon. She looked like a grandmother who had aged well, and as she flew, vivid blue constructs bloomed into the air around her like flowers.

Chon Ma ran on the air, a dark cloud blooming under his foot with every step. As he reached the yellow-and-silver wall, he let out a roar, swinging both hammers. Mist blasted out from him in an explosion.

At the same time, the Underlady lifted off the deck, blue flower-constructs spinning around her. They opened, releasing streams of lightning-bright sapphire energy that pierced the wall in half a dozen places.

The cloudship didn't slow down.

Chon Ma leaped up as the ship caught up to him, landing on the deck. The Underlady drifted back down in a dignified manner. Together, their attacks had left a web of cracks that covered the face of the wall, but they had only punched through in small holes. Nothing nearly big enough for the ship to pass through.

Lindon braced himself as the cloudship struck.

The wall shattered like glass, shards exploding as the prow of the ship broke through. The noise was deafening, a sharp-edged detonation, and pieces of silver-and-yellow madra careened through the air.

Lindon had to release the deck with his Remnant hand, leaning low to avoid being blown backwards, so that he could reach up and slap away a fragment of power the size of his chest.

No one on the deck was weak enough to be caught up in the destruction; none of the fragments came even close to Yerin, and Eithan was able to casually stand in front of Mercy. The madra simply dissolved when it came

close to his skin.

And they were through, shooting over the dark trees of the valley. The Night Wheel itself spun slowly overhead, gathering purple light, and the strength of the aura here felt like diving into an ocean of power. The ship turned, making for the huge layered fortress that had swallowed up the eastern mountain, lit only by spots of violet or orange light.

Lindon gripped the deck again. The cloudship was tilted now, the bow rising, so that he was in danger of sliding backwards.

He pushed his perception outward, sensing the unity of aura, preparing to advance. But he knew the problem even before Dross said anything.

[I don't want to discourage you, but you'll need your full concentration if you want to advance. Which means you won't be able to keep aura cycling to your arm, and you will fall.]

It was even more complicated than that, Lindon knew. He wanted to Forge the Archstone into his arm as he advanced, and in order to do that, he would have to let go of the deck or the hand would remain permanently fused there.

Lindon looked up to Yerin, who offered a hand without a word. He took it in his hand of flesh, once again concentrating on the unity of aura. She held him as securely as if he were tied to the ship.

[Oh! That's a better idea, so long as you don't care about what happens to Yerin. She's not ready to advance yet, so the soulfire will burn her hand off. But then, *you* have a Remnant hand...]

Lindon released his perception, shook his head at Yerin, and took his hand away.

"I can wait until we land," he conceded. Though the rich aura pressing against him tempted him. He was so *close*. But he wouldn't be able to lay out enough natural treasures around him here either; he would have to pull them from his void key and leave them in his lap. Unless he could draw on their power by opening the key? Questions for later.

They ran across a few Seishen Kingdom sacred artists, who flew back to report what they had seen.

That was expected, and it encouraged Lindon to feel their spirits retreating in the opposite direction as the Akura family castle grew closer. Their information suggested that the bulk of the Seishen forces were concentrated in the heart of the valley, and it was nice to have that confirmed.

Of course, even if everything went according to plan and they emerged

from the Akura vault with their ship bursting with enough natural treasures to fuel the entire Blackflame Empire, that still might not be enough for Yerin.

At Mercy's wild gesturing, the ship started to slow. The prow lowered gradually as the Emperor's power retreated, until eventually Lindon could release the deck.

They were at the base of the Akura family fortress, which loomed over them as a wide, jagged mountain against the dark sky. Its shadow covered them, the purple and orange lights making for strange silhouettes on each layer.

At the bottom layer, a scripted stone wall rose a hundred feet from the ground. And at the base of that wall, a wide gate carved with constellations.

The ship settled in front of the gate, the green cloud landing gently on the grass.

"You all have your assignments," the Emperor announced. "Underlord first team, escort Akura Mercy to the gate. Truegold first team, with them. Truegold second team, fan out to the forests. Underlord second team..."

He continued to give orders, but Lindon and Yerin were in the first team. They walked over to Mercy, joining Eithan, Naru Saeya, and the silver-haired Kotai Underlady. She gave Lindon and Yerin a glance as they joined, but kept her attention mostly fixed on Mercy.

"A smooth flight," Eithan observed. "Nothing makes me more nervous than a smooth flight. If your ship doesn't crash, then is it even a real—"

His head jerked to one side, his eyes growing suddenly serious. Naru Saeya drew her sword a moment later, its rainbow-colored blade shimmering.

"Ready for battle!" she shouted, her voice booming out with enhanced force.

Then Lindon felt the power encircling them. A script running underground had activated.

Misty white light rose from the ground. A boundary field.

Unlike the wall that had surrounded their portal, this one was not a rigid plane of force. It filled the air with a strange dream aura. His thoughts grew thick and slow, his perception—already limited by the darkness of the Night Wheel Valley—blunted and clumsy.

[Ew,] Dross said, [what *is* this? I don't like it.]

A purple light flared in Lindon's spirit.

Suddenly, the weight on his thoughts released. He could still see the Ruler technique floating around them in the form of white mist, but he was

untouched.

[Not to hurry you, but I only have so much madra. This is another good reason to make me stronger, isn't it? Make a note.]

*You saved me*, Lindon thought, projecting gratitude in the spirit's direction. He grabbed Yerin, who was stumbling around the deck, and pulled her with him. It took her eyes a long moment to focus on him.

Conversation would be pointless while she was under the effects of the boundary field, so he pulled her toward Mercy. She was still tied to the deck by strands of her Chainkeeper madra, staring at the sky with an empty smile on her face.

Instead of reaching for her, he reached out to the Underlord next to her: Eithan.

Eithan's madra was already cycling, his eyes closed, but it was moving slowly. Lindon shook him with his Remnant hand, but Eithan didn't respond.

Lindon was about to abandon him when a pulse of pure madra passed through the Underlord. His eyes snapped open, and he took a deep breath, looking Lindon up and down.

"Another advantage of having your own personal mind spirit," Eithan said, straightening his outer robe. "I envy you. I can't keep this up forever, and I'm as vulnerable as the rest of you once my madra runs out." He looked to the sky. "Where's Little Blue?"

"In my void key," Lindon answered, but he understood Eithan's intent immediately.

As one, both of them turned toward the Emperor.

Eithan's voice was low, and his spirit started to cycle faster as he pulled more deeply on his power. "Quickly. They're already here."

Shadows closed in from the depths of the white light, emerging from the forest. Underlords.

Lindon stopped counting at ten. He couldn't sense them all, and there were more in the trees around them.

He touched the key hanging next to his badge, still not releasing Yerin's hand. She was looking around, moving from one spiritual presence to the next, clumsily readying her spirit for battle.

The void key opened, the closet-sized door appearing next to him. Some of the surrounding Truegolds frowned, trying to push their muddled thoughts into figuring out what he'd done.

Little Blue sat with her chin in her hands on the edge of a jar of Dream

Well water, her dress kicking out like a child kicking her feet on the edge of a swing. When she saw him, she brightened, giving a high chirp and scurrying over to him.

Then the white aura touched her and she swooned, swaying in place, leaning against a nearby box to steady herself.

Lindon scooped her up in his Remnant hand, careful to keep the hunger madra under control. “I’m sorry, but I need your help,” he said softly. “Can you cleanse their spirits?”

It was an alarmingly long moment before she gave a dreamy peep of agreement.

Without hesitation, he pushed her onto Yerin’s hand. Little Blue didn’t show any of the usual reluctance toward touching Yerin, only reaching out and sending a spark of deep blue power into Yerin’s soul.

The madra traveled lazily, as though it too were addled by the boundary, but it slid through Yerin in long loops. After a few breaths, her eyes sharpened, her breath coming quicker.

“Well, that’s a kick to the head.”

Now that Lindon had confirmed it worked, he hurried over to the Emperor. The man had summoned a sword, holding it with both hands, but otherwise he was simply standing still, seemingly trying to gather himself.

Lindon had intended to release Little Blue onto the Overlord as soon as possible, but he couldn’t help pausing when he saw the sword. It had a long, straight blade of dense black, with red layers streaked through it in a pattern that reminded him of rising flames.

It was Blackflame. The Emperor had a sword made from the Path of Black Flame, and from the pressure it gave off, it was at least an Overlord-level weapon.

After that brief moment of hesitation, Lindon set Little Blue onto the Emperor’s shoulder. She leaned into his neck, pushing a bigger orb of blue into his madra channels than she had used on Yerin. It took her a hair longer this time, either because she found it harder to affect an Overlord or because the field was affecting her more strongly.

Lindon pulled her back, moving over to Mercy. He wanted to help everyone on the ship—some of them had started acclimating, staggering around or preparing techniques, but none of them were anywhere near ready to battle someone of their own level. He could bet the Seishen Kingdom would have ward keys for this boundary field.



And another cloudship had approached, carrying multiple Underlords and one greater power. The King of Seishen, and—Lindon guessed—his royal family.

Whatever happened to the rest of the ship, Lindon had a goal.

He passed Little Blue onto Mercy as the Emperor took a long, shuddering breath. His eyes flicked to Lindon, and he gave a nod, but his mind was clearly on business. His wings spread and he rose into the air, confronting the smaller cloudship.

Mercy shook herself as she woke, and she brightened when she saw Little Blue, cradling the tiny spirit in her hands. “Did you save me? Thank you! Oh, what's wrong? Can you not help yourself?”

Little Blue gave a sad little peep, sprawled on Mercy's black-gloved palms.

[She can help your human spirits cleanse themselves,] Dross said. [She wouldn't be affected if she were more powerful, but right now she's too weak. Oh, and it won't last long. Other than you and the Arelius, the rest of you have maybe...ten minutes before the field goes to work again.]

Lindon gathered Little Blue up again. Her color had grown lighter, and her edges had started to fade slightly. She curled up to sleep in his hand, and he placed her back in the void key.

“That's the best she can do,” Lindon reported to Eithan, who was radiating as much power as he could to slow the approach of the enemies. He couldn't tell if it was working or not; the Seishen King was still moving forward steadily.

Eithan looked to the Emperor. “Twenty-nine Lords and Ladies, one of which is an Overlord. How many do you think we're worth?”

“Ten,” the Emperor said immediately, still watching the skies. “I can match the Overlord, and in a fighting retreat, perhaps one or two Underlords more. I trust you to tie up three without getting yourself killed, though I doubt you can finish them.”

“I'm honored by your confidence in me,” Eithan said. “Though it depends on their deployment. A few of them are old and dangerous, and I would hesitate to face them even alone. They would *ruin* my hair.”

“Your students can stand in for one more, or perhaps two, and the rest of our passengers can keep four or five at bay, even in their current state. The enemy does not seem to have brought any Truegolds.”

“They haven't,” Eithan confirmed. “But that's still only a third of what

we're facing. Should we surrender? The Sage will intervene.”

The Emperor squared his shoulders. “Not until we have tried everything. We abandon the mission. I will overload the propulsion constructs. We leave.”

“I was somewhat looking forward to a desperate do-or-die stand, but I agree. We were never going to succeed with them ready for us. Cut our losses and retreat, with surrender as the final option. But I disagree on one point.”

Eithan shook out his sleeves. “I'll overload the constructs myself. They'll need some maintenance when we return, but I need you to deal with *that*.”

A small cloudship, the size of a lifeboat, emerged from the white haze.

## Chapter 17

The Seishen King stood at the bow of his ship, which rode on a vivid orange cloud. His rough black-and-gray beard and shaggy hair lent him the aspect of a bear, but his Forged gray armor made him look deadly. In his left hand, he held a shield that reminded Lindon of Kiro's: a heavy metal disc with a lion's face on it. In his right, he clutched a massive sword.

His helmet was missing, and he smiled broadly down on the Blackflame Empire ship. "You're looking sleepy, Naru Huan! Why don't I give you a place to rest?"

The Emperor kept his Blackflame sword in both hands even as he rose into the air on emerald wings. "Seishen Dakata. Are you not ashamed to show your face? You broke the peace by attacking my people first, and here you lure us in with shameful traps. Are you still so afraid of us, even with all these Underlords?"

King Dakata wore his emotions openly on his face. He went from gloating to suspicious in a moment. "You appear to be in fine health. At least your tongue is quick enough."

Naru Huan swept his sword through the air, leaving a trail of fire and destruction. "A trick like this could never hinder us. Ah, but we have failed to greet your son." Now, the Emperor had risen above the level of the cloudship, and he looked down upon the armor-clad prince. "Prince Kiro, who bravely managed victory over a handful of Golds."

Prince Kiro was armored like his father, and he did not react visibly to the Emperor's words. He dipped his head in respect. "I apologize if my actions disrespected you, Emperor Naru."

A younger man in similar armor stood nearby, though he didn't stand as comfortably as the other two. He held a sword in each hand, and glared at the Emperor as though he were about to attack. From the look of him, and the fact that he stood to the Seishen King's left, Lindon took him to be Kiro's brother.

The bottom of Lindon's stomach dropped out when he realized the younger brother was Underlord too. He couldn't be much older than Lindon.

He sensed more Underlords on the ship, but didn't see Meira. From this distance, it would be hard to spot their madra.

Eithan had disappeared, presumably to the propulsion constructs, but Lindon had turned his attention away. Down to the gate to the Akura vault.

Yerin stood looking over the edge of the railing. The sense of her madra withdrew as she veiled herself, and Lindon knew what she was thinking.

She glanced back over her shoulder, meeting his eyes.

Then she leaped over the side.

The Akura family wall guarded the ship on one flank. None of the Seishen Underlords could be approaching from that direction, and even with ward keys, their spiritual senses would have to be restricted. The Night Wheel Valley already made it harder to see or sense anything. Under those conditions, using a veil, Yerin had every chance of reaching the gate undetected.

But that wouldn't be her plan, he realized. She hadn't brought Mercy; she couldn't enter the gate. She would hide nearby, meditating. Trying to trigger advancement.

The Emperor and the Seishen King traded barbs, and Eithan's madra spun as he readied himself to unleash it on the cloudship.

*Dross, will this boundary field reach into the vault?*

[If it's filled with natural treasures? Not possible. It'll have to be locked up tight with scripts that block aura.]

That was all Lindon needed to hear. He reached for Mercy...

But she had already grabbed his arm, pulling him closer to the railing. Her spirit was veiled.

"You know we're going after her," she said. "Follow me!"

*Leave Eithan a message*, Lindon told Dross, then he pulled his pure madra in tight and jumped after Mercy.

She rode her staff the short distance down to the ground, where she raced to the gate.

Yerin dashed out of a nearby thicket. "You're cracked in the head. What if I'd been gone already?"

"Then we would have followed you," Lindon said, and ran toward the star-covered gate.

The constellation patterns on the gate shifted and danced at the touch of

Mercy's hand, and the thick stone entrance—wide enough to drive a pair of wagons through—began to slide open.

Lindon braced himself for the grating of stone-on-stone and a huge, visible hole in the wall, but the stone melted soundlessly up, leaving enough room for them to scurry inside.

If he had thought the aura *outside* was rich, inside it was like drowning in power. He was scared to open his Copper sight. It felt as overwhelming to him now as the Transcendent Ruins had back when he was a Copper.

It was the perfect place for them to advance.

Which was fortunate, because they were locked in once they entered. They wouldn't be able to leave for days, with the Blackflame Empire retreating. Maybe they would have to stay inside after the competition closed, and the portal back to the Empire vanished.

If he and Yerin made it to Underlord, it would all be worth it. As long as Yerin made it, really. Lindon wasn't about to turn down a chance to advance himself, but he was far more worried about Yerin.

Lindon glanced back as they ran, seeing the propulsion constructs flare green at the back of the cloudship. A few silver lances blasted from the Seishen side as some of the Underlords managed to release Striker techniques, but the only one that mattered was from the King: an enormous battering ram of solid gray force shaped almost like a fist that formed out of nowhere. It plunged down onto the ship.

And was met with a wave of Blackflame.

The fiery power raised the temperature everywhere, incinerating the King's technique. Then there was a pulse of wind, and the ship turned into a beam of color as Eithan's madra shot them away.

The Seishen Kingdom followed immediately, their smaller cloudship streaking afterwards, and all the other Underlords flying away on clouds or techniques of their own. None of them noticed Lindon hurrying toward the gate.

[Did you invite someone else?] Dross asked.

Lindon immediately spun around, but saw no one. *Was someone following us?*

[Most of my attention is going to keeping *you* from sleeping on your feet. You should pay attention to your own senses.]

Nonetheless, when Lindon passed under the stone gate, he looked to Mercy before even looking around. "We need to shut the gate behind us," he

said.

She peered around him to look into the white haze. “We *can*, but then we're at Aunt Charity's mercy. The door can be closed from the inside, but it can only be opened from the outside by an Akura. I could call for help, but...my family...” she gave him a hopeless shrug.

“Someone's trailing us?” Yerin asked, her Goldsigns bristling and white sword in hand.

“Dross thought he noticed someone,” Lindon said.

The purple spirit spun into existence, hanging over Lindon's shoulder, and gave a fake cough. [I have to work through *your* body. If anyone's eyes are playing tricks on me, they're yours.]

Yerin peered into the distance for a long moment before turning to walk deeper into the vault. “Doesn't change what we have to do.”

He supposed she was right, but he hated leaving an opening behind them. Lindon gave one last glance over his shoulder before following her inside.

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Kiro watched his father's cloudship speed after the Empire, feeling the King's fury. They had approached cautiously, waiting for their boundary field to do its work, only to find that the Emperor hadn't been fazed by their dream aura at all. Did he have protection against mental techniques? Maybe that was his Iron body. Nonetheless, even with him awake, the Blackflame Empire could gain nothing here.

Especially since Kiro, Daji, and Meira had leaped off the ship before it had departed. Without the Sage's warning, they would never have noticed a few veiled Truegolds slipping off the Empire's massive cloudship. They would have pursued, missing their chance.

Kiro still hadn't sensed anything, but thanks to Akura Charity's map, he knew exactly where to look. And as they approached, they saw the gate open a crack.

The flowers braided in Meira's hair blazed pink, and her smile was cold. She was beautiful in her new armor, thin and sleek, her scythe making her look every inch the Lady of Death. But he couldn't take advantage of her preoccupation with him. Besides, she deserved someone who could give her his full attention.

“We're in luck, Your Highness,” she said. “They came. Their Emperor can say whatever he likes, but *we* have the prize.”

Shame rushed through Kiro at her mention of the Emperor's words,

though he showed none of it. Naru Huan had seen through him.

Daji gripped his swords, pacing forward. "I'll take them myself. See what the Sage thinks when I paint her halls with their blood."

"Restraint," Kiro reminded him, though he did follow his little brother toward the gate. "If we are not careful, we will disgrace ourselves in her eyes instead. And we cannot hurt Akura Mercy, even by accident."

He had chewed on her words ever since she'd appeared, and her phrasing still disturbed him.

Her note didn't say 'Do not harm Akura Mercy,' or 'You will be punished if you harm Akura Mercy.'

It said 'You *should* not harm Akura Mercy.'

That could be taken as a command...or as a warning. Either way, Kiro intended to obey.

Daji made no comment, but together, the three of them entered the gate to the Akura vault.

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The interior of the Akura vault was enormous. It must have extended beyond the outer wall and into the mountain itself. Lindon found himself in one hallway about fifty yards long, the ceiling far overhead. The hall ended in a wide, circular atrium with a central spire that swirled with script. Scripts on the spire shone in a host of colors, drawing aura from all over the facility, and Lindon felt like he could guess at its function even without opening his Copper sight. It must siphon any excess aura that escaped containment and funnel it elsewhere to the rest of the house.

The hallway was as wide as the gate had been, and into the stone walls were carved house-sized nooks that contained the natural treasures. After walking into the hallway for a few paces, he stared into the first such opening on his right.

A massive scripted cauldron, big enough to cook an ox in, sat in the center of the display. It was filled to the brim with those black death-aura skulls, from as small as a fingernail to bigger than an actual human skull. Other, similar objects had been placed in the corners, or on shelves around the walls: a black vase that spilled ominous green aura, a sword with a blade stained in green-edged black, and a little statuette of a cat licking its own paw with eyes that blazed green-and-black.

The whole display radiated death. There was nothing that walled off this nook from the hall except a line of script around the inside of the entryway. If

Lindon stepped across that line, he was certain the death aura would kill him instantly.

And there was another nook above that one. Two rows per wall.

Opposite the hall, on his left, was a similar display filled to bursting with the power of water. The center of that display was a fountain rather than a cauldron, and its shelves sported seashells, clear blue fruits, crystal-clear clouds that wept rain, bars of reflective blue steel, and swirling orbs like trapped whirlpools in every size from small enough to fit in his palm to bigger than his entire body.

He scanned down the hall. There were ten such displays in each row on either side, and both an upper row and a lower row. So forty natural treasure displays in this hall alone.

There were four hallways radiating out from the central atrium. And maybe more, further down; who was to say that this was the only crossroads in the entire vault?

“There has to be one of these filled with swords,” Yerin said, looking hungrily from one to the next.

[If you find one for dream aura, I promise I will stop altering your memories while you sleep,] Dross said.

Lindon missed a step.

[Kidding! Or am I? You won't know unless you bribe me.]

“There are sixteen for shadow aura,” Mercy said, hobbling down the hall on her staff. “As I'm sure you noticed, darkness is thicker than weeds out there.”

Even with the spire at the end of the hallway drawing off excess aura, there was still enough power here to overshadow the Night Wheel Valley many times over. Lindon felt like he was about to advance just *thinking* about it.

But he kept a close eye on Yerin.

“We can give you as much time as you need,” he said, but he was hoping that being here would somehow lead her thoughts in the right direction.

They reached the spire, which was ringed by a waist-high wall. She hopped up onto it, sitting high enough that she could look him in the eye. “No sense in that. You advance, then we stuff our pockets. I'll keep an open eye.”

“First, why don't you—”

“Listen,” she interrupted, “I'll be thinking 'till my skull pops while you do it. Maybe the feel of you advancing will set a spark to my torch and light my



way forward. But whether it does or doesn't, we could use an Underlord right now.”

Lindon's conscience wasn't entirely at ease, but he already felt like he couldn't wait anymore. Without further argument, he sat on the ground, resting his back against the wall. Yerin's armored boots dangled next to him, and Mercy's staff ground into the stone on his other side. They would make sure he was undisturbed.

Facing back down the hallway, he tapped his void key and opened his storage. He felt ridiculous using his own natural treasures when he sat here in an endless treasure vault, but he didn't want to spend the time to select the perfect balance of aura. He decided to think of it as emptying his storage so he could fit more in later.

Lindon carefully withdrew the set of natural treasures that he carried for his advancement, placing them around him. Then he closed his eyes, letting his perception flow along the lines of aura, tracing the source.

It was many times easier here than it had ever been before. He felt connection to everything all of a sudden; from the stone beneath him to Yerin's beating heart. Her lifeline felt so thin that it pained him. It was a central pillar holding up a house, but it had chunks taken out of it like bites. How long would it hold up under the weight?

He refocused his mind, feeling his connection to the world around him. The soulfire echoed that connection, forming a bridge between his spirit and the aura.

*I practice the sacred arts, Lindon began, so that I—*

Yerin's spirit and Mercy's flared at the same time. The script around the entrance was disrupted for an instant.

Someone had entered the vault.

He snapped his eyes open, deactivating the void key so that he could see. He therefore had a clear view of the Underlords marching on him.

Kiro walked in the center, helmet on, his armor working smoothly around him. Unlike the crudely Forged madra he'd worn before, this was clearly Soulsmith work, and through each seam in the other layer of dark gray madra, Lindon caught a flash of bright silver or dull yellow beneath. Nothing of Kiro himself showed through. He carried the same sword with the bright blue spark curling around its edge, and the lion-faced shield.

The young man Lindon took to be his brother sauntered along with him on the left. He held two swords and no shield, and his armor was slightly

thinner. He was also walking with his helmet dismissed, and by his expression was eager for violence.

Meira walked to Kiro's right. Unlike the last time Lindon had seen her, she wore armor as well. Her armor was sleek and smooth, seemingly made of plates of polished wood with green shining beneath. He could see no trace of her hair or the Goldsign running through it, only an ornate chestnut-colored helmet that shone from within with a verdant green light. He only recognized her by the scythe she carried propped up against her right shoulder, the blade a standing banner of life-fire.

Three enemy Underlords, and clearly they had come here for him. Behind them, a silver-and-purple owl fluttered within, perching on the edge of a nook on the upper row.

[Okay,] Dross said, [this could be good! It isn't the *worst* possible scenario. It is the...fifth worst.]

Lindon scooped up the natural treasures he'd prepared for advancement, hurriedly tossing them into his void key. It wasn't the most dignified thing to be doing in front of the enemy, but he didn't want to leave the wealth behind.

He rose to his feet, cycling pure madra and activating the communication construct in his left arm. He had removed it from his previous armor, but after re-examining the suit with Dross, they had found the space to return it. And they had decided to do so, in the case that Dross needed to preserve his energy.

And when he wanted to send a message to the Skysworn without broadcasting his thoughts to every mind within range.

"Three Seishen Underlords in the vault," Lindon said quietly. "Require assistance."

The butterfly-shaped construct hovering over his bracer flashed once, then vanished. If Eithan knew their situation, he would find a way to help.

"Come at me all at once," the younger brother shouted, his swords flaring blue.

Yerin tilted her head. "Whose little brother are you?"

The youngest Underlord's face turned purple as he ground his teeth together. "Your Remnants should remember the name of the man who killed you! I am Seishen Daji!"

Mercy waved. "Hello, Daji! I'm Mercy!"

*Dross, how fast can I advance?* Lindon asked.

[There are records of Truegolds advancing to Underlord in one breath

under ideal conditions, and these *are* ideal conditions. Except for the people waiting to kill you. But I wouldn't count on doing it that fast. Say...two minutes, to be safe? That's two minutes in which someone won't stab you to death, so probably not *these* two minutes.]

He didn't have that long. Even if he ended up being one of the people who advanced in a breath, Kiro only *needed* one breath to spear him through the chest with a Striker technique.

Lindon cycled Blackflame. "Yerin, are you feeling enlightened yet?"

Her sword was in her hand, the power of her spirit scraping at the edges of her armor. Her six sword-arms bristled around her, gleaming silver. "Can't say that I am."

He turned blackened eyes from her to his enemies. "Then I don't see a reason to leave," he said. "Do you?"

She drew aura around her sword as she passed it through the air. "I'm starting to like it here." Her tone was deliberately casual, but he caught the strain. She was afraid.

[That would be the correct reaction,] Dross said.

Mercy's staff melted, the dragon's head sliding down to the center as it transformed into a bow. She pulled the string, manifesting an arrow. "Three of them, and three of us. Could be worse!"

Dross slid out of Lindon and held a tentacle over his mouth as he cleared his throat. [Ahem. AHEM.]

Mercy brightened further. "So we outnumber them!"

Meira's voice rang out through the hallway. "We expected you to use this time to surrender," she said. A ball of green light appeared on her upturned palm. "I'm glad you didn't."

A line of life energy burned the air toward Yerin. At the same time, a crackling blue light streaked out from Kiro's sword, and a silver-gray bar of Daji's own madra.

No one was caught off guard.

Lindon's dragon's breath met Kiro's sword-blast, and the beams deflected one another. Blackflame left a line of red-hot stone in the floor, though it didn't melt anything—the Akura vault was not so easily broken. Kiro's blue madra traced a thin line on the ceiling.

At the same time, Mercy's black arrow met the line of force madra from Daji. The arrow was blasted aside. Yerin blocked his attack with one bladed arm, though it took a great effort of madra, but it didn't stop her from

retaliating with a wave of sword-madra from her Rippling Sword technique.

Which left the green line of life madra blasting for her.

Lindon reached out his right hand.

He activated his hunger madra, swallowing as much of the green light as he could, but this was the attack of an Underlady. The light knocked his white hand back, splashing him with madra that attacked his lifeline.

It was like trying to chop down a tree with a paper axe. Before Lindon's lifeline, which had been reinforced by Ghostwater's Life Well, Meira's madra withered away.

He pulled the green madra from his arm into his body, but not into his core. The madra went wild, trying to harm him, but his Bloodforged Iron body was already feeding on it. The life madra attack dissipated, accomplishing nothing.

But he didn't have time to relax or retaliate, because after that volley of Striker techniques, the Underlords were upon them.

While Lindon was still recovering, Meira hacked at Yerin with her scythe. Yerin leaped backwards, and the Underlady narrowly missed cutting the spire at the center of the room. Lindon didn't know what would happen if she broke those scripts, but it wouldn't be anything good. Yerin fled down one hallway, with Meira chasing her.

Lindon tried to chase after, but Daji dashed for him, and he readied himself to meet the new Underlord's attack. An instant later, he didn't have to: Mercy's Strings of Shadow technique snared Daji's feet, tangling him up. He tore through her power easily, still set on Lindon.

Then a black arrow took him in the cheek.

He conjured his helmet, roaring at her, and finally changed his target.

Daji swiped at Mercy, but she turned her third page, radiating the power of a Truegold. In an instant, she was pulled away on Strings of Shadow. The young prince followed her down a different hallway, shouting.

Leaving Lindon standing and facing Kiro. If he turned his back on the prince, he would die.

Slowly, the Underlord raised his shield. "I expected you to run," he said.

"You were wrong."

Lindon was afraid for Mercy; she was completely outclassed in this contest, but she was an Akura inside her home. Killing her would mean swift and certain execution for the Seishen Underlords.

He was even more afraid for Yerin. If they had to fight Kiro and Meira

again, Lindon had intended to be the one to fight Meira. But he had missed his opportunity to take that fight, so he had to turn his focus to the one ahead of him.

He had to end this quickly.

“Let Yerin advance,” Lindon said quietly. “Leave us alone, and I will swear an oath right now to turn down any nominations for the tournament.”

Kiro stopped his gradual advance. His shield lowered slightly.

“I beg you, please stand down. She is dying.”

The prince hesitated. Lindon thought he sensed uncertainty in the man's spirit, and for a moment Lindon hoped.

Then Kiro shook his helmeted head. “I can't. I bear greater responsibility than you can imagine.” He lifted his sword, his shield rising to match it. “And why should I make a deal with you? You're not even an Underlord.”

Lindon's Blackflame madra surged, and he reached into his void key.

“I don't care,” he said.

Then he pulled out a cannon.

## Chapter 18

The Emperor's ship fled through the darkness, flanked by enemies on all sides. Even Eithan's sight was restricted by the shadow aura of the Night Wheel Valley, but he could still see Underlords dashing through the trees on either side, pitching Striker techniques at their hull.

Most of the Truegolds were either maintaining defensive scripts in the ship or using their own techniques to defend them. Cassias and Naru Jing were no exception, standing at the railing and taking shots at distant enemies.

They were only inches away from where Eithan stood, pouring his madra into the ship's propulsion constructs, fueling their flight. Eithan reached one hand over to tap Naru Jing on the arm. "Would you hold on to your husband for a moment? The skies are about to get rough."

She looked confused for a moment, but then her yellow Remnant eye flashed, and she threw her hands around Cassias' shoulders.

"Your turn," Eithan called, and behind him, the Emperor spread wide emerald wings.

"We know," Naru Huan said. His spirit surged with power.

A different Overlord's madra swept over them all, coalescing into a gray blade that hung over their cloudship. It plunged down, stabbing into the deck. Eithan was certain that the attack was intended not to kill, but to destroy their vehicle and scatter them, leaving them at the mercy of the Seishen Kingdom.

From his soul space, Emperor Naru Huan pulled out his weapon.

It was a long, straight-bladed sword that looked as though it had been made from black glass rather than from metal. As his spirit flowed through it, waves of red began to shine like rising flames all over its dark surface.

Blackflame ignited on the Emperor's blade. The madra trailed behind his swing as he swept his weapon at the sky, slashing at the sword descending upon them all.

Red-and-black fire drove up through the Seishen King's technique, splitting it in half. The Blackflame madra tore it apart, reducing it instantly to

a cloud of gray specks.

The clash of Overlord techniques shook the cloudship like an earthquake. The deck shuddered violently, sending sacred artists tumbling in every direction.

Naru Jing flapped her wings, hanging in the air, Cassias steady in her arms. Naru Saeya, the Emperor's sister, used her Grasping Sky madra to seize half a dozen Truegolds before they were lost, pulling them back down to the ship.

Eithan was tossed in the air as well, which broke his contact with the propulsion constructs. A gray-bearded Truegold stumbled past him, destined to fall over the railing, but Eithan seized the back of the man's robe. While still in the air, Eithan pulled the old man back, though that only accelerated Eithan's trip over the side.

He silently thanked his Raindrop Iron body as he twisted in midair, grabbed the railing, and pulled himself back on one-handed.

Without the reaction speed his Iron body gave him, he'd have fallen to the forest below. Which would have been beyond embarrassing.

The Seishen King's smaller cloudship had caught up to them, which had been inevitable as soon as Eithan had lost his grip on the propulsion. Enemy Underlords caught up to them, flying up from the forest to land on their cloud base or cling to the sides of their hull.

It was a pity. The portal to the Blackflame Empire was just in front of them, a tall column of darkness leading into the night sky.

Now the King himself looked down from his tiny cloudship, a grin splitting his bearded face. He had a lion-headed shield in one hand and a sword in the other, and his armored form loomed over the Emperor.

"Rude of you, Naru Huan, trying to leave without greeting us." He laughed heartily, though no one else did.

Green wings stirred the wind aura, and Naru Huan drifted up, trailing Blackflame madra from his weapon. "Would you attempt to stop us from returning to our Empire?"

King Dakata hefted his weapons. "I couldn't waste this chance to give my Underlords some exercise. And it's been a long time since I could stretch my own spirit. What do you say, Huan? Should we exchange techniques?"

By this time, Seishen Underlords had crawled up onto the ship from all sides. Some of them floated on Thousand-Mile Clouds, Remnants, or flight techniques. Others had pushed their way onto the deck.

Naru Saeya drifted over to Eithan, her sword of rainbow glass shimmering in one hand. She looked as grave as the situation deserved, but if he didn't know better, he'd have said she was enjoying this.

She kept her voice low. "You think the Sage is watching us?"

There were two silver-and-purple owls observing them at that moment, and considering the restrictions Night Wheel Valley put on his bloodline powers, perhaps many more. "I have no doubt," he said.

"Good," she said. "This is my chance to give her a show."

Overlord madra detonated above them, as the King and the Emperor clashed, and that was the signal. The fight began.

Saeya dashed out, wings shining and rainbow sword flashing. She zipped from one Underlord opponent to another, engaging them in the air. They struck at her with her own techniques, but she was already gone, moving to the next target. With her speed and senses, if she kept that up, she might be able to tie up five or six opponents.

While musing, Eithan casually slapped aside a ball of wheeling golden energy that would have crashed into Cassias' back.

The Underlords on either side would avoid bloodshed as much as they could, but there were many Blackflame Truegolds onboard. Accidents happened, and Akura Charity would not hold a handful of deaths against anyone.

So Eithan had to hold those accidents back, at least until the Sage herself intervened. And she would.

After his students finished their business.

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As Fisher Gesha told it, she'd been working in her foundry some months ago, working on ways to get extra output out of Gold bindings. It was a known fact in Soulsmithing that some techniques would resonate with one another when activated together, producing a result greater than the sum of its parts. However, it was a rare enough phenomenon that it was difficult to count on.

The Fisher had, on paper, worked out a plan for a launcher construct that relied on this effect. And not only one pair, but three pairs, all working together.

It was only viable in theory. A fun but impractical thought experiment. Until Eithan had found it and helped her make it real.

His bloodline legacy had been invaluable for tracking down the right



Remnants, his connections had given her the materials, and weeks of experimentation had produced one workable prototype.

Made of six Truegold bindings, linked together by a Fisher Soulsmith, washed in soulfire, and activated by a Highgold, it had scored a deadly hit on a Redmoon Hall Underlord.

She had told him that she couldn't have been the first Soulsmith to think of such a method, but the practical considerations were too great. First, finding six bindings and linking them all with not just each other, but with the Soulsmith's madra and the user's...it was exponentially more difficult than creating a regular launcher construct. Second, the weapon was 'loud,' spiritually speaking. The enemy would sense it coming. Third, the six bindings put a heavy strain on the construct's physical form, so it could only be used a few times. Three shots, if you were lucky. One if you weren't.

So three days ago, when Lindon had discovered what Dross could do for a Soulsmith, Gesha's resonance cannon was among the first projects he'd turned his mind to.

He'd expected to fight Kiro again. And if he did, he wanted to have something to punch through that shield.

The cannon he pulled from his void key was made entirely of Remnant parts. It looked like it had been created from slick bones of black light; it was too big to be used in one hand, and it had a rounded, organic appearance that came to sharp points. Its mouth was the snarling maw of a dragon's skull, and it was made of black madra with ripples of dark red.

Blackflame dead matter. He'd raided the Skysworn foundry for a Blackflame Remnant; if it hadn't been for his status as a Truegold in the top one hundred, he would never have been allowed to take it.

This was his solution to the second problem of Gesha's. It was easy to sense coming? Not if he kept it in a separate space.

Now that he pulled it out, it practically *screamed* in his spiritual sense, and the aura around him screamed with it.

It sounded like a dragon's roar.

Seishen Kiro put up his shield, the lion facing Lindon, and flooded it with madra and soulfire. The shield expanded immediately into a solid gray dome that protected the Underlord.

For a moment, the world was silent. Then devastation *thundered* from the cannon.

There were six techniques bound up in Lindon's resonance cannon.

Spear of the Golden Sun, from a Path of light and fire.  
Heart-seizing Claw, from a Path of blood and destruction.  
Phoenix Wing Burst, from a Path of force and fire.  
Song of Falling Ash, from a Path of destruction.  
Gravetouch, from a Path of death.  
And black dragon's breath, from the Path of Black Flame.

All of those techniques were Striker techniques, all of them lethal, all compatible with one another, and all compatible with the Path of Black Flame.

The combination of techniques was too bright to examine directly, though Dross had shown Lindon its effect in a dream simulation. It was a riot of colors, from ragged thorns of red to a rushing spray of fire, all synchronized to feed on one another.

The madra closed the gap between Lindon and Kiro's shield in a blink of an eye. The floor, which had only heated from the passage of dragon's breath, *exploded* outward, sending chunks of rock flying to either side. If they breached containment on the wrong natural treasures, all of them would die, but it was too late for caution.

The Striker technique struck Kiro's shield. The soulfire-infused Forged barrier burst like a soap bubble, exploding with enough force to send a roar echoing down the halls and hurl the Underlord backwards, but that was all Lindon saw.

The cannon was under great strain. It could last for another shot or two before it was depleted of its essence and destroyed.

Had Kiro's shield withstood the impact? Had Kiro himself?

If he waited to see the effect, it would be too late. He couldn't let up. He had to assume the prince had survived.

One of the other drawbacks of the weapon was that it took a moment to refresh itself, the bindings drawing new power from the stockpile inside the weapon. In another battle, perhaps he could wait the few seconds it would take.

Lindon dropped his cannon and pulled out a second.

Before the dust had cleared from his first shot, his second was already in the air.

This one wasn't made from Blackflame dead matter—the materials he had used in the first were too rare and valuable to be used too frequently. This one was a sacred instrument, like Gesha's original prototype—it was a

construct in a physical shell. Plates of goldsteel restrained the excess power of the bindings, and scripts focused them together. These techniques weren't as compatible or as destructive as the first set.

He blasted Kiro anyway. The force lit up the hallway with another flash and a roar, tearing a groove in the floor.

This time, he caught a glimpse of the Underlord again—the man's body was spinning through the air, his armor chipped and smoking. His shield was nowhere to be seen, but his sword was still in his hand.

Lindon had already dropped the second cannon and picked up the first again. The hallway roared.

Still, he couldn't let up. This battle couldn't take a second longer than necessary, or Yerin would pay for it.

“Dross,” he said. “Battle plan.”

**Information requested: combat solution against Seishen Kiro.**

**Beginning report...**

*Not to criticize, because it's nice to be needed, but are you sure you need a plan for this? Sorry, I'll focus.*

*First, he's hurting, but he isn't dead.*

Lindon empties both cannons into Kiro's flying form, driving him back to slam into the wall over the open gate. His body falls from there, crumpled onto the floor, but he pushes himself shakily to his feet.

*That is some high-quality armor. Prime stuff. The Seishen Soulsmiths were not playing around with this, I can tell you that much.*

The outer plates of gray madra are cracked and split, smoke leaking from the armor, but the broken plates only reveal shifting parts of silver and gold beneath. Kiro activates his armor, and a network of bindings trigger all over the suit, linked by a method that Dross doesn't understand. Gold light shines from within the helmet and through each joint.

*You're looking at, oh...Enforced strength and speed, a Forged barrier inside the armor, and a Ruler attack that has its own guidance construct. It will aim straight at you.*

The chunks of stone, pieces of the floor broken by Lindon's cannon, are shaped by yellow earth aura into fist-sized balls. Yellow light flashes and they're *hurled* at Lindon, who dodges the first, deflects the second with his

armor, and by the time the third arrives, Kiro is on top of him, sword in hand.

*Without the new armor, he'd be dead already. I give you fifty-fifty odds of surviving, and only a twenty percent chance of killing him.*

*Wow. Looks like you really did need a plan.*

Wind bursts from Lindon's green armor as he activates the Skysworn's emergency wind barrier, knocking Kiro back a step and grabbing the enemy's armor with his Remnant hand. The hunger binding devours the strength of the armor.

*It works:* the Ruler binding stops shooting Lindon as it loses power, and just in time. Lindon's armor had been starting to crack. Kiro tries to fight back, but he can't muster enough power in time. He falls to the ground, trapped in powerless metal.

*It doesn't work:* Kiro takes a step back, and Lindon reaches out with his white arm, but the Underlord is too fast. He brings his sword up, and Lindon has to pull his arm back or lose it.

Now Lindon is on the back foot, and Kiro has every advantage. The Ruler construct keeps pelting Lindon with projectiles, breaking his Skysworn armor piece by piece, as Kiro pushes him backwards.

Eventually, Lindon runs out of tricks, and is pinned to the stone by the Underlord's sword.

*You'll have better odds if you fight to run away, but I know that's not what you want. You want to win, I can tell.*

*I've got a plan for you, but it's not an easy one. You're going to have to take some risks...*

~~~

Yerin used her Endless Sword like the wind, and an invisible blade struck Meira's scythe, knocking it back before it could slice into her.

"You stabbed him," Meira muttered as she leaped down the hall, swinging her weapon at Yerin. "You cut him. You hurt him. You made him bleed." The green flame of her scythe passed without harm to the stone, but each swing was more pressure on Yerin, pushing her back down the hall.

Meira's body had been reforged in soulfire, but Yerin's Steelborn Iron body gave her more than enough physical strength to match her. Unfortunately, physical strength wasn't coming into play as much as Yerin wanted.

That was her only edge. She couldn't summon her Blood Shadow unless she had no other choice. It was too strong now; it could even *speak*. It was

only holding back from draining her dry because it felt like it. What if it changed its mind? Would it hollow her out and wear her like a suit? Would it *be* her, walking up to Lindon while he had his guard down?

No, the Blood Shadow wasn't an option. She had to win this one herself.

"I'll kill you," Meira said, her voice suddenly pleasant.

"You're cracked in the head," Yerin said, whipping a Rippling Sword at her opponent. The silver slash flew through the air, and Meira avoided it effortlessly, but the point was to buy time. Yerin created a few more feet of distance between them.

Meira's helmeted head twitched. She reached out one hand, gathering up a ball of green light, and then pointed to Yerin.

A lance of life-madra blasted at Yerin, who managed to get the flat of her white blade up in time to catch the beam.

"I'm not insane," Meira said, suddenly calm. "I owe him a debt. He took me in, when his family didn't want him to. He trained me at his own expense. He has been with me every day since I was a girl. He will be a wise, selfless ruler, and I have sworn to protect him."

She drew back her scythe, the blade burning green. "And while he was under my protection, you stabbed him in the back."

Sweat rolled down Yerin's face. She had barely stopped that Striker technique, and her lifeline was shaky as it was. If she slipped and let one attack like that through, one more sweep of the scythe...that was it. Her Path was over.

If Meira had followed up that attack instead of stopping to talk, she might have been dead already.

Yerin shivered at the feeling of death passing so close, but her training took over as the Underlady dashed back at her.

She activated the Endless Sword with all six of her Goldsigns, conjuring a storm of silver power. The vital aura was strong here, but not much of it was sword-aura...and even if it had been, the aura was too strong for Yerin's Gold spirit to control completely. So the Endless Sword was no stronger than usual.

But she poured her madra into it and didn't bother with control.

She rang like a bell as a thousand invisible blades chewed through the air around her. Her own green armor was chipped and gouged, and a handful of new paper-thin wounds appeared on her skin as the technique passed a little too close to her.

Meira slammed into the Endless Sword head-on.

Her armor screamed and sparks flew as the blades of aura tore long scratches in her brown plates. A chunk of her helmet was torn away, exposing green and silver Remnant parts beneath, and smaller pieces on her chest, shoulder, and limbs tore away as well.

But Meira didn't defend herself.

She pushed through, heedless of defense, scythe swinging for the kill.

The blade of green flame closed in, with Yerin raising her master's sword to meet the weapon, but she could feel death breathing down the back of her neck.

Silently, she apologized to Lindon. To Eithan, to Orthos. And even to Mercy. She knew the pain they would go through after her death.

But she also felt a little relief. At least, by going first, she wouldn't have to feel the pain of losing them.

Something in her soulfire stirred.

Yerin's sword reached the scythe, and the scythe reached her. She couldn't tell which would strike first.

Then a red hand reached out of her chest.

It grabbed the scythe, stopping it long enough for Yerin's blade to connect. The weapon was knocked aside, but Meira spun into a kick aimed at Yerin's back.

The Blood Shadow rose completely.

It was a more complete copy than when she had seen it last, so it must have made good use of that meal. It had her hair, but bright red, her skin except pink. The whites of the Shadow's eyes were almost really white, its irises fully detailed but red. Six blades gleamed metallic red on its back, and it even wore a sacred artist's robes. Crimson, of course.

Its bladed Goldsigns caught the kick before the attack connected with Yerin, pushing it aside. Meira backed up a step, bringing her scythe around.

From a sheath at its belt, the Blood Shadow drew a pink-bladed copy of her master's sword, pointing it at Meira.

Horried, Yerin tried to pull the Shadow back inside her, but it resisted easily. Yerin shook; how much control did she have over the spirit? How much control had she ever had?

At least it was pointing its sword in the right direction, but how far could she trust that? How long would it protect her, and what might make it change its mind?

For the moment, Yerin set her thoughts about the parasite aside. Something had shifted in her soulfire a moment ago. What was it?

She was relieved to her bones that she hadn't been killed, of course, but for a second she had touched on a deeper fear even than that. She felt like, if she could only examine her thoughts for a moment, she could touch it again.

An explosion echoed through the halls, along with a flash of light.

Yerin felt it in her spirit: a detonation of many different techniques all at once, howling with power like a dragon Lord's roar. Even through the overwhelming aura in here, it was easy to sense.

Meira spun around, ignoring Yerin, her head turning down the hall. Around the corner, they saw a billowing cloud of smoke and debris. And Lindon, standing there holding a launcher construct that blazed with spiritual power.

The Underlady screamed in rage and panic, and green light flared from the gaps in her armor. She was Enforcing herself. She no longer cared about Yerin anymore; she was too focused on Kiro.

Terrified of losing him.

Yerin's thoughts snapped into place. She'd been on the right track before, but hadn't taken it far enough: she wasn't growing strong in order to protect the people she cared about. She pushed herself because she wanted to avoid the pain she'd felt so many times before. The pain of loss.

*I practice the sacred arts, she thought, because I don't want to hurt anymore.*

For an instant, the soulfire inside her thrummed, and she could feel the aura around her vibrating in sympathy. Maybe it was because of the environment down here, but she could sense the unity of aura clearly, even without having intentionally extended her perception. It was all so clear that she wondered how she had ever missed it in the first place.

Though her revelation was so embarrassing she wanted to die.

*Heaven's truth, I wish it had been about protecting people.*

Meira hurled herself toward Lindon, leaving a streak of green behind her. First, she had tried to kill Yerin. Now, she was trying to take someone away.

Yerin used the Endless Sword.

At the same instant, so did Yerin's Shadow.

A storm of blades surrounded Meira, visible only by the sparks and pieces they kicked up from her armor. Now, through the gaps, Yerin could see sprays of blood shooting up.

Meira tried to push through this one too, but the Blood Shadow's added assistance made it too much. She turned, her armor ragged, one eye visible through her broken helmet. There was a familiar fear in her eye.

Yerin raised her sword.

“Did I say you could leave?” the Truegold asked the Lady.

With an ear-piercing shriek, Meira turned from Yerin and raced away once again, trying to escape.

Yerin and her copy followed.

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People had always looked down on Seishen Daji.

His father was so proud of Kiro because Kiro was born first. And was good with people. Well, Daji had made it to Underlord earlier than Kiro had. His swordsmanship tutors said he was savage, which he knew was a compliment. He'd used his sacred arts to beat a dozen other students at his own stage into the ground.

Even the Sage was looking down on him, saying he wasn't ready to compete in her tournament. He'd been *born* to fight, everyone said it. He'd show the world. He hadn't been an Underlord for a week, but he knew he could go toe-to-toe with anyone of his generation.

Meira...didn't count. Her Path wasn't meant for combat, and that she could fight anyway was because she'd been born a freak. She was so obsessed with his brother that it scared him a little. Only a little.

Now, even this Highgold girl was looking down on him.

In more than one way.

She stared down at him from the ceiling with those purple eyes, hanging from her black strings, mocking him. She kept slipping through his hands like a fish, and to make matters even more humiliating, she even found the time to launch an arrow at him every now and then. They didn't hurt him, but they might make him trip a step or blind him for a second, and then he found she had scampered even further away.

By this point, as she pulled him further down the hallway like a mouse leading a cat, his rage was making it hard to breathe.

“STOP RUNNING!” he roared.

An arrow smacked him in the face.

“No!” Akura Mercy said, and he felt her running again.

Daji wasn't sure what he did next, but somehow he activated the armor that his father had given him. Its power Enforced him without costing him



any madra, and he blasted down the hallway. A yellow light flared on the floor beneath him as a Ruler technique gathered up loose stones and dust and turned them into deadly projectiles, which flashed at the Highgold.

His grin was furious, though she couldn't see it through his helmet. He gripped his swords, seeing her avoiding the pebbles that flew at her faster than arrows. He almost had her.

The whole vault shook, and there was a flash of light and power behind him.

He skidded to a stop, boots scraping on the stone floor. That had come from his brother's direction.

He couldn't see much from his vantage point, but he saw dust and flying stones. That hadn't been Kiro attacking, he was sure of it. Kiro had poured everything he had into defense.

Why did *Kiro* get the real fight, while Daji had to play catch-the-mouse?

He hated to let his prey go, so he turned to look back over his shoulder. "Stay right there," he said. Then he ran for Kiro.

There was another thundering crash, and he was filled with regret. He was missing an actual fight. Kiro and Meira had told him that these Truegolds could stand up to Underlords, but he hadn't believed them. Now, they had stuck him with the—

Something grabbed his foot as he ran, and he tripped, slamming headfirst into the floor.

He kept a grip on both his swords, but he was sprawled out on his chest. Behind him, there was a steady *chuff-chuff-chuff* as his armor's Ruler construct kept launching stone missiles.

He craned his head to look at his foot, where a sticky tendril of black madra gripped his ankle.

Mercy dipped around a rock, launched an arrow, smacked another rock out of the air, and launched an arrow. It was a display of skill he would have never thought he'd see out of anyone below Underlord.

Each black arrow stuck where it landed, spreading into sticky goo, but the ones that hit him in the armor had another technique embedded in them. They burned his soul and his flesh, eating into the constructs of his armor, a hungry acidic venom that chewed at him. They couldn't do much against his soulfire-enhanced body, but they stuck up the joints in his armor and interfered with the scripts.

Then she tripped.

The next pebble pelted her, and she cried out in pain. Now she was under pressure herself, doing everything she could to defend herself. She had been trapped.

He slowly pushed himself to his knees, tearing free of the black webs. More arrows came, but he knocked them aside with his swords.

It was strange; he felt so angry that his body could not contain it all. Like his wrath had gone beyond him and was controlling him from the outside.

That was it. He was done.

His armor was almost out of power, but he used the last of the fading Enforcer technique to rush down the hallway. Mercy saw him, Forging a string to pull herself up to the ceiling.

He'd seen that trick before.

He triggered the Striker bindings in both his swords. Blue crackling light lanced from his blades, one slicing through her string, one stabbing at her chest. Her green breastplate split under the attack, sending her tumbling backwards. But it hadn't killed her; the armor had done its job.

Daji Forged both blades to a massive size with the Titan's Blade technique. With the strength of an Underlord, he slammed them both down on her. It was enough force to spray her all over the stone.

When he removed his swords, he saw she was *covered* in purple crystalline armor. A full suit, like his. And she was giving off the pressure of a peak Truegold; had she advanced? Had she always been Truegold, but hiding her power? And how many layers of armor did she have, anyway?

Not that he cared.

He slammed his massive blades down on her, again and again. The armor she wore looked Forged, like his Goldsign breastplate. It looked like it had grown onto her, not like it had been crafted by Soulsmiths, and it didn't crack.

But it would sooner or later. And beating on her was healing his mind.

Finally, he paused. The armor dissolved, and she writhed on the floor. Her eyes looked like they were made of the same purple crystal her armor had been, but they soon retreated back to normal. Her spirit returned to Highgold, and she gasped for breath.

With a shaky smile, she pushed herself up on her bow, which had now straightened into a staff. "I lose," she said quietly.

Daji released his Forger technique, letting the increased length of his blades dissolve back into essence. He stood over her, swords in his hands, panting with effort, but he didn't quite feel the satisfaction of victory yet.

So he slammed the flat of his blade into the side of her head.

She almost flipped in the air as she collapsed, making a sound like a dying cat. It made him feel better.

“You think you have it that easy?” he asked her.

Of course she did. She was an Akura.

Her whole family looked down on him.

He put his boot on her arm, pinning her down so she couldn't move. Then he pulled off his helmet to look her in the eyes. They were filled with fear...but not as much as he'd expected.

He crushed her arm, which broke with the sound of splinters. This time, she didn't make much of a noise, but her eyes went as wide as they could possibly go. She gasped until her lungs were full, trying to pull in more air, and she writhed. He kept her arm pinned.

She had wasted his time.

He took his boot off of her, looking down, trying to decide whether to kill her or not. His anger had slackened a little, now that he'd had a chance to let it out, and it would be stupid to kill her. He knew that. He was in the basement of an Akura fortress.

He resented having to do what they told him just because they were stronger, but he wasn't entirely stupid. For now, he had to listen to them. And when he got stronger than everyone else, *they* would do what *he* said.

Daji spat at Mercy's feet in disgust, about to walk away.

Mercy forced out her next words. “Don't...kill them,” she said, between pained breaths.

Daji stopped.

“Just...leave, okay? Take...your...victory. Don't...ruin it...now.”

Even while begging for her life, she was *still* telling him what to do. On the brink of death, the Akura still thought she could command everyone with her family name.

Her lips were pale and trembling, but she pushed them into a smile.

“...please?” she added.

Anger rose up in him, ugly and hot. “Maybe I can't touch you,” he said, “but the Sage doesn't care about your friends.”

Daji turned to leave, hefting his swords in both hands. He had beaten her, but he hadn't truly won yet. Only crushing all three of them would be a true victory.

He had taken the first step when motion caught the corner of his eye. He

raised his blades, spinning back to battle.

Akura Mercy threw herself on his swords.

The weapons pierced her ribs, and her purple eyes widened in pain from only inches away. For a moment, he stood frozen in shock. She had pushed herself to her feet, stumbled over to him, and intentionally lunged into his blades. She hadn't even tried to defend herself.

She slid down, leaving her blood on his swords, her lips stained red. He saw sadness and pain in her, but no fear.

Was everyone in the Akura family insane?

Daji shook off his surprise, marching back to the fight. He didn't care about a Highgold Remnant. His armor was almost out of power, but he could tear it off and fight without it.

The Sage of the Silver Heart wouldn't be happy with him for killing an Akura clan member, but it had been an accident. Surely she would see that. If he was able to fight in the tournament and win glory for them, they'd forget all about this. As always, strength was the deciding factor.

Daji's body stopped.

A second later, his thoughts stopped.

And darkness flooded the vault.

## Chapter 19

**Information requested: Akura Mercy, daughter of Akura Malice.**

### **Beginning report...**

Even by the standards of the Akura clan, Mercy is born a genius.

The strength of the Akura bloodline legacy varies among the children of the clan; many must have their ability strengthened with elixirs while they are still young. Mercy's is so strong that she has to have it suppressed, lest it place too heavy a burden on her spirit.

At Copper, Iron, and Jade, she outclasses all her peers in madra control, technique proficiency, and shadow aura compatibility. She sets new records in combat with bows, staffs, flying swords, and puppet constructs.

The children of Akura Malice must prove themselves in order to be acknowledged as the Monarch's true sons and daughters. Over the centuries, one hundred and eight children fail to inherit a sufficient measure of her talent, and are relegated to distant branches of the family. They have no rights as Malice's children, and never meet their mother after the day of their birth.

Even for favored children, they have no chance to prove themselves to their mother before reaching Lowgold. At that point, if they inherit one of her Books or demonstrate enough talent in another area, she will favor them with an audience.

Even before advancing to Copper, Mercy meets with her mother at least once a year.

Instead of a Remnant, Malice's direct descendants attempt to bond with Divine Treasures created by their predecessors. These Books require an open soulspace as well as a Jade core, so special—and expensive—means are used to open the soulspace early without harming the child.

There are many such Books, each left behind by an Akura expert, each with seven pages and seven techniques. Malice's descendants are tested by

the Books, taken into a dream-world where they are given trials by the Divine Treasures themselves. Those who pass and truly embark on the Path of Seven Pages are recognized as members of the head family. Those who fail are still given the full protection of the Akura clan, but are sent to branch families.

Only one book has never been claimed before: the first book, the one crafted by Malice herself for her successor. Her idea of a perfect shadow Path. It contains the seven techniques that the Monarch would have learned herself, if she could start her journey anew. It is the guide to the Path she wishes she had walked. The Book of Eternal Night.

All of Malice's children are given the chance to activate the Book first. None ever do. For some of the geniuses in the line of Malice, like Akura Fury or Akura Charity, this is their first taste of failure. It is meant to show them the difference between a Monarch's expectations and their own.

Mercy falls into a trance at first sight.

The Book finds her perfect. By the time her tutors report the incident to Malice, her bonding is already complete. She is Lowgold.

That night, her mother declares Mercy her heir.

Mercy passes through Gold with ease, setting new family records at every turn. She is the object of jealousy, admiration, fear, and awe in the clan. As she grows, she learns more of her family.

She does not like what she sees.

They scrape and debase themselves before those more powerful than they, while demanding those beneath them do the same. Their behavior is undignified. It's petty. Mercy is determined to do better.

She treats those beneath her with respect, and her kindness becomes legend within the servants of the clan. There are those who wonder if her mother looked into the future to give her a fitting name, for there is truly mercy in her soul.

By the time she reaches the peak of Truegold, she knows she has escaped the trap that has ensnared the rest of her family. She does not demean herself for approval, or elevate the opinions of the powerful as they do. She practices the sacred arts for the benefit of others.

Then she discovers her Underlord revelation.

The truth frightens her.

Mercy abandons her advancement, seeks a hearing with her mother. She begs Malice to let her leave, so that she can find an identity of her own.

Her mother, who sees far, agrees.

But she includes the following restrictions.

Mercy's body and physical skill will be sealed, as these were inherited from her mother.

Her advancement will be reverted, as that too was a result of Akura family training. She will return to Lowgold, and she will have to advance from there without the assistance or guidance of the Akura family.

She may keep only her personal belongings, as well as her bow and her Book, for neither of those can be taken from her without damaging her spirit. However, as a Lowgold, she will be able to evoke only a small fraction of their power.

Mercy and Malice make a bet.

For as long as Mercy can survive on her own under such limitations, without the full measure of her talent or her family's support, Malice will place no requirements on her. She will live without the weight of responsibility, as she pleases.

However, if she cannot—if she fails or dies—then she must embrace her identity and become the heir to the Akura clan once again.

**Suggested topic: Akura Mercy's little brother, Pride.**

**Denied, report complete.**

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As the swords slipped through her ribs, Mercy felt one thing through the overwhelming pain: regret. She'd lost.

Not the fight.

Her bet.

After Seishen Daji turned to walk away, he froze. Everything did, including—thankfully—Mercy's pain.

Shadows rushed through the halls, casting the world in darkness. Only one point of light remained, like sunlight beaming down through clouds. Into that light stepped a woman.

She was beautiful, with a full figure and the poise of a queen. She wore a rich, black dress of silken fabric hung with a web of delicate silver chains, as though she had been draped in the world's most expensive spiderweb. Each of those chains bore fat amethysts, which flashed in the light streaming from above. One silver chain wrapped around her forehead, holding the largest

amethyst over her eyes.

Her hair flowed down to the small of her back, darker even than the night surrounding her. It hardly looked like it was made from real strands, but from liquid smoke or boiling shadow. Her hair billowed behind her, twisting and curling with a mind of its own. Her skin was pale, her lips painted black. At least, Mercy had always assumed it was paint.

And her eyes blazed with pure, endless purple light.

“Hello, Mother,” Mercy said.

Her voice came out a little strained around the wound in her chest, though she couldn’t feel it. The gemstone over Malice’s eyes flashed, and Mercy’s flesh knitted together. She took a deep breath, rising shakily to her feet.

She held Suu in one hand, and the bow’s dragon head swiveled down to look at Malice. The dragon’s eyes closed in respect. Mercy had to lean on the staff to push herself to her feet.

“You admit your loss?” Malice asked, her every word graceful.

“Yes.” Mercy had chosen to give up her bet so that she could save Lindon and Yerin, but she still felt some regret. And a touch of despair. She had enjoyed being out on her own.

But it had been worth it. If Daji had joined Kiro or Meira, Mercy’s friends wouldn’t have survived.

Her freedom for her friends’ lives was a good trade.

Malice sighed, reaching a hand out for her daughter. Mercy took it. The Monarch’s fingers were perfectly soft. They didn’t feel like they could crush steel like butter.

“This is not the end of your freedom, Mercy. It is the beginning. *Power* is the ability to do as you wish. You will always be the toy of those who have more of it than you do. You have seen that.”

Mercy had felt that lesson pushed through her ribcage. With her sacred arts sealed, she couldn’t stop Daji from doing anything he wanted.

“I have. But I still don’t understand the rest of the family. They would sell their own firstborn if they thought you would grant them favor. Why? What’s the point?”

They’d had this argument already, on the day Mercy had left the family. She hadn’t been satisfied with her mother’s answers then, and she still wouldn’t be now.

But Mercy continued spilling out her feelings. This was probably a waste of a rare audience with her mother, but she couldn’t help it. “Why do we have



to beg and crawl for every scrap?”

“*You*,” Akura Malice said, “don’t.”

She raised her free hand. Her nails had been painted the same purple as their bloodline armor...or maybe they had crystallized that way.

With her daughter’s hand in her left, she held her right over Mercy’s forehead. Cool, dark power flowed around her, and the Divine Treasure rose from Mercy’s soul space. She knew it would be hovering behind her, a massive book of Forged madra that contained the power of her Path.

Malice’s voice now resonated with the oath she and Mercy had sworn together. “Akura Mercy, do you agree to abide by the restrictions of our pact?”

Mercy closed her eyes and thought of her Skysworn team. She hadn’t known them for long, but she would miss their time together.

This was the last thing she could do for them.

“I will return to the family,” Mercy said. “And my role and responsibilities therein.”

The oath loosened around her, pressure on her madra channels relaxing slightly. She had every intention of fulfilling her promise, which satisfied their soul oath. Though she did feel a pang of grief for opportunities lost.

She had wanted a little more time.

“Then in return, I lift the seal on the Book of Eternal Night. Let your power be returned to you.”

The first page flipped to the second, and Mercy felt her mastery of the Shadow’s Edge returned to her in full. Then the third page, and the Nightworm Venom flooded back.

Her spirit surged from Highgold all the way to the peak of Truegold on the edge of advancing. Where it belonged. Soulfire rushed from the book back into her spirit.

Mercy looked up expectantly. She was looking forward to what happened next.

A smile touched the edge of Malice’s lips, and she waved her hand again. “And also, I return to you the full measure of your physical talents.”

It was like her skin had been a poorly fitted suit, and now—with a shudder that passed through her bones—it had been tailored for her. She took a deep breath, stretching one arm, then another. She wiggled her fingers.

Her eyes grew hot with tears. It had been too long since her body had been *hers* again. To prove she could, she sprang into a backflip, spinning her

staff all the way around her body as she did so. She landed in a handstand on the top of her staff.

Then she released one hand, holding it out to the side as she balanced on the other. There was nothing holding her up but the staff, and it didn't even tremble.

Effortless.

Mercy dropped, spinning Suu into the air and catching it. She didn't stumble. Didn't fall.

"That was the worst part," she admitted.

"To strip away what the family gave you, I had to include your Puppeteer's Iron body and the results of your training. Even with your spirit restricted, you would have had it too easy."

Malice rarely explained herself, but she looked as though she was relishing her daughter's joy. That warmed Mercy's heart, and she squeezed Malice's fingers in return.

"The others curry favor with me because they can strive for nothing more," Malice said. "You should be different. Ascending to the Lord realm means accepting who you are, not who you will be."

"That's what Aunt Charity said."

"And who do you think taught her?"

Mercy smiled up at her mother, but Malice's face was no longer pleasant. She was looking over Mercy's shoulder, into the darkness.

"As per our arrangement, I expect you to advance immediately. I need you as an Underlady, not a Gold. Once you have, report directly to Charity for transport. You may not return to the Blackflame Empire."

"Yes, mother," Mercy whispered. Then she realized what Malice had said, and she looked up in confusion.

"You will lead our team in the Uncrowned King tournament. Fury and Pride will be informed. I expect you to represent us in the individual matches, so your instruction will resume at an increased pace. You have missed a year of training, and I need you in shape."

"Did you say...are you not taking me now? Are you leaving me here?"

The shining purple eyes of the ancient Monarch met hers. "Do you not have unfinished business here?"

This was Mercy's chance. She released her mother's hand, bowing low. "I beg you, as a personal request from me, to save my friends." Damage to Yerin's lifeline was a minor inconvenience to a Monarch, and she could send

their enemies back to the Seishen Kingdom with a thought. Or evaporate them. “For me, will you intervene on their behalf?”

“I don’t need to intervene,” the Monarch said. “You will.”

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Kiro's armor was falling apart, he'd used far more madra than he could believe, he'd lost his shield, and his arm was trembling so badly that he felt like he was about to lose his sword. His body ached all over, and his left arm was numb.

If he let Lindon keep shooting him, he was going to die.

He burned everything he could of the armor's power, and it shone at the edges, flooding him with strength. It wouldn't last long, especially not with so much damage, but it would make him far faster than his own Enforcer technique.

Before Lindon could activate his launcher construct again, Kiro was on him.

He slashed at Lindon, who reached into his void key once again. The Blackflame pulled out his axe, its haft a long bone, its sharp edge gleaming red.

Kiro's sword was turned, but he struck with enough power to force Lindon backwards. He couldn't let up; again and again he struck, and again and again Lindon was overpowered. The Truegold's white arm began to crack, spraying madra into the air like blood, and Lindon flinched with visible pain.

But Kiro couldn't get that final hit. He was faster and stronger, but Lindon kept slipping by.

The Titan's Blade technique expanded the size of his sword tenfold, and he slammed it down on Lindon like a hammer of judgment.

Lindon stepped aside as though they were dancing and he knew all the steps. A fiery black-and-red haze sprang up around him, his eyes glowing, and Kiro braced himself to receive an attack.

Then the Truegold turned and ran.

His Enforcer technique gave him explosive strength, and he dashed around the central spire. On instinct, Kiro chased after him. His mind only engaged afterwards. Had Lindon run out of madra? Was he weaker than Kiro had expected?

Kiro launched a bright blue lance at Lindon's back, but once again, Lindon slipped aside like he had eyes in the back of his head. Maybe Lindon practiced a core cycling technique that improved his spiritual sense; it would

explain how he always escaped with his life.

Rounding the spire, Kiro caught a glimpse down the halls at the two other battles. Meira was engaging the sword girl and her Blood Shadow. The Truegold had lasted longer than he'd thought; he would have expected her to be dead by now. It looked like Meira was struggling to escape, but there was no way that could be true.

She would be fighting to save *him*.

Well, there was no need to worry about her. Daji looked like he had his fight in hand; some Forged strings of black madra hung from the ceiling, and he was holding a bloodstained sword in each hand.

Kiro could only pray to the heavens that his brother hadn't killed the Akura girl. He should never have left her to him...but then again, he couldn't have left his little brother to face that Blackflame cannon either.

Then he turned the corner, chasing Lindon, and lost sight of Daji. Meira was fighting in the hallway opposite him, but he focused on his prey.

Lindon had come to a stop in the middle of the hall, tossing his axe back into his void key. The closet-sized entrance zipped shut, leaving him holding nothing. He stood, quietly watching Kiro.

The lights went out and flickered back on in an instant, flooding Kiro with panic, but when the shadows faded, Lindon looked as confused as he was. He hadn't followed up on Kiro's instant of distraction.

So Kiro would be the first to move.

His sword swelled with the Titan's Blade, and Kiro thrust forward, the power of his armor fueling the attack. It was so fast that it astonished even Kiro, almost instant. There would be no dodging this.

Lindon caught it in the palm of his white hand.

The Remnant limb fractured again, barely holding together, and Lindon shouted in pain. A binding triggered deep inside, and Kiro felt his Titan's Blade destabilize, the technique fading. He pulled his sword back, its length ordinary again.

The Truegold stood in front of a natural treasure display, panting and cradling his broken prosthetic arm. It was difficult to look past him; the light from the display shifted and danced, and it was hard to make out exactly what was in there. At first, it looked as though the nook was filled with living creatures scuttling and squirming, but then Kiro would have sworn it was filled with paintings. Actual paintings, framed in canvas or spread out on huge wall scrolls, decorated every surface. But no, maybe they were statues...

He blinked to clear his eyes. Those would be the dream treasures. Or maybe light and dream, with some illusionary aspect.

Lindon didn't miss that moment. He dashed forward, slipping behind Kiro while he was distracted. Kiro spun into a slash, using the Titan's Blade again.

The Forged blade slammed into Lindon's forearms, which were held up to shield him. The Truegold cried out, armor cracking, and his white arm hanging from the elbow by only a thread. But he wasn't pushed aside. He fell to his knees, then sprang up, slamming his shoulder into Kiro's breastplate.

Kiro was pushed back a step or two. The dream aura whispered behind him, dangerously close.

From down the hall, Meira screamed his name.

She always worried about him, but this time, her concern was wasted. Lindon had accomplished nothing with that attack. He was off-balance, too slow, and his Remnant arm was falling off.

Kiro had him.

His enlarged sword swept through Lindon's neck in a flash. He felt no resistance, and for an instant, he was sure he had decapitated the man so smoothly that he'd felt nothing.

But then his senses caught up, and he realized Lindon had, once again, ducked out of the way.

Something shoved him from below, a burst of wind, and he staggered back. Only a step or two.

He crossed over into the dream display, and his senses were overwhelmed.

~~~

Darkness flickered before Daji's eyes and was gone.

He looked around, wary, but he didn't sense anything to worry about. It was like he'd blinked one extra time.

Meira's presence was growing more and more chaotic, and Kiro's was weak and distant. Meira would be fine, but his brother needed help.

He couldn't wait to be the one who saved Kiro's life.

Daji dashed on, suddenly eager, but the power had run low in his armor. He had to deactivate the scripts to save madra, but it had taken too much structural damage. Now it hung heavy on his body and his spirit, making running awkward.

Still, he was an Underlord. He drew on his own madra, Enforcing his whole body, and kept running until he reached the central spire. He spotted

Meira down a hall to his right, shining green and surrounded by a storm of slashes. Her opponent was the scarred girl in green armor, six bladed arms sticking out from her back. She fought to keep Meira pinned down as a blood-drenched twin mirrored her on the other side.

That was a strange technique, cloning yourself. He had heard of such, but only in legends.

It looked like Meira was fighting to escape, though that was impossible. Her opponent was only Truegold. Maybe he should help—saving Meira would look even better than saving Kiro.

As he paused in indecision, she saw him. Screaming, she pointed down another hall. “*Kiro!*” she shouted.

He turned, following her finger, and saw his brother.

Kiro's shield was gone, and his armor was a smoking mess, venting yellow and silver madra. Those huge blasts earlier had done quite a job on him. He still held his sword, infused with the Titan's Blade technique, and he swung it at the Blackflame. The strike was so fast it was almost impossible to see, a blur in the air even to Daji's eyes.

But the Blackflame, Lindon, ducked as though he'd known it was coming, and the air around him exploded soundlessly. Some kind of wind technique. Kiro was shoved backwards.

Into one of the natural treasure displays.

Daji sauntered forward, waiting for his brother to emerge. Most of these nooks didn't contain anything dangerous to an Underlord. Even if they did, if it didn't kill him immediately, Kiro would only have to take one step to leave.

But he didn't take that step.

A spark of concern kindled in Daji's chest, and anger along with it. How *dare* this Truegold touch his brother.

Daji shouted, drawing the Blackflame's attention; black-and-red eyes fixed on him. A rectangle the size of a closet door suddenly appeared next to Lindon, and he reached inside with his one remaining good arm.

Daji didn't care what kind of weapon the Gold had inside. He had weapons of his own. He raised his swords, reaching out for their Striker bindings.

Then tendrils of shadow grabbed him from behind and pulled.

He was hauled off his feet before he could react, dragged back around the corner and down the hall.

In a second, he flexed his full strength, tearing the strings loose around his

arms and slicing them apart. He rose to his feet again, ready this time, looking around. Maybe he had activated a security measure, or someone new had shown up.

Akura Mercy stood at the end of the hall, holding her bow in one hand, straightening her ponytail with the other. Her green armor had been broken, and he could see bloody holes in the robe beneath, but the skin of her ribs was now whole.

Daji suddenly felt danger.

She was Truegold again, and stronger this time, but she had suddenly raised her advancement before. It hadn't helped her then.

This time, she had returned to life.

Something strange was going on.

Daji summoned the shield from his soulspace, replacing it with his left-hand sword. Now he held the shield in front of him, approaching with caution.

"Why did you have to threaten them?" Mercy asked, and for the first time he saw anger in her eyes. "You think killing them will make Aunt Charity happy?"

Aunt Charity. This was the Heart Sage's niece.

Daji's anger receded a little further, replaced by fear. If Mercy had stayed dead, he might have been in some *real* trouble.

But she was alive now. Everything was all right, he just had to be careful not to kill her this time.

"This is a battlefield, not a playground," Daji said, firing a beam of blue lightning from the point of his sword. To be safe, he aimed at her leg.

Mercy's hands blurred, there was a flash of darkness, and his Striker technique deflected to splash onto the wall between natural treasure displays.

She had blocked it.

With an arrow.

Daji decided to change tactics. "How about this?" he yelled, his tone challenging.

He raised his sword, letting her think he was about to attack. Then he poured all his power into his *shield*.

He used the Titan's Blade, injecting the technique with soulfire, and a curved gray wall bloomed from floor to ceiling. It was solid as stone, at least for the next few minutes, and it would block her off.

He wasn't allowed to kill her, but he hadn't seen her use any big

destructive techniques. She would be trapped in there while he rejoined Kiro and Meira. Then, once they'd gotten rid of the other two, they could decide what to do with the Akura.

Daji ran away, proud of himself. Kiro had looked like he was in the most trouble, so Daji would go to him first. Then...

The aura of the vault shifted, like a river suddenly changing course. Suddenly, a spirit began to swell with power.

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Sweat ran down Yerin's face and her spirit trembled as she held her technique. She had never maintained the Endless Sword for so long before; it wasn't like her to fight for a stalemate.

But the longer she could hold Meira in place, the better.

The Underlady's armor had practically crumbled off her by now, and strands of gray hair were falling to the ground. Still, she tried to push forward, as though pushing against a strong wind.

The light blinked off.

For a second, Yerin wondered if her eyes had quit on her, but only a moment later the younger brother Daji ran around the corner, his footsteps pounding on the stone floor. His armor hung heavy on him, and it wasn't glowing as brightly as before. It was almost out of power, she was certain.

Not that it mattered for her. The swords he held in his hand would bury her well enough.

He turned his helmet toward her, adjusting his grips on his weapons, and the bottom fell out of Yerin's stomach. This was it. She always figured she would meet her end in a hopeless fight.

Then Meira extended a finger and screamed, "*Kiro!*"

Yerin felt hope again.

Daji turned away, running the other direction, but she couldn't relax. Daji was going after Lindon. Even if Lindon could hold his own against one Underlord, he wouldn't stand up against two any better than she would.

She pulled harder on her spirit, though her madra was getting dangerously low, her channels aching and strained. A little more, and maybe she could hit the Underlady hard enough to matter. Her Blood Shadow sensed the same opportunity, and though it must be running dry just like Yerin, it pushed harder too.

Yerin's knees buckled.

She fell, bracing herself against the floor with her hands. Her Endless



Sword technique faded, and rather than pushing against a strong wind, Meira staggered forward.

Yerin's vision doubled, and she was seeing two of her master's sword lying on the ground, then four, then six.

She turned her sense inward.

Her lifeline was gone.

Instead of an unbroken line of green running down her spine, it was like a faint wisp of green gas. She had gone too far, and now she was out of time.

But the fight wasn't over.

With the last dregs of her strength, she stumbled to her feet, raising her master's sword. She couldn't let Meira get away...

Meira wasn't running. She had sensed Yerin's condition and turned, scythe spinning up.

Yerin's Blood Shadow snarled and rushed in, firing a blood-fueled Rippling Sword Striker technique, but Meira batted it aside. Yerin moved in, lifting her white sword, though it felt a thousand times heavier than normal.

Only minutes ago, she had thought she was ready to die, but now everything was different. Now, she was an inch away from Underlord.

She was too close to give up now.

Her Blood Shadow swept a sword at Meira, but the flaming blade of the scythe cut into its side. The spirit shrieked, stumbling back. Yerin prepared her own sword.

Then the aura swept down the hall as Lindon started to advance.

As soon as Yerin sensed it, she moved. Meira would be distracted. This was her chance.

Sure enough, the Underlady shifted, her attention moving to the other battle. To Kiro. She let down her guard for an instant.

Yerin tumbled forward, sliding her sword through the gap in the woman's helmet as she passed.

She ended in a heap on the other side of the hallway, out of strength, as Meira screamed and clapped a hand to her eye. Yerin wanted to follow up with another attack, but this time something caught *her* attention: a shimmering silver display that she hadn't seen before. It looked like a blacksmith's shop, packed full of spears, axes, knives, and blades of every description.

Natural treasures of sword aura.

Using her master's sword like a cane, Yerin pushed herself to her feet.

She shoved her way over, inching forward one step at a time.

Life madra erupted from Meira. It formed a pillar connecting her to the ceiling, and then the top of that pillar bloomed. Spreading outward into leaves and branches.

Meira stood in the center of a towering tree of life madra, her scythe dangling from one hand. She hovered a few inches off the ground, more fragments of her armor plinking to the floor.

The ruin of her eye healed in an instant, flesh knitting itself together, and she wiped the blood away with her hand. She was the image of a furious Underlady, and without a word, she raised her hand.

Yerin scooted closer to her Blood Shadow, which was growling in defiance. She had only seconds left to live—she didn't know how many, but it wouldn't be long. She was almost out of madra and options.

But she stirred the last of her spirit and held on.

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From a crouched position, Lindon triggered the emergency wind barrier in his Skysworn armor. Kiro staggered backwards, crossing over into the dream display, and then went limp. His mind was out of his control.

[I envy him,] Dross sighed. [Now, you should hurry. Dragon's breath would drill through that armor eventually, but it's not like murdering him will help you beat the other two. You should advance.]

Dross' combat report had been harder to follow this time. It had involved more steps, and each one could have gone wrong in a dozen ways, but it *had* worked. Lindon had survived, and Kiro was trapped in a display.

The effort had left him strained and exhausted. His madra channels had been in better condition, his body trembled with effort, and his Remnant arm was a mangled, useless mess that bled white sparks of color into the air. But all of those problems could be solved.

Then he heard a wordless shout from down the hall.

A helmeted Seishen Daji sprinted at him, his armor dimly glowing gold at the joints, a sword in each hand.

Bloody swords.

At the sight of him, Lindon felt an instant of fear. Not for himself.

The second prince had been fighting Mercy.

The fear turned to anger, and he used his void key. The cannons were not the only weapons he'd prepared for today. He would see if the younger brother could stand up to the same punishment as the older.

Daji pointed his swords, and then Strings of Shadow grabbed him around the arms and shoulders, pulling him around the corner.

Lindon stared, blinking at nothing, for a frozen moment.

[Looks like she's fine,] Dross said. [Onward, to Underlord!]

Lindon reached into the void space, seizing the bundle of natural treasures he'd arranged for his advancement, spilling them out onto the ground.

Hastily, he sat down, calming his spirit and reaching out.

The unity of aura came easily now. He felt connected to the displays around him, like deep pools out of reach, and the soulfire inside him trembled. He spent a moment breathing, cycling, steadying the connection.

From his soul space, he pulled the Archstone, placing it on the ground in front of him. His Remnant arm dangled from his elbow, twitching occasionally, growing weaker by the second. He had to grab it with his left hand, placing the right palm on top of the Archstone.

The arm's binding was unstable. He could use it *maybe* one more time, and the longer he waited, the less likely he would be to succeed.

The time had come.

"I follow my Path," Lindon said, "so I won't be worthless anymore."

For an instant, his perception expanded, so that he touched all the aura in the vault. Just for a moment.

The transformation began.

Soulfire flooded out of him, passing through his clothes and armor without harming them, consuming the natural treasures piled around him. The gray fire swelled until he blazed with it. Then it focused in on him.

Everywhere the soulfire passed, he was reborn. Remade. His madra channels were rebuilt even as they burned away, his bones strengthened and reinforced, impurities in his spirit cleansed. It wasn't painful; it felt like being scrubbed clean for the first time in his life.

He couldn't move his body well, but he could still control his spirit.

He triggered the hunger binding in his arm, then thanked the heavens when it worked.

The power in the Archstone churned like water swirling down an unplugged drain, funneling down into his arm. The limb flooded with power, far more than it could normally hold, but Lindon kept the binding going. Only an instant later, the stone cracked, shattering into pieces.

And Lindon took control.

He had practiced this next part with Dross. He touched the fragments with

his pure madra, binding them to his Remnant arm. He focused his will on Forging them together, holding the image of his new arm in his mind. The power of ghostwater made it easy to keep the images in his mind, and the simulated practice gave him perfect timing.

Shredded pieces of white madra melded together, fusing to the limb and repairing it, chunks of madra filling in as he watched. The jagged edges of the skeletal Remnant arm smoothed out according to his mental vision, forming into a rough model of a human hand.

The true transformation began as the soulfire passed through the arm. It burned away the weakest elements in the madra, strengthening what remained, restructuring it to better conduct power. If he hadn't reinforced it with Lord-level madra, the limb wouldn't have had enough material left to stay intact, and would have fallen apart. Now, when the soulfire passed, he was left with a perfect human arm, a match for his left, only pure white.

At least he didn't have a monstrous arm anymore.

The soulfire passed over Dross...and left him untouched.

[Ah. That's disappointing. I was hoping to get double-soulfired. That's not how it works, I know, you don't have to say anything.] A moment later, he added, [Have you, perhaps...checked on Yerin recently?]

Now that Dross mentioned it, Lindon could feel an overwhelming sensation of life madra coming from near Yerin. He practically couldn't feel her at all.

Alarm shot through the pleasure of advancement, and Lindon urged the soulfire to hurry, but he could no more speed up the transformation than he could speed up the tides. He cycled his madra, bolstering his spirit, but there was little he could do.

Life madra raged, and Yerin was certainly fighting for her life. And here he was, with no option but to wait.

Though the change was not physically painful, every wasted second was agony. The soulfire gradually continued its transformation, changing him from the soles of his feet to the tips of his hair. Slowly, the soulfire died out, and his eyes opened.

With no time to waste, Lindon expanded his spiritual sense. It unfolded stronger than ever before. He could feel everyone so much more clearly. Mercy seemed...better than ever, actually.

Then he found Yerin.

Ignoring Kiro, Lindon ran back to the crossroads.

Kiro finally staggered out of the dream display behind him, and Lindon could feel the prince's spirit. It was unsteady, but getting steadier. He had to save Yerin before Kiro caught up.

Running normally now felt as smooth and powerful as using the Soul Cloak had when he was a Gold. His body responded instantly, and he marveled at its power as he reached the central spire, opening his void key and withdrawing the axe.

He ran to Yerin's hall. Meira was covered in overwhelming life madra, which had bloomed into the form of a tree that stretched from the ground to the ceiling. The power was astonishing; he couldn't imagine anything killing her with that much life energy running through her.

But that didn't mean he wouldn't try.

He raised the axe, running his Underlord madra through the binding. The red light running down the savage blade strengthened, rolling like crimson waves, and spectral hands of madra began to reach out of the weapon as the binding activated.

Yerin and her Blood Shadow were together, defending themselves from whips of green madra. Yerin's presence felt shaky, like she was a flame that could go out at any moment.

As he was about to release the Striker technique in the axe, his spirit flared a warning, and he spun back.

Kiro had fired the technique in his sword, blue lightning piercing the air. At the same time, he'd released his own Striker technique from his left hand, pouring soulfire into it.

Lindon swung the axe.

He hadn't been able to test the weapon before. Harmony's spirit hadn't been strong enough to activate the binding inside it, and until now, neither had Lindon's. But he and Dross had spent some time examining the axe, and they thought they had an idea of what it could do.

The reality was so much greater than he had imagined.

Blood and destruction madra erupted from the axe, forming into a wave of red, spectral hands. Thousands of spindly arms stretched out from the blade, reaching for Kiro. His Striker techniques punched through the cloud of madra, destroying a few hands, but there were many more to replace them. His attacks were swallowed up as though they had landed in the sea.

Scarlet fingertips clawed forward in a flood, wailing loud enough to hurt Lindon's ears. They swept down the hallway without slowing, but all Lindon

could see was a wall of red.

What had it done to Kiro?

When the red light started to fade, Lindon strained himself, looking quickly for Kiro. If the Underlord had survived...

A hulking figure like an armored giant stumbled up to Lindon.

He almost panicked, but this was bigger than Kiro had ever been. The Remnant had a smooth boulder for a face, with twisting ribbons of metallic madra for flesh.

It looked at Lindon, who lowered his axe and kindled dragon's breath in his free hand.

After inspecting him for a moment, the spirit wandered away.

## Chapter 20

Mercy felt Lindon advancing to Underlord, and she let out a breath of relief. From everything she'd seen, these Seishen Underlords would stand no chance against him. Eithan Arelius had done a strangely excellent job of building his foundation, though Lindon wasn't as well-trained as she would have expected in someone of his power.

Lindon would be fine, but Yerin was still in danger.

Mercy formed an arrow from all three of her techniques and the full force of her spirit. It formed so quickly, she almost wept; she was going to *love* having her full power back.

She faced the wall standing between her and Seishen Daji. She couldn't break it all at once, but she had to stop him from joining his teammates.

So she took aim *through* the wall.

The arrow blasted through, leaving a finger-thick hole in the gray madra. The effort of penetrating the wall had caused it to lose some of its power, so it only splashed against the back of Daji's armor, causing him to lose focus. She had accounted for that.

In a breath, she unleashed three more arrows through the hole the first had left.

They pierced his back, spreading venom and webs of force madra all over him. The Nightworm Venom technique would eat into his armor, corrupting it, leaving him stripped of its power. He would have to tangle with that while she waited for the wall to fall.

But she couldn't afford to wait around. Yerin was in danger.

She slipped into one of the many shadow displays, grabbing a stone covered in a shroud of darkness. Then into the treasures of light, selecting a crystal that shone brightly. From a display like an overgrown jungle, she took a flower that teemed with life, and from a crimson display she took a shard of bloodstained steel.

Spreading them on the ground before her, she stretched out her spiritual

perception. The unity of aura was so blessedly clear, as it had been before.

The vault roared and there was another flash of light through the hole in Daji's wall. That worried her for a moment, but the blast had felt like Blackflame. Among other things.

She closed her eyes and spoke. The Underlord's revelation should always be spoken, she'd been taught.

Even if one was ashamed of it.

"I walk my Path," she said, "so my mother will be proud of me."

The soulfire sparked, consuming the treasures in an instant, and passed through her body in a single breath.

It was as much of a change as when she'd shed her curses and returned to her power as a Truegold after most of a year as Lowgold. She gasped, feeling the new power in her spirit and body.

She was Underlady now, and it had only taken a second. She wanted to cheer.

But now wasn't the time. She had a job to do.

"Chapter two," she said, and the power of the Book of Eternal Night surrounded her. Its pages began to shift.

"Page four."

An instant later, her new arrow shattered the wall.

She walked up to Daji, who had struggled his way free of her webs. She placed a hand on his head, and he looked up, rage and terror warring in his eyes.

"Learn from this," she said.

Then she unleashed the Strings of Shadow technique. The first technique she had ever mastered.

Leaving him wrapped in a dark cocoon, she hurried forward, only to run into Lindon running from the other side. He looked so different that it startled her, but now wasn't the time to gape.

Yerin needed their help.

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Pulling back the rushing vines of green life madra, Meira glared at Yerin. "If Kiro is dead, I will kill your friends. I will kill your family. I will kill everyone you've ever loved, you've ever known. I will kill, and kill, and kill, and kill, until you wade through a river of blood with every step."

Lindon was already an Underlord, and he was moving closer. She could feel him.



Red light flashed, and screams echoed through the halls. Yerin had never sensed that technique before, but from the feel of it, she could guess what it was: Lindon's axe.

"He's dead," Yerin said.

Meira screamed, and vines shot from the tree again. Yerin's Blood Shadow leaped, stopping them with its Goldsigns and rasping out a whispery laugh.

It could laugh now. That was...horrifying.

Yerin needed the distraction. She hobbled over to the sword display, which she could only sense once she got close enough. Its power pushed against the script like the weight of a river against a dam.

The Blood Shadow was overwhelmed in an instant, slammed against the wall. Yerin felt a distant pain as Meira's tree tore the spirit-parasite limb from limb. It made a wet tearing sound every time, and there was something especially disturbing about seeing something like that happen to your own body. Especially when the Shadow's hungry grin never faded, even as it broke down to essence and flowed back to Yerin's spirit.

Yerin's body and spirit shook. Her sword trembled as she held it down and to the side, but she forced one more technique through it. The Flowing Sword. Her blade began to glow.

"Don't you look all..." Her voice failed her for a moment, but she pushed on. "...all bright and shiny new," Yerin called. "How many pieces am I going to have to cut you into?"

Meira didn't answer, shouting again and launching more vines at Yerin.

"Let's find out," Yerin said. And with the Sage's white sword, she scratched the scripted stone around the sword display.

Sword aura *gushed* out. If she moved an inch, it would slice open her skin. With the last of her madra, she seized that power. Controlled it.

Ruled it.

The Endless Sword gathered around her six Goldsigns, around the sword left by the Sword Sage, and aura blasted out from Yerin in a storm. Far more than she could ever hope to gather or control; she only activated it.

And Meira was overwhelmed.

If the Underlady had been able to move, she could have broken Yerin's control, or dodged, or set up a defense. But Yerin had already seen that this tree required Meira to stay in one place.

The rest of the Underlady's armor shredded away as she screamed,

followed by her clothes and her hair. In only an instant, she collapsed onto the floor, a bloody mess.

Her scythe fell after her, plinking to the stone, its haft notched and pitted.

Yerin stood watching her, unable to move. With her madra exhausted, she couldn't move the sword aura out of the way, so she was frozen. And her legs were already trembling with weakness. If she fell to her knees again, she would end up like a butchered pig.

*When her Remnant shows up, I'm in a pile of trouble.*

Lindon and Mercy ran into view, and both of them had obviously changed. Mercy looked an inch taller, her hair longer, her eyes brighter. She moved with an unfamiliar speed and grace, though maybe she would pitch onto her face in a moment and spoil that impression. Her armor was broken, the inner robe pierced on the left and right sides of her ribs, but unharmed skin showed underneath.

She had advanced. Probably to Underlord, given what Yerin had sensed earlier, unless Lindon had somehow managed to advance twice. How had she gone from Highgold to Underlord? With her spirit as weakened as it was, Yerin's spiritual perception was too weak to figure it out.

Yerin felt a spark of jealousy, but there was no point in thinking about it too hard. It had never made sense that Mercy was so weak to begin with, so this was the restoration of the natural order.

But Lindon looked like an entirely different person.

His right arm looked like a human's arm now, only chalk-white, and she was surprised at how much better it suited him than the monster limb. His Skysworn armor was cracked all over the place, but he carried it lightly. It was the smallest details that showed the largest change.

First, the soulfire transformation left him looking healthier than ever. His skin was clearer, his chin more defined, and he seemed to stand straighter. He looked like he had aged five years, but in the best possible way. He looked less like a sect leader's evil son, and more like...well, a sect leader.

He and Mercy took in her situation, looking from Yerin to Meira, and only then did Yerin realize there was no Remnant. The shining green tree was still there.

Beneath the sheet of blood, Meira was healing.

Lindon approached Yerin slowly, keeping an eye on Meira, but his expression was concerned. "How do you feel?"

Yerin's vision doubled again, and she sagged in place, the aura slicing

into her.

Lindon couldn't open his Copper sight in here, but his spiritual perception should have been honed as a Lord. He grasped the problem quickly.

An instant later, a colorless light passed from him as he called on his remaining soulfire. The pressure of the sword aura around Yerin retreated, and she drooped forward, almost stumbling.

He caught her.

She didn't have the strength to stand, melting into him, but she tried to make a joke. "Usually it's *you* collapsing and me picking you up."

Her spirit shivered as he scanned her, and he stiffened. "Mercy, get me some treasures. Right now. Yerin, are you...ready?"

His voice trembled with fear, and Yerin forced herself to stand up straight. "I'll show you what ready looks like."

Mercy was already darting from display to display, pulling random objects from each. Yerin was having trouble focusing on her, and everything had started to turn gray around her.

Lindon gently lowered her to the ground, eyes concerned. Underlord really did suit him; now he didn't look so much like he was trying to glare a hole through her.

Dross appeared over his shoulder, one big eye taking up most of his purple body. His voice slid into her mind, guiding her through the unity of aura, but she had already drifted off.

She didn't need any more instruction. She could *feel* it.

Her spiritual sense spread out as easily as spilled water, and her connection to the world solidified.

"I train in the sacred arts," she whispered, "because..."

She hesitated, the reality of the situation slapping her in the face. Why had she said this out loud? You were supposed to, but there wasn't *supposed* to be anyone around to hear. But now stopping would be more embarrassing.

And besides, she was dying.

She blurted the rest out in a jumbled rush. "...because I don't like people around me dying, and it hurts, and I'm afraid I'll have to feel that again, so I try to get stronger so I won't have to. And that's all."

Yerin squeezed her eyes shut harder, hoping that it would work and she wouldn't have to repeat herself.

The aura froze, as though unsure, and after a long second, her soulfire responded.

With a surge of relief, she felt the advancement take over.

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Yerin rose to her feet, washed in soulfire, and Lindon stared at her. Just stared.

She had been remade.

Her Goldsigns now looked absolutely real, as though actual steel blades grew on metal arms from her shoulders. Her green armor was pitted and cracked, but her scars had been wiped away, leaving her skin clean.

It was in the little touches that she had really changed. That, or the loss of her scars had changed her appearance more than he'd thought. Her eyes seemed deeper, looking from within the veil of her hair, and she looked more mature. She hadn't grown any—her head still only reached up to about his shoulders—but that made him feel too tall.

More than anything, she was alive. Her lifeline, which only a moment ago had been a breath away from fading out, now shone as healthy as a young sapling.

The relief was so strong it shook him physically. His fingers trembled, and he leaned back against the wall. How many seconds had he been from losing her?

Mercy danced up to Yerin, glancing her up and down. Then Mercy threw her arms around Yerin's neck and wept into her shoulder.

"I'm glad..." Mercy sobbed. "I'm really glad..."

The stress and exhaustion must have gotten to Lindon, because the world started looking misty all of a sudden. Even Yerin's eyes watered, and she wrapped her own arms around Mercy in return.

A moment later, Yerin had evidently had enough, dabbing at her eyes as she pushed Mercy away. She had to brush strands of her hair aside. Yerin's hair had grown some, as his and Mercy's had. Now it hung down into her eyes, extending past her shoulders.

She saw him looking and blew the hair out of her eyes. "Yeah, it's longer than I like to work with." A brief whisper of power, and the hair in her face was sliced away. Her attention moved to the back.

"I think it looks nice," Mercy said cheerily.

"So do I," Lindon added.

The movement of Yerin's spirit stopped. "Nothing like trying out a change," she said. "Might like it how it is."

Dross spun out onto Lindon's shoulder, squinting his eye at Mercy. [Who

are you? I'm warning you: I have a large sacred artist attached to me. He fights.]

Mercy looked startled. "Are you okay, Dross? It's me."

Lindon had assumed all along that Mercy's advancement had been temporary. She could make herself a Truegold for a while, why not an Underlady? But as he scanned her spirit, he found that the transformation was stable.

"You really advanced," he said, astonished. "How?"

She shifted in place, rolling Suu between her hands, looking at the tips of her shoes. "I was, uh...always a Truegold. I left home because I didn't want to be a Lady."

Yerin's eyes narrowed. "If that was a veil, I'm a leaping fish. You took an Underlady's fire to the face."

Mercy's hand shot to her cheek before she pushed it down. It looked like an involuntary reaction. "Not *my* veil. My mother's."

Together, Lindon and Yerin nodded as though that explained everything.

It almost did. She had left home, but her mother had sealed her power in exchange.

"I would like to hear the full story later, if you're willing," Lindon said. "But first..."

He looked down to the regenerating Underlady at his feet. She was unconscious, but her technique was still going, leaving her healed. And naked. And caked in blood from a thousand cuts, so there wasn't much to see, but he still looked away.

Mercy had raised her gaze to the ceiling, where she pointed to the silver-and-purple owl. "Aunt Charity," she said, "we've won."

The owl didn't move, but Akura Charity stepped around a corner as though she'd been waiting for that exact moment to appear.

Though it was Lindon's first time seeing her, something about her face struck him as familiar. As though he'd glanced her before. Maybe that was just her resemblance to Mercy.

She appeared much younger than he had expected—roughly his age—but she carried an intangible sense of wisdom along with her. Her silken black robes were adorned with softly glowing lines of violet that looked like script, and while he didn't know the significance of the clothes, they must be expensive.

"*They* have won," the Sage said. "You've lost."

Lindon looked to the squirming black cocoon that his spiritual sense told him contained Seishen Daji. He couldn't imagine that counted as a loss, but Mercy didn't disagree.

She also didn't look happy.

"You promised me a favor, Aunt Charity," she said. She sounded hurt.

"I will add a gift of my own to the Blackflame Empire in compensation," the Sage said serenely. "I will also allow each of you to take all that you can carry from this place."

Lindon's void key zipped open.

Everyone looked at him.

"Apologies," he said, cutting off the flow of madra. "Forgiveness, please."

He wondered if 'from this place' included looting the Seishen Underlords. What about Kiro's Remnant? That was morbid, and for a moment his thoughts sobered.

[Yes, terrible thought, but what *did* happen to that Remnant?] Dross asked.

"You warned the Seishen Kingdom," Mercy accused her, and Yerin's gaze sharpened. "You put us all in danger." Lindon had assumed as much, but what was he going to say to a Sage?

"Everything was under my control," Charity said, but that didn't comfort Lindon. He would bet his own Remnant that she would have watched him die as easily as she had watched Kiro. Mercy might have been safe, but he doubted that protection extended outside her family.

Seeing that Mercy didn't seem appeased, the Sage added, "And everything worked out perfectly well for you, in the end. I don't see any reason for you to be upset."

Mercy glared, but her aunt swept a hand over the vault. "Ten minutes," she said. "Then we leave. I must announce the results."

[Go to the dream one!] Dross said. [The dream one, the dream one!]

Lindon did, but he had to trust Dross to protect his mind from illusions.

Ten minutes later, Lindon had filled his void key, and all his pockets, and every line and fold in his clothes. His robes bulged like a chipmunk's cheeks. The fire treasure he had stuffed in his sock was starting to smolder.

He had picked up the broken pieces of armor from what remained of Kiro's body, stuffing them into the bottom of his void key. He had even managed to take the helmet, greaves, and one gauntlet from a struggling Daji,

who promised bloody revenge.

The armor of the Seishen Kingdom was far more advanced than his Skysworn armor. He could learn something.

Yerin filled her pockets and carried an armful of treasures out, but she still stared resentfully at the copper key around his neck and muttered about how it wasn't fair. Even though he told her he would share.

Mercy didn't take anything. She chatted as Yerin and Lindon bustled around, stealing everything they could. Lindon guessed this didn't matter to her; it was one vault of the many her family owned.

Outside, a black carriage waited on the ground, pulled by six Remnant horses whose hooves flashed with violet fire.

The doors swung open, and Charity gestured for them to wait as they approached. Lindon stopped too abruptly, and a silver bell fell from a pouch strapped to his armor. Each chime, as it tumbled, sent wind aura rippling.

A pair of silver-and-purple owls flew out of the ruins, each carrying a body. Daji was still wrapped in black strings, and thankfully now Meira was too. They each bobbed along peacefully in the grip of an owl, their eyes blank. The Sage had calmed them with a touch and a pulse of shadow and dreams.

[Now, I'm not suggesting this is a good idea,] Dross began, [but do you think you could take a *little* sip of her madra for me? I promise I won't be mad if you cycle it to me.]

*You want us both to die?*

[I want to be able to do that to their minds! Look at that! They're completely senseless! Imagine if I could do that to someone, bam, just knock them out like that.]

Lindon gave it more thought than he should have.

The Seishen Underlords were bundled into the carriage with them, which made for an uncomfortable hour-long ride. Lindon, Yerin, and Mercy sat on one side, staring into the empty eyes of Daji and Meira. Which left Lindon with the knowledge of what he'd done to Daji's brother.

He didn't quite regret it. He hadn't had much choice, and he had tried to stop the battle before it started.

But he was...sad for the necessity.

Finally, the carriage descended, coming to a rough landing before it slid to a halt. Lindon pushed the door open to see the massive pillar of shadow that was the portal. Hopefully, the one back to the Blackflame Empire.

The Emperor's cloudship was frozen almost touching the darkness, trapped in a purple haze. The Seishen King stood on his tiny cloudship, sword and shield hanging limply at his side.

Behind him, among the forest—and some in the air, either under their own power or on Thousand-Mile Clouds of their own—were his remaining twenty-five Underlords.

Charity had ridden outside the carriage in the driver's seat, and now she dismounted, flicking her wrist. The purple haze dissolved, and Lindon sensed the subtle power binding all of those Lords and Ladies dissipate.

Most of them sagged in relief, and none continued the battle.

Charity spoke, and this time her voice rang in all their minds like Dross'. "This battle has concluded, and entry to the Night Wheel Valley will soon be closed to you. I have chosen the three young Underlords who will represent the western vassals of the Akura family. They are all three from the Blackflame Empire."

A sudden cheer rose up from the Emperor's ship, and an equally loud exclamation from the Seishen Kingdom. Especially from King Dakata, who looked ready to explode.

But none of that could drown out the Sage's voice in their minds.

"I therefore award the Blackflame Empire three hundred million high-grade scales," she said. "In addition, to ease reparations caused by this competition, I will gift the Emperor with an Archlord defensive construct from my own collection."

Even the cheers went deathly silent as everyone processed this news.

"As for the Seishen Kingdom...it seems you have trained your Truegolds well in this short time, to have raised so many new Underlords. I hope that the benefits you have reaped from the Night Wheel Valley will serve you well."

Nothing. They would get nothing.

Only Lindon's confidence in Charity's power made him feel safe against the glare of the Overlord King.

King Dakata's spiritual sense swept roughly over the carriage, and his eyes went wild. "My son! What have you done with my son?"

"Of course," Charity said. Owls swooped into the carriage and then emerged, carrying Daji and Meira. "I have subdued them for their own safety. They will wake unharmed in the morning."

"What about—" the King began, but a void key the size of a barn opened



next to him.

Inside it was complete darkness. Lindon wondered if that was a characteristic of Akura void keys or if it was a protective measure to keep people seeing what you had inside.

Slowly, an ornate table slid out of the darkness, floating on a purple Thousand-Mile Cloud. The table bore an ornate, lacquered jar, with a few characters painted on. It was too far away for Lindon to read, but he suspected it read "Seishen Kiro."

Not a jar, then. An urn.

"I made the urn by hand and painted it myself," Charity said. "That is the little solace I can offer you. That, and the knowledge that he died fighting honorably."

Trembling hands reached out for the urn.

"Who?" he asked. "Who did this?"

Charity faced him calmly, hands folded. "He walked onto the battlefield as a Lord, and he was prepared to die a Lord."

"WHO DID THIS?" he screamed, red in the face. Lindon thought he would crush the urn, but he contained his strength.

Lindon concentrated on not taking a step back.

Charity's voice was cool as water. "Your grief is understandable, Your Highness, but your disrespect is unwise. You will have your answer in the morning, when your remaining son and your...servant...awaken."

King Dakata did not respond, but he didn't keep screaming, either. His gaze moved between Lindon and Yerin. He didn't seem to include Mercy.

Whenever those eyes landed on Lindon, his spirit boiled up in preparation for a fight.

[That is *not* a fight we want,] Dross assured him. [Although, maybe with some of that Sage's madra...how about a little taste, hm? Just a taste.]

After having stared at them for too long, while the owls deposited Daji and Meira onto the Seishen cloudship, the King finally turned his ship around and began flying away. Individually and in small groups, his Lords and Ladies followed him.

"Like a pack of whipped dogs," Yerin muttered.

[Well,] Dross said, [they *did* lose. So it's only appropriate they look like losers.]

Charity's voice slipped into their minds again. "People of the Blackflame Empire, congratulations. I will deliver your winnings and announce my

selections for the team in person, and I look forward to your team doing my family proud in the Uncrowned King tournament.”

The people aboard the cloudship let out another loud cheer. Yerin and Lindon looked to each other, and then to Charity. Were they supposed to leave? It seemed so; the Sage hadn't stopped them.

They began to walk toward the cloudship, which slowly lowered to pick them up.

“Do you think we're on the team?” Lindon asked.

“Can't see what else might have changed her mind,” Yerin said. “She decided on the team tonight, so that leaves the three of us. Probably won't be all...”

She stopped as she realized at the same time Lindon did.

Mercy wasn't following them.

They turned back to see Mercy. She had removed her Skysworn armor, wearing only simple black-and-white robes. She leaned with one hand on Suu, waving the other. They walked over to her, but she hurried to meet them.

“This is what comes with getting my power back,” she said wistfully. “I'm working for the family again. I have to go home.”

Yerin grabbed her by the shoulders, but she didn't seem to know what to say.

Mercy gave a sad smile. “I'll see you at the tournament,” she said. “Even if we *will* be on different teams.”

Yerin threw her arms around Mercy, and Mercy's eyes welled up with tears. She patted Yerin on the back, avoiding the sword-arms, and met Lindon's eyes.

Lindon wasn't sure what to do. He wasn't even sure what he was feeling, other than tired—too much had changed in too little time.

But he pressed his fists together, one white and one of flesh and blood, and bowed deeply to her.

She nodded back to him. Then a second later her face started turning purple.

She tapped Yerin with one black-gloved hand. Then again, with increasing urgency. “Yerin,” she wheezed. “Yerin, I need...”

Yerin released her, and Mercy doubled over, heaving a breath.

Wiping at her eyes with the heel of her hand, Yerin walked stiffly back to Lindon. “See you at the tournament,” Yerin called back.

Lindon waved again, walking off with Yerin.

“Where are *you* going?” Charity's voice rang again in his mind and his ears at once.

Lindon thought the Sage had still been speaking to everyone, so he glanced around, but Yerin had kept walking. When he stopped, she continued another step before looking at him in confusion.

He turned to see the Sage behind him.

Her young face clear of expression, Charity held out a hand. “I would like the axe back.”

Oh right, the axe.

Hurriedly, Lindon opened the void key and pulled out Harmony's axe. He was reluctant to hand it over, now that he could actually use it, but its power was a little unnerving. And giving up the weapon was better than having the Akura clan making him answer for Harmony.

The weapon vanished as soon as Charity laid one finger on it.

“Now, I have retrieved my gift to my nephew.”

Lindon started to sweat.

*Nephew.*

[Just to be clear: that's not *too* closely related, is it? For humans? I know if you left her *son* to die, she would be after you for bloody revenge, but a nephew isn't too bad, right? That's just, what, a harsh scolding?]

“I am sorry about what happened to Harmony,” Lindon said, keeping his voice steady. “I never had any ill will towards him.”

Not until the very end, anyway.

Charity's purple eyes were cool. “Whatever your intention was, you knowingly opposed a member of the Akura family. And in doing so, you cost us a potential competitor in the Uncrowned King tournament. You owe us a debt.”

It might have been the exhaustion, but Lindon's fear turned suddenly to anger. He kept his words respectful, but his tone had a bit too much of Orthos in it. “When the world began to collapse around us, I offered to take Harmony back. There was no feud between us. No reason either of us should die. He refused, and not *only* did he refuse, he said he would turn the resources of the Akura clan against me and not rest until my family was destroyed.”

He hadn't intended to tap Blackflame, but his eyes burned. “My family lives in territory owned by the Akura clan. Even so, I did not kill him. But I

did leave him.”

He left out the part where Orthos had destroyed the portal.

Something flashed across Charity's face, but he couldn't tell if it was anger, grief, regret, or something entirely different. It was gone too soon, her voice as placid as ever.

“Even so, Harmony was my selection for our team. You owe me, and I collect on debts incurred intentionally or otherwise. I have been watching you, Wei Shi Lindon Arelius, and as of tonight, you have become qualified to pay me back.”

Far behind Charity, Mercy's eyes went wide, and her spirit shook. “Aunt Charity, no!”

“I do *not* select you as one of the three competitors from the Blackflame Empire,” she said.

Lindon hadn't realized how much he'd been looking forward to competing in the tournament. Nor how much he'd expected to be selected. The disappointment stabbed him through the chest.

Why? It didn't make sense for it to hurt so badly. He was still an Underlord, and he could still advance. No one had expected him to make it far enough for any of the best prizes anyway.

But Yerin would surely be selected, and Mercy as well, on a different team.

He was the only one not going. He wasn't sure if he would even be allowed to watch.

Mercy still looked horrified.

[Aw, cheer up,] Dross said. [That could have gone a lot worse. Imagine what *else* she could have—]

“Instead,” the Sage continued, “you will compete on behalf of the great Akura clan.”

At first, he couldn't comprehend the words.

“I will take you with me to our headquarters, where you will be trained to compete to our standards. I am confident you will bring honor to our name, and if you do not perform up to my expectations, you will be punished.”

Lindon turned to Yerin, whose eyes met his. Her Goldsigns were extended, and she had a white-knuckled grip on her sword. She stared at him, silently begging him to say something.

His mind churned, searching vainly for a way out. “Honored Sage, I apologize, but surely I cannot perform up to the Akura's standards,” he said.

“Not yet,” Charity said. “Training begins now.”

Shadows swirled around his feet, and he could no longer move them. He began to sink into the darkness.

He looked up to see Yerin staring at him helplessly, her eight arms hanging limply at her sides. What was she supposed to do?

He raised a hand to her. “Apologies,” he said.

Then the darkness closed around him.

## Epilogue

Suriel dashed through the Way. The Abidan were under attack all across their border worlds, from Sectors Ninety through Ninety-Nine. Sector One Hundred had already been lost, and the others were soon to follow.

The Vroshir couldn't maintain an attack of this scale for long, but the Abidan were likely to give out first. They were simply spread too thin.

She was not the only Judge to have flown straight from emergency to emergency for months; Gadrael and Razael had not stayed in one Iteration longer than it took to win a battle.

Wherever a Judge went, victory followed. But they could not be everywhere, and they were the only three Judges that could be spared.

Now, she hurried to Iteration 943. It was another nameless border world with a small, primitive population, but Sector Ninety-Four had not been able to evacuate it in time. She would probably have to revert an entire Iteration again, which strained both her mantle and the world's connection to the Way. A handful of lower Abidan were defending it, so it should last until she arrived.

In the middle of endless blue, Suriel slammed to a halt.

It was as though a wall had appeared in front of her before she could slow down. She felt the impact in her mind, and for a moment she floated in pain, aimless and disoriented.

When her vision returned, she stared ahead, at the flow of the Way that would have led into Iteration 943.

Instead of a smooth sapphire passage, she stared into a ragged black gash. It was fuzzy at the edges, as though the Way had been severed completely. The World had been cut off.

[No barrier detected,] her Presence told her. So it hadn't been sealed away.

She pushed into the dark hole, which was as difficult as digging bare-handed through packed earth; without the Way to lead into the Iteration, there

was no easy path for her to follow.

But she managed it, determined to rescue any surviving fragments of 943.

She found nothing. She floated in endless emptiness, the pure void. Even the distant swirls of color that she usually saw in the void, wild fragments of broken worlds, were so distant that she couldn't see them. This was a pure lack of existence.

It frightened her more than anything she'd seen in years.

[Warning: the Way has begun to repair itself. Recommend immediate return.]

She could survive in the void, but not forever. It would begin to corrupt her, breaking down the influence of the Way, turning her into an incomprehensible Fiend. At that point, if she didn't find an Iteration or a fragment to latch onto, the void would continue to break her down until she no longer existed.

She stepped back into the Way, the endless power of order comforting her, but she still shivered internally at what she'd just seen.

Iteration 943 had been erased.

"What could do that?" she asked her Presence.

[Request denied,] her Presence said. Without her permission, the ghostly doll formed in front of her, looking at her with its featureless face. The construct couldn't *truly* disobey her, but it could act independently when it needed to.

This time, it sensed that she was looking away from an uncomfortable truth, and it met her with a gaze that had no eyes. [You already know.]

There was only one weapon that could erase a world so thoroughly.

The Reaper's Scythe.

~~~

Yerin sat with her forehead on the table next to a bowl of soup. All around her were the sounds of celebration and the smells of expensive food.

It was the Emperor's celebratory feast. She sat at the head table, in a place of honor.

One of her sword-arms dangled in her soup.

The seat next to her was empty, the old Underlord next to her having risen to go speak to someone else, or to relieve himself, or to die in the corner as far as she cared.

Someone else sat down. Someone in a shimmering pink outer robe.

Eithan's hand patted her on the back. "I've never been good at

consolations, but do cheer up. You'll see him again at the tournament!"

"He's gone," Yerin muttered into the table. "He took Dross and Little Blue with him. Mercy's gone. Even Orthos is gone. Everyone I talk to is gone."

Eithan cleared his throat.

She turned to glare at him without lifting her head.

He cleared his throat again.

"You got a chicken bone in there?" she asked. She raised the Goldsign out of her soup, its tip glistening. "You want me to get it out for you?"

He leaned closer to her. "Did you hear? Akura Charity announced our team."

Yerin sat bolt upright, Eithan dodging a blade to the face. She grabbed his collar. "When?"

"It was a private address to the Emperor last night," he said. "Very private. No one could possibly have heard anything."

Yerin shook him. If she wasn't selected for the tournament, she'd be the only one left out.

"You're in it!" Eithan said, his teeth rattling.

She sagged with relief. Her master had reached Underlord at about the same age she was, but he had competed in the Uncrowned King tournament years later. She would have settled for fighting in the next one, if not for Lindon. And Mercy too.

But soon, the pall on her spirits returned. "It doesn't matter," she muttered. "Do we even have a team left?"

"Oh, I think we're okay," Eithan said. "We have you and Naru Saeya, the Emperor's sister. She distinguished herself in battle against the Seishen Empire. Fought with great skill against two Underlords at once, while you were sneaking around in that vault. It was very impressive, and it's always nice to have a teammate with wings."

Yerin waited. He was leaving out the final competitor intentionally, she was sure.

"And, of course, there's the team leader," Eithan said casually. "The captain, if you will. The Sage's first choice. The one who will lead the team into battle against the enemy."

Yerin waited.

Eithan smiled.

"Who?" she asked.



He smiled wider.

“...who is it?” She was starting to worry that she knew the answer.

“What?” he asked innocently. “I’m thirty-four. How old did you think I was?”

~~~

**Information requested: preparations for the eighteenth Uncrowned King tournament.**

**Beginning report...**

The favored young Underlords of the Akura clan are lined up. For some, this will be their first time seeing the Monarch in person. Each Underlord and Underlady drops to their knees as Akura Malice emerges from shadow, her favored daughter at her side once again.

More than five thousand miles to the northeast of Akura territory, dragons of every shape and color fly around a volcano. Their roars fill the air and shake the earth as a small figure hikes closer and closer. In the form of a cloaked human boy with golden eyes, he approaches: Seshethkunaaz, the wandering King of Dragons.

Sha Miara, Luminous Queen of the Ninecloud Court, throws a tantrum. She wants to fight in the tournament. Her tutors have reached the end of their patience; there is no sport in sending a Monarch to do battle with Underlords. She’ll keep her power veiled, she insists. She will compete fairly, and no one will recognize her. When they continue to deny her, her wails conjure a storm indoors.

One at a time, the Eight-Man Empire call up would-be squires from all over their territory. For those who want to join the Empire one day, this tournament will be a good test.

Emriss Silentborn, the Monarch Remnant, watches gravely over the Wandering Titan. The massive Dreadgod, like a mountainous statue, has stirred earthquakes in its sleep. It is beginning to awaken, even before the Bleeding Phoenix has gone fully dormant. Emriss must choose her champions carefully; it is likely that this next generation will inherit a world at war. They must be ready.

Northstrider walks the boundary between Akura territory and that of the dragons. He has no family and leads no sect. He is the Monarch of unbound sacred artists, those with no master or home. He goes into the Wasteland,

where he seeks out the Beast King. The Herald might have an eligible student who can bring honor to the name of Northstrider.

The Arelius clan, in the ruins of their ancestral home, is still in mourning over the loss of their Monarch. Their clan has as deep a foundation as any, so they are invited to participate in the Uncrowned King tournament, but there is fierce debate. This could be nothing more than another blow to their reputation. Grimly, they determine that their fate will be even worse should they try to hide.

Reigan Shen looks out over those he has newly recruited to his cause. Redmoon Hall, with their Blood Shadows in a thousand different forms. Abyssal Palace, their faces concealed beneath hoods and stony masks. The Silent Servants, whose mouths are bound, and the Stormcallers, who ring their arms in scripts that crackle with lightning. The cults of the four Dreadgods look to their new Monarch, who raises hands of benediction over them all.

**Suggested topic: connections between the Arelius family's fallen Monarch and Eithan Arelius.**

**Denied, report complete.**

~~~

Wei Shi Kelsa crouched in the underbrush of the orus groves, keeping her breath slow. Night had always been bright in Sacred Valley, but Samara's Ring cast harsh shadows. She waited in those shadows now, silently begging the heavens to keep her hunters away.

A figure walked boldly through the trees to her right, holding a lantern of bright green madra. He was doing nothing to conceal himself as he searched for her. She pressed lower against the ground, sliding under a bush as far as she could without rattling it and giving away her presence.

The Fallen Leaf School had glimpsed her stealing fruits before, so they had increased security. She tightened her grip on the bag of fruit that she'd managed to fill before tripping a hidden security script. Even if she got caught, she couldn't leave without this food.

Her pursuer swept his lantern from side to side, searching for her. Summer had begun, but the ground was still cold as she pressed against it. She kept herself from shivering. Even the slightest motion could catch his eye.

Fallen Leaf elders wouldn't lower themselves to personally hunt for a thief, so this man wouldn't be Jade. Probably Iron, like her. She would have a chance to fight her way free.

But she couldn't afford to antagonize another School. As it was, if caught, she wouldn't be killed on sight. Instead, they would turn her over to Heaven's Glory.

Which might be worse.

The Fallen Leaf guard raised his lantern as a signal and called out a greeting. She flinched at his sudden voice, but he was looking past her hiding spot. Behind her.

Another green light approached from within the forest.

She had to move.

Slowly, so slow that it was agonizing, she inched out of the bush, sliding the bag of fruit along with her. While the guards were focused on one another, she could slip away.

If she opened her Copper sight, she could have seen the haze of dream aura around their heads. She was a Ruler on the Path of the White Fox, and could send them a distraction.

But then they would know for sure she was around. For the time being, it would be better to slip out unnoticed.

Her spirit shivered.

It was a Jade's spiritual sense. She'd been scanned.

The scan felt like a curtain of icy water passing over her, and the shock was so sudden that her body jerked. Her elbow snagged on the edge of the bush, which shook like a squirrel had passed beneath. In the quiet night of the grove, she might as well have rung a gong.

The two Fallen Leaf guards turned toward her.

Kelsa bolted.

She ran all-out, bag slung over her shoulder. Fear brought every detail of the run into focus, from the harsh scrape of her breath to the pounding of her feet on the earth. The Fallen Leaf guards raised a cry and sent up a signal as soon as they saw her, running after her.

She was tall, with long limbs, and she ran as part of her daily training. She would be able to outrun most other Irons, as long as none of them were an Enforcer.

A quick glance behind her showed her that the heavens had abandoned her. A young Fallen Leaf woman with an iron badge had cast aside her

lantern, dashing after Kelsa with coils of green light around her legs. An Enforcer technique. She would catch up in seconds.

Kelsa kept a grip on her rising panic, forcing her breath into the right patterns, twisting her White Fox madra into a technique.

When the sound of footsteps grew close, Kelsa turned again, reaching out with her madra to the aura around the woman's mind. The Fox Dream settled around her head like a cage.

The Fallen Leaf woman slid to a halt, eyes wide, glancing around her. The specific illusion was born from the target's mind, so Kelsa could only vaguely shape what she would see. In this case, Kelsa didn't care what it was; anything that would attract the guard's attention was good enough.

In that opening, Kelsa started running again.

By now, she could hear cries coming from all over the grove, see sparks of green moving through the shadows. She would have to dodge all of these Irons and Coppers to escape Fallen Leaf territory, but that wouldn't be the end. She couldn't lead them directly back to her camp, so she'd have to run in the wrong direction to lay a false trail, then hide out for the rest of the night.

She gripped the bag of fruit as though it contained goldsteel treasures. Even if she had to crouch in a wet, freezing ditch for another day, it had been worth it. She had food.

So long as she escaped with her life.

Kelsa looked quickly for the largest stretch of shadows. Wherever she could see a gap, she'd take it.

The shadows were deepest to her left, so she dove into them, cycling her madra to her limbs and urging them to move faster and faster. A dull red light rose up from the darkness in front of her, but it wasn't green—at the very least, this wasn't Fallen Leaf madra.

Still, she altered her course to run around it. The guards weren't the only threats out here. Wild beasts, Remnants, and rogue sacred artists wandered the Valley, each presenting their own kind of threat.

Last fall, two young outsiders had torn through the Heaven's Glory School, breaking their way into Sacred Valley. They were still at large somewhere, hiding just as she was. If she ran into them, she would fare even worse than the Heaven's Glory Jades had.

It was best to avoid anything unknown.

A bulky shadow stepped out of the trees, cutting her off.

It looked like a mound the size of three horses side-by-side, glowing dull

red and giving off a haze of smoke. She staggered as she tried to turn away at the last second, catching herself against a tree.

Two eyes, like circles of red in the darkness, moved toward her. A voice like rumbling earth said, "Wei Shi Kelsa?"

Kelsa jerked to a stop at the sound of her name.

"Took me long enough to find you," he grumbled, "but a dragon does not give up." Kelsa heard crunching. When she focused, she could see that this creature had leaned down and snapped up a tree branch. It chewed and swallowed a moment later.

Now the beast stepped forward, and she could see it in the light of Samara's Ring, paler and brighter than moonlight.

It was a turtle.

Kelsa gathered up her madra again. It must have been the Heaven's Glory School who had sent the sacred beast to hunt her. He hadn't attacked her yet, but that only meant he was under orders to take her alive.

"I am called Orthos," the turtle said. "I come from your brother Lindon."

Her madra trembled, her technique dissipating. She was still tense, her body telling her to run, but she also couldn't move.

"He's alive?" she whispered.

Green light swelled in the forest, and shouting voices grew closer. She spun and saw that she had already wasted too much time; the net had tightened.

"We have to get out of here," she ordered. "Can you run?"

Red-and-black eyes surveyed the people following her, and the ground began to shake. After a moment, she recognized that it was the turtle laughing.

"I am pleased by you already, Wei Shi Kelsa. And I cannot run."

He walked forward, brushing past her, facing her pursuers.

"Not when I can fight."

THE END  
Cradle: Volume Six  
*Underlord*

**Lindon's story continues in...**

# ***UNCROWNED***

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## Bloopers

"A wild natural treasure," Mercy said, looking down at the tree a thousand feet below. "It doesn't look like anyone is harvesting it. You couldn't ask for anything better for a fire artist!"  
Lindon leaped over the side.

~~~~

The Skysworn Captain's expression darkened. "Take them," he ordered.  
The other Skysworn exchanged glances.  
"I don't know, they have a giant fire-breathing turtle."  
"Look at that guy's eyes, he looks like he wants to eat me."  
"What if we accidentally hurt a member of the Akura family? Won't we all be executed?"  
"I recognize her, that's the Sword Sage's disciple. I, uh, think we're going to sit this one out, Captain. They're all yours."

~~~~

[And now the owl's back!] Dross said. [There are so many birds around here. Maybe the *bird* aura is strong here.]  
Dross drew Lindon's attention up, where he saw the silver-and-purple owl swooping down from the clouds above them.  
Mercy saw him turn and followed his gaze. "Is the owl back? Where is it?" She sounded doubly eager to see the bird, almost like she was afraid to miss it.  
[Don't worry, it's coming toward us! It's fast, too. Is anyone else alarmed at how fast it--]  
In a flutter of intangible wings, the owl dove past Lindon's shoulder, catching Dross in talons of silver madra. Before Lindon could react, the owl grabbed Dross in its beak and tilted its head back, swallowing the spirit down its gullet like a mouse.  
"Aunt Charity!" Mercy cried. "Make it spit him back up!"  
The owl burped.

~~~~

"Starting to get hungry out here," Yerin said, as they marched on their patrol route through the Night Wheel Valley.  
"Not me," Lindon replied. He pulled the object from his soulspace and popped it into his mouth. "I have a bean."

~~~~

From his armor, a purple light shone from Lindon's wrist. "This is the communication construct," he said. A cloud manifested from behind him, flowing beneath his feet. "And this is the built-in Thousand-Mile Cloud."  
A parasol unfolded over his head. "For shade." A blue light bloomed from around his neck, and icy wind blew past his face. "In case it gets hot. I've also got a detachable knife, a heater, a light, a telescope, a towel, and twelve books in case I get bored."  
Yerin looked him up and down. "What if you get thirsty?"  
From the construct on his wrist, Lindon sprayed water into her face.

~~~

"I've been thinking about splitting my core again," Lindon said.

Eithan raised his eyebrows. "You don't think you have enough on your plate as it is?"

"It's strange...every day I don't split my core, I hear these screams, as though thousands of people far away were shrieking in frustration at once."

"Well, have you tried splitting your core?"

"I have. Watch."

He sat down and began cycling according to the Heart of Twin Stars technique. Just as his pure core began to stretch apart, there came a chorus of distant screams.

"Are those the same voices you heard before?" Eithan asked.

"No, I think that's an entirely different group of people."

"You're right," Eithan said. "That *is* strange."

~~~

With a flourish, Eithan flipped open the lid of the box.

A disc floated within, suspended in midair. It was made of two flat, black discs on the outside, containing between them a layer of creamy white. It smelled sweet and tantalizing, and Lindon began to drool.

"Ladies, gentlemen, turtle: for your enrichment and education, I present to you the greatest spiritual elixir ever invented by mankind. Behold...the O'ree'o."



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