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The Crown of Madness

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The Crown of Madness A Novel

A THESIS

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ABSTRACT OF THESIS

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The Crown of Madness is a 425 page High-Fantasy novel that follows the power struggles within three different factions: Aarden Hall, the druids, and the Undying. The primary protagonist of the Aarden Hall plotline is a young monster hunter named Lucius. He is thrust into the position of vying for power in a mysterious semi-democratic competition for the Crown of Madness, a crown that grants heightened abilities but slowly turns the wearer mad. Lucius never sought power, yet those around him rally to him all the same. However, the Shadow Counsel seeks to oppose him and take control. In the Druid Wood, Raijin has come of age in his tribe and must complete the bonding ritual with his spirit animal and learn to lead as his father before him. The young druid is uncertain he will bond properly and fears he may become a Wild One, a rival faction of druids who worship a Dark Totem and succumb to their ferocity. The Undying lands are blighted with plague. None but the Undying can live there without suffering the same fate. Aeacus has ruled his people for a very long time, but a new faction arises that worships the demon that cursed them. Aeacus must reassess his leadership and team-up with new allies to regain control of his kingdom. There are several subplots that spawn from these primary plots, these include: a reincarnated seer who seeks the leader of Aarden Hall and fights alongside Raijin and his druids on her journey to Aarden; and a young knight who accepts a dangerous job from a mysterious alchemist. Each of these plots follows the main theme of power and how different people handle it. The stories are

connected by occasional intersecting characters and a battle with a mysterious dark essence that infects the world around them. The Dark Totem, Crown of Madness, and Aerico the Demon are all interrelated through a link with the shadows of the world.

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The Crown of Madness

Prologue

Standing silent, the large crowd stared toward the castle door. Each held a red thorny rose, gripping it tightly and drawing blood. They stood there for nearly an hour—no one said a word and no one faltered. At last, the giant entryway opened. A procession of darkly dressed soldiers filed out in a close, uniform line, followed by the king, dressed in all white except for the dark iron crown on his head. Their leader looked tired but proud, defeated yet strong. Each step the king took was methodical. His face unchanging, he stared forward toward the platform in the center of the crowd. The tired man stopped at the edge of the path created through the audience. All but two of the knights continued on to the platform. They knelt down toward the king upon arrival at their destination.

A deep, mournful horn sounded from one of the castle towers. It bellowed seven times. Roses were passed and thrown into the opening made for the king. The ground became completely obscured by the bloody flowers and the king began walking. Again, he walked slowly and deliberately, showing only strength though in great anguish. Finally, he arrived at the platform and climbed the short flight of stairs. One knight knelt at the top of the stairs, facing away from the king, and those around the platform stood to turn toward him. One by one, the warriors knelt, shortly followed by the crowd around them. All were on their knees except the king and his appointed executioner. The king knelt and the standing knight gently removed the crown from his head, placing it on a small table next to the white marble executioner's block. The king lowered his head onto the cold stone as the knight picked up the dark iron broadsword from the nearby rack. The knight tested the sharpness of the blade on his own hand which immediately bled. He

raised the sword high and brought it down swiftly onto his leader's neck. The cut was clean and they head fell hard into the basket below. The horn sounded seven times.

Chapter 1- Kamon

The Iron Chamber

Soldiers clamored about the castle, Aarden Hall, moving in to their positions for the next phase of the Passing of the Crown. The council members walked just as quickly but with a rehearsed grace in each of their steps. They moved with importance in place of any sign of expedience.

“The blood papers are already coming in. Is it always so soon?” a young scribe named Kamon asked as he struggled to keep up with a counselor and keep hold of a bundle of parchment.

The older man, Gerreon, smiled wryly. “Yes, and sometimes sooner. I remember my first Passing of the Crown. A few blood papers came in the day before the ceremony was to begin.”

“What did you do?”

“Report their names to the head of the guard and they were imprisoned for disrespecting the crown.”

Kamon looked baffled by the statements of his master and made a clear effort to hold a better posture and a tighter grip on the documents in his hands. Swiftly walking down a brightly lit stone corridor they came to a pair of double iron doors. Turning to face his scribe, the counselor came to a sudden halt.

“You are about to witness history, m’boy. This chamber is only used for two purposes, discussion of the Passing of the Crown and as a war room if the castle were to ever fall under siege.”

Nodding, the young man could not seem to speak. He stared at his master, hanging on his every word. His hands trembled. The old man gave the scribe's arm a reassuring pat.

“Relax. All you have to do is keep your back to the wall directly behind my chair and hand me documents when I call for them.”

“Yes, sir.”

“Good lad,” said the counselor, turning toward the iron clad entrance.

As the man slowly pushed the heavy doors forward, the hinges groaned, making it clear they had not opened in a very long time. A knight ran up to the two men as the doors swung ajar.

“Status report?” the elder asked.

“Sir, the signal fires have all been lit. We expect the blood papers from nearby farm and villages to be sent within the next few hours.” The soldier reported in a dutiful stance, but could not help an occasional glance into the fabled Iron Chamber.

Gerreon nodded. “Good. You are dismissed, soldier.”

Saluting, the guard took one more long glance into the Iron Chamber before turning to resume the rest of his duties. The old counselor sighed and ushered his scribe into the room. They were the first to arrive, so they traveled to the end of the long, rectangular, dark wood table that sat in the middle. The room looked just like any other in the castle, stone walls and floors, except that everything was reinforced with iron in some way. Each stone in the walls and floor bound to the surrounding stones by iron. The

ceiling had iron support beams in every corner. And even the table had iron supports underneath it.

“Remember, not a word spoken in here leaves this room.”

“Yes, sir.”

“Oh, and I would advise finding a spot on the wall or floor to stare at. Some of my fellow counselors are... a bit high strung. Birch in particular does not like when his ‘lessers’ look at him directly, the snobby bastard.”

Both horrified and amused, Kamon picked out his spot on the wall as the rest of the counselors and their scribes filed in. Ten counselors attended in total, and they all entered in quick succession shortly after the first few arrived. The first discussion of the Passing of the Crown was about to begin.

Chapter 2- Alwin

The Banshee and the Bog

Blood red illuminated the sky as the sun sank slowly beneath the hills. Many of the shops were packing up as Alwin headed toward Aelwyd Tavern. His friend, Lucius, had asked to meet there when he got done with guard duty. Being very cryptic, Lucius promised an adventure and a little extra coin. The handsome guard was a rather capable man, but his friend's "jobs" often pushed him to his limits. Alwin stood tall and proper, he had his dark blonde hair in a standard short guard's cut. As he reached for the door it swung open. He dodged the door on instinct, but stumbled back. An older, hefty man barged out of the open doorway, already drunk. The air of the tavern thickly lingered, but the lighting was warm and inviting. Alwin smiled and began to relax. He found Lucius sitting at a table in the far-right corner of the bar quietly talking with a man in a tattered, hooded cloak. Lucius spotted him and smiled. Just as they greeted each other the strange man seemed to disappear. Alwin glanced around but could not find him.

"Who were you speaking with?" he asked.

"My proprietor for my next business venture," his friend said with a grin.

Lucius was not remarkably big or handsome. Nor did he have much to his name. However, he carried himself in such a way that reassured those around him that he had a plan. Short dark hair wistfully tangled down to his ears, his eyes were piercing blue, but perhaps his smile attracted people to him most.

"Oh? A respectable type of job I presume?"

"Well... Maybe not entirely respectable, but it does sound exciting."

“I assumed as much when we spoke earlier.”

“Sit down with me, let’s have a drink,” Lucius said, signaling the barmaid, Prue, whom Alwin had known most his life. They exchanged pleasantries with their friend and then they got down to business. Alwin couldn’t help but be uneasy regardless of his friend’s excitement.

“So, there I was, asking around for available work in the usual places when a hunter friend of mine tells me some stranger has an odd request that no one will take. Says he thinks I’m foolish enough to be the one to take it.”

“Of course, and I’m foolish enough to get dragged along,” Alwin retorted leaning back as the waitress placed their pints in front of them. “What is the stranger seeking?”

“Banshee essence,” Lucius said, taking a long drink from his pint. “Tonight.”

“Banshee essences... are you insane? Where would we even get it?”

“Altum Marsh, just a few hours journey from here that has rumors of a banshee.”

“I’ve heard of that bog. They say it is cursed. What amount of coin would possess you to venture into a cursed swamp?” Alwin was holding his pint with both hands but not drinking.

“The coin is unimportant,” Lucius said dismissively.

“Since when was coin trivial in your mind?”

“My payment will be the honor of being the first to slay a banshee in many years.”

Alwin sighed, staring deep into the dark liquid filling his pint. “Fine, when do we leave?”

Lucius downed the rest of his pint and jumped up. “Give me half an hour to get all the needed supplies. I’ll meet you here.”

Alwin watched as his eager friend dashed out the door of the tavern. He hadn’t expected a night of rest when a hunting job was lined up, but he had not expected an all-night trek into a cursed swamp to kill a creature no one had seen in ages. He took a very long drink from his pint and summoned Bard, the proprietor of the tavern, over.

“I’m going to need something stronger,” he ordered.

“Got a job lined up with Lucius?” Bard chuckled.

“Yes, and it seems it will prove to be a very long night.”

Half an hour later Alwin was standing outside the bar taking in the night air with a bottle of the tavern’s strongest in hand. He spotted his friend prancing down the road with a bundle of supplies in hand. When he arrived near the door Lucius dropped all the supplies at Alwin’s feet.

“I had all the basics: silver dagger, iron sword, bow and a full quiver. The hard thing to come by was the Aglaophotis.”

“What on earth is that?”

“It’s a rare plant better known as demon’s bane.”

“Ah, well let’s get started then, shall we?” Alwin said, hoisting up half of the supplies.

They set off on their journey with Lucius leading. Alwin thought the way they were heading seemed odd until he realized his friend’s unspoken plan. They were going to steal horses from the guard stables. He thought about saying something but knew it would do no good. In any case, Alwin really did not want to make the journey on foot.

They entered the stables through the back and quietly walked to the nearest pens. One of the horses snorted at their arrival—Lucius gently reached out and calmed it. The horse relaxed immediately and looked straight at the hunter inquisitively. Alwin saddled the one in the next pen and they briskly made their way out unto the main road.

“Are we going east through the village and flatlands?” Alwin asked.

“It would be the quickest route, but I worry about the watch tower and patrols.”

“I doubt they would realize these are stolen horses.”

“I’m not worried so much about now as I am later, if we do not return them in time. You know the captain of the guard has it out for me.”

“The path between the guard towers and the marshlands is very narrow, plus we run the risk of encountering a group of wild druids on a nightly hunt.”

“True... It will be safer and much faster to risk the town. But you are paying my bail if I go to prison.” The two friends laughed and quickly made their way southeast toward the marshlands.

The journey took them close to three hours, and the darkness now enveloped them completely. The lights of the city had long since faded and now they both carried lit torches. Arriving at the edge of the swamp, the two hunters dismounted and tied their mounts down. Somehow the swamp seemed even darker than the night around them. The trees dark and twisted and the ground murky, making it nearly impossible to delineate land from water. The two friends looked at each other and nodded, taking their first steps into the wild bog ahead of them.

Unlike the flatlands they had ridden across, the swamp echoed with the sounds of life. Frogs croaked to each other, searching for their kind in the infinite dark. Bugs buzzed, chirped, and clicked creating a disorienting cacophony of sounds. Stepping cautiously the pair scanned the ground ahead of them with what little light their torches produced. This went on for nearly half an hour. Suddenly, all the noise ceased. The silence more unsettling than the noise had ever been. Lucius stopped and motioned for his companion to do the same. They both strained their senses to find the source of the change.

A menacing yet seductive wail echoed in the distance. Both hunters extinguished their torches and knelt as low as they could muster. A faint glow appeared a few yards away. Slowly, they could make out the shape of a woman in a luminescent white dress floating over the swamp. Her eyes entirely black, she stared straight ahead, occasionally letting out another mournful wail. Lucius pulled out a pouch containing the demon's bane. He took a pinch and wrapped it in a small piece of cloth, tying it shut with some twine. He gave the rest of the herb and his silver knife to Alwin and motioned for him to intercept the banshee's path. Undetected, he did as instructed, trusting in his friend's

unknown plan. Lucius combined his pouch with some tinder and attached both to the end of an arrow with yet more twine. He double checked to make sure his set-up was secure, never taking his eyes off the floating apparition.

Unable to see, Alwin crept forward to intercept the creature. His foot blindly kicked a rock into a nearby pond. The splash made both hunter's cringe and the banshee turned her attention toward the sound, her wailing grew louder. The whole area illuminated with her sickly glow and she pointed a pale boney hand toward Alwin. He valiantly stood his ground with the silver dagger extended her direction. Lucius frantically tried to light his arrow with some flint, occasionally glancing up toward the skirmish. His friend, though still expressionless, slowly backed away.

"Damn you," Lucius muttered under his breath.

Just then the banshee let out a deafening wail and sped toward Alwin.

"Run!" Lucius shouted.

Alwin turned and ran with the banshee close behind. Lucius followed, barely keeping pace and still frantically trying to light his arrow. The muck below pulled at their feet, slowing Alwin's desperate attempt at escape. The wraith floated above the ground, unencumbered by the gripping sludge below. Finally, flame engulfed the point and the hunter deftly strung his bow. Alwin could see a light in the distance. The faint beacon, much warmer than the light of the banshee, made the knight long to be out of the dark. He turned to see the creature closing in on him—it began to wail as it reached toward him. The sound cut short as a smoldering bolt hit its mark. The banshee caught fire and emitted a new, panicked sound as it burned up leaving only a glowing essence behind.

Lucius stepped out of the dark and scooped up his prize. The two hunters laughed nervously, patting each other on the back. They took only a moment's rest before turning their attention to the nearby light. After making their way through a collection of trees, they discovered the source of the light, a lone house carefully propped just above the surface of the mire.

Chapter 3- Raijin

The Bear in the Mists

Breathing deep, Raijin attempted to remain calm. He fought the beast inside for control. His father, Borghildr observed calmly. He always knew the day would come when he and the elements would become bound. Preparation and teaching consumed much of his younger life, yet, he still felt ill-equipped for the task at hand.

“You must accept that you neither have control nor are under control. Nature is an unpredictable force. The only thing you can control is how you react to the world around you.”

“Yes, father,” the boy managed to mutter through clenched jaw.

“You cannot fight it. But you also cannot let your transformation be uncontrollable, that is what the Exiles do. You must be one with your animal and communicate with that side of yourself. Come to an understanding.”

Tears began to streak across Raijin’s face. He was sure he would fail and become one of the outcasts. Would his own father send him into exile? A low growl echoed in his mind that shook his very soul. The boy took one last glance at his father, who showed no sign of fear, and then the young druid blacked out.

Raijin’s eyes opened what seemed to him an instant later, but they viewed a part of the forest he did not recognize. Crawling, opaque fog aimlessly hovered above the hard ground. The air lingered heavily. The young man could not breathe, though he was not sure if it was the forest’s doing or his own fear. The woods were completely silent except for his panicked short breaths. Like a thunder crack, the roar returned—the very

trees of the forest seemed to sway in its wake. Looking around frantically, the druid searched for the source of the noise.

A looming figure appeared in the distance. Raijin recognized its shape even from a distance, a bear. Within seconds the hulking beast loomed in front of him, staring intently into his eyes. To his surprise, all fear disappeared from the young druid's heart. Fierceness dwelled in the bear's eyes, but he suddenly sensed no malice towards him. Getting to his feet, the child kept his gaze fixed on the animal. Slowly, he reached out to touch the bear. The wild beast did not move and it did not break its gaze. The moment the boy's hand touched the bear's fur a bright light illuminated the forest and blinded him. When the light faded, Raijin found himself back in his village with his father looking at him with a smile.

“You have done well. Your journey of balance is far from over, but you have made a great first step, my son.”

“Thank you, father,” the boy said with his head bowed modestly.

“Sleep well tonight. At dawn tomorrow we set off in search for the Great White Deer.”

Chapter 4- Aeacus

Civil Unrest in the Undying Lands

Putrid air surrounded them. The forest recoiled by their presence. The Undying rule the southwest region, and none dare to challenge them. To confront the Undying is to run the risk of becoming one of their ranks. Yet, they are prisoners in their own land. A great wall separated their territory from the rest of the kingdom. Aeacus stood on a jagged cliff, gazing down on the ruins of the once great city of Nox'Ortus. He cursed the demon Aerico for sending his savage and diseased Pricolici, undead wolf like creatures more commonly known as Rot-Hides. It mattered not how many wolves they could slay and from what distance, the disease was relentless. Yet, despite its persistence to infect the citizens of Nox, the disease never spread past their territory. The spread created a natural barrier that soon became fortified by the man-made wall that still stood today.

Aeacus strode through town with his head held high. He watched as his people toiled tirelessly, most in search for a cure. The Undying needed little sleep or sustenance and found no comfort in down time, so they spent a majority of their days searching for an end to their curse. Having developed immunity to most chemicals, including poisons, the Undying took to alchemy as a means to search for answers.

“Lord Aeacus, might I have a word,” Savio said, looking up from his work.

Aeacus ushered the chemist to him wordlessly and they began to walk together.

“I tell you this, because we go way back. There is...unrest amongst the Undying. Many are starting to question the path you have set us on. They see your caution as

inaction. Others are beginning to view the plague not as a curse but as a strength that should be embraced.”

Aeacus listened thoughtfully. He considered his words before he spoke. “I cannot stop these thoughts in my people, but they cannot turn into action. Only through unity will we overcome this hardship, even if it is a fragile one. Where do you stand?”

“I stand with you, of course, my Lord.”

Aeacus immediately lost trust in Savio. The surest way to find disloyalty is to search for those seemingly without opinions of their own. Of course, there are those who simply follow those in charge, but Savio was not one of the sheep. Aeacus weighed his options and decided the only way to get the answers he needed was not delegation but candor.

“Tell me, which side is it you lead?”

Surprise filled Savio’s face, but quickly vanished. “Our numbers dwindle because of our sterility. I see this as the only downside of our affliction. I lead those who wish to embrace our condition.”

“You seem to be ignoring the fact that we cannot interact with any other living creatures or risk spread of the infection.”

“What loss would they have if they became one of us? We are more resilient. We utilize resources more efficiently.”

“And what of the constant pain? You would curse the world to feel your anguish simply because you think you are superior?”

“The sterility and pain are things we can overcome. If given the proper resources...”

“What if they are not obstacles that can be overcome but a reality of our condition? Would you damn the world to stagnation and suffering just to appease a select few that believe themselves privileged?”

Savio clearly had no response, nor did he give any indication that his opinion swayed. “The path you lead us down is stagnation and we will not stand for it!” He said haughtily as he stormed off.

Many Undying had stopped their research and looked toward their leader. Attempting to read their faces, Aeacus scanned the crowd. He discovered a sea of scattered emotions within his people’s expressions. He sighed heavily, his kingdom was on the verge of collapse, and the results could be devastating, not just to his people, but also to the surrounding lands.

Chapter 5- Alwin

The Seer in the Swamp

The door to the mysterious little house sprang open, flooding the swamp with light. A decrepit old woman craned her head out the doorway and squinted into the darkness. She seemed relieved but not surprised when she spotted the two hunters.

“Ah, so you’ve arrived at last. Come in.” The woman walked deeper into her home, leaving the door wide open.

The two men looked at each other inquisitively and strode into the light together. The house seemed even smaller on the inside, cramped and filled with all sorts of strange objects. There were various strange herbs hanging from the ceiling, essences in milling bowls, teeth and eyes in jars and many other strange collections. The old woman ushered the two men to sit down, there were exactly three chairs, two together and one alone.

“I made some tea, though I presume you won’t take it. Still, it’s here if you like,” the woman said, pouring herself a cup.

Lucius and Alwin sat down without taking their eyes off the strange woman. It was not until she sat down in front of them that they got a full look at her in the light. Simultaneously, they both spotted her missing eye. She smiled at their unintentional expressions.

“My name is Dalia. And yes, these are ingredients for various occult researches. I am a seer of sorts and mostly just conduct experiments to enhance those abilities.” Dalia spoke as if she had already rehearsed her response to questions she assumed they would

ask. “In fact, that is how I came acquiring this lovely blemish in my otherwise good looks,” she said, pointing to her empty eye socket and laughing.

“We are, Lucius and Alwin,” Lucius blankly stated, ushering toward himself and his friend respectively.

The old woman smiled politely and nodded. “Forgive me. I have a horrible habit of having one way conversations. Foresight does not grant me the right to forget my manners. Why is it you’ve come here?”

“Would it surprise you at all to know we came hunting the evil in this bog?” Alwin asked.

“It does not, but you are misinformed.”

“How so?”

“Though the banshee you destroyed was no doubt evil, the presence attracting it and like creatures is not a source of evil. It is a side effect of my own future sight... Unfortunately, my power twists the area around me into a foul sort of magic.”

“What power could be so important that this perversion is necessary?” Lucius said.

The woman seemed amused. “I could ask the same of your kingdom’s crown. But do not worry yourselves about the ill-effects of my power. I will soon be leaving this place.”

“No offense, but you do not seem capable of leaving on your own accord,” Alwin sated plainly.

“It is onto a new life for me soon, it requires no physical journey on my part.”

Both of the men stayed silent, the crackling of the fire was the only sound in the house. Outside, the various animal sounds began anew and the blackness of the night seemed to surround the house.

“But you did not end up here to learn trivialities like that. We have much more pressing matters to discuss.”

Both men stayed silent and leaned forward.

“There is a darkness growing. I cannot see a face or a name, perhaps the power itself is obscuring that, but its intention is clear. The oncoming darkness wishes only to consume all life in our world. Much like the darkness that inhabits this swamp, this evil I sense longs to engulf the world.”

“What is it? Where does it come from?”

“I do not know. But it is powerful and will surely take significant numbers to combat it.” Silence filled the room for a few long moments. “But it is time you head back home.”

The woman began to usher the two hunters out of her house. Lucius stepped out of the threshold first. The woman grabbed Alwin and caught his eye for a moment. Then she whispered:

“Your friend has an important role to play in the upcoming battle. You must convince him to submit his blood papers for the Trial of the King.”

Alwin quietly nodded and walked out the door into the darkness. Both men looked around in search for any indication of the way out. A glow emitted from the house, different from that of the fire. They turned to see Dalia holding out a glowing stone.

“This will guide you home through the darkness,” she stated, handing Lucius the stone. “Return it to me when next we meet. Though I will have forgotten you and you will not recognize me, our paths will cross again,” Dalia said returning to her home without another word.

With her last statements echoing in their minds, the two hunters turned their attention to the darkness before them. Lucius held the glowing stone flat in his extended hand. The glow hardly illuminated the path ahead and gave no directional indication. The two men stood in silence waiting for some kind of sign.

“Uh... Home?” Lucius guessed a command.

Cracking apart, the stone revealed luminescent flying beetle. The creature’s light revealed a clear view of the surrounding area. It turned and looked at the two men before beginning a flight path away from them. They followed the bug and it kept a steady pace but never left their line of sight.

“So, blood papers are due soon. This will probably be the only chance in our lifetime to see the ceremony,” Alwin awkwardly stated.

“Yes, I suppose so. If I didn’t know any better I’d say you wanted to try for the crown.”

“You do know better. Knights aren’t allowed to enter.”

“You could always quit.”

“Or you could submit your papers instead.”

Lucius laughed. “Can you imagine that? A country under the rule of a hunter with no interest in politics.”

“You may not be interested in politics, but you do care about people. I think you should try. If you aren’t worthy the test will tell.”

“No... There is no use in spilling blood to be told what I already know.”

The two friends walked quietly until they finally came to the edge of the marshlands. Their horses were waiting calmly, seemingly unaffected by the nearby eerier marsh. Lucius extended his open palm again and the beetle hovered over it.

“Thank you,” he uttered and the bug turned to hardened stone once again and fell into his open palm, he placed the stone in his pocket.

“Will you be at the blood paper ceremony?” Alwin attempted to ask casually.

“I will try. I picked up a bounty for an unknown creature killing in the King’s Wood that I plan to track tomorrow.

Alwin nodded as they both mounted their horse and rode toward home. The knight wrestled with creating a new approach to convince his friend to try for the crown the whole way home, but came up with nothing.

Chapter 6- Raijin

The Wild Ones

Light golden rays of the morning sun drifted through the forest canopy. Borghildr and his son silently trudged through the tangled brush. Every now and then Raijin looked at his father's face in search of any indication that they were nearing their destination, but Borghildr only stared forward with a fixed expression. Since the beginning of their journey before sunrise his father did not speak. The young druid wondered if the silence was part of the test. Was there something he was missing? Maybe the Great White Deer would be startled if they made any noise.

Nearby, the sound of a twig snapping broke the silence of the Druid Wood. Borghildr stopped and reached out his hand to stop his son. He indicated to crouch down as he scanned the surrounding trees. An animal like call suddenly echoed throughout the woods. Borghildr crouched down next Raijin, he bared his teeth and let out a low growl.

“What is it?” Raijin whispered.

Borghildr held a finger to his mouth to silence his son. The sound of things running through the wood sounded all around them. The great druid leader lowered to all fours as his bones began to crack and shift. Raijin watched in wonder as his father took the form of a bear. Running through tall brush, several wild looking men, all dressed in different animal pelts came charging at the two druids. The boy's eyes widened in horror as he realized they were Exiles. Until that moment they existed as only myth to the young druid. Until then, he was not entirely sure they were real or just a story to caution children. The reality of these wild druids was more terrifying than he ever could have imagined. Neither man nor animal, they seemed only to be pure fury. The first of the

Wild Ones reached their location and was quickly swatted to the ground by his father's great paw. The Exile yelped in pain, but quickly sprang back to his feet. One of the others had transformed into a wolf and jumped onto the boy's father from behind. The wolf tore at the bear's shoulder, inching toward its huge muscular neck, but the bear shook furiously until its grip failed. Raijin stood frozen. He felt helpless. Could he transform? Could he control himself? What good was he to his father in a fight like this? Horror filled him when he realized his father would not run if the fight took a turn, he knew he would stay to protect his son even if that meant death. He had to do something. The young man frantically looked around looking for something to use as a weapon.

Spotting a small, thick branch the young druid took action. He dashed forward and swiped the wood from the ground. Turning towards the battle he saw two wolves and a second bear. This was not a fair fight. Raijin ran into the fray with his makeshift weapon swinging. He made direct contact with a wolf skull—a sickening crack rang out. The wolf fell and did not get up. The other two wild druids seemed quite surprised, as if they had forgotten they had two opponents. Borghildr took advantage of this moment of distraction. Lowering his head, he charged the other bear, the Wild One lost his footing and crashed into a nearby tree. Raijin charged toward the remaining wolf. The cowardly beast turned and ran into the woods, leaving his companions behind. Borghildr, still in bear form, advanced onto the dazed bear and lunged face first to its throat. Blood spurted on the damp earth as the druid ripped the Exile's throat out. The dazed wolf started to come to. The young druid turned his attention to it once again, raising his weapon. His father's now human hand caught the branch and stepped in front of his son. Borghildr

knelt down, drawing a knife from his waist. Plunging the knife into the Exile's heart, the great leader sighed.

“One escaped. There will be others soon,” the father said.

“What do we do?” asked the son.

“I will get a higher vantage point and find out where they are coming from, we'll go from there. Wait here for my return.”

With that, the mighty druid transformed into an eagle and took flight. Raijin watched in wonder until he could see his father no longer. Then he remembered his solitude in the motionless woods, and hoped the Wild Ones would not come back before his father could return.

Chapter 7- Aeacus

The Ghost in the Keep

Taking up arms, the factions of the Undying sat at a standstill. Those that embraced the plague wished to begin conquest to surrounding areas to grow their numbers. Those that saw no progress demanded new leadership. Aeacus and his followers held their ground but spread themselves thin, trying to keep their broken kingdom unified. The Unity forces were a constant presence all around the Undying Lands. They patrolled vigorously, making it difficult for the other factions to achieve their goals without consequence. They had confined their proud leader to his quarters for safety purposes. He was able to seek counsel with distant allies by the aid of his translocation orb, however, it did little to sate him and his confinement quickly maddened him.

“How can I address the cries of inaction if I am unable to take action? How can I show the tiring ill-effects of this curse if I am confined to luxury? How can I demand unity when I alone stay separate?” Aeacus shouted at his council members and head of the guard.

“It is not stable on the streets, sir. The probability of an attempt on your life is too great,” retorted Brauntos, the head of the guard.

“Yes, yes. But what is my absence producing? How much damage to our society does my safety warrant?”

“Sir, I’m sure your followers will understand that you must stay safe during this turbulent time.”

“My people will understand to a point, but one can only stand up for a ghost for so long before realizing he’s not there. Make whatever arrangements you feel necessary, I will not sit idly by while my kingdom falls to ruins.”

Braun bowed and left the room quickly. Aeacus stood, staring at the door of his room, searching for solutions to what seemed like an infinite number of problems. The most logical thing for him to do would be to step down and let the people elect a new leader, but with the gap between the two factions widening that would only lead to more problems, possibly even civil war.

The wait for his escort heightened his agitation, though Aeacus was not entirely sure what good his venturing out would do, perhaps being out in the midst of the conflict would generate some kind of idea, some direction to turn. Two very stern looking guards he didn’t recognize came in the room with the head of the guard. He thought about asking if they could be trusted, but doubted a man so intent on his safety would chose guards he did not trust. *Unless...* the Undying leader thought, *unless he is aligned with a rival faction and is conspiring to assassinate me.* Aeacus hated that his mind crept towards those dark thoughts, but in times of civil unrest it was difficult to know who to trust.

Chapter 8- Lucius

A Hunt in the King's Wood

Lucius watched as the deer lowered its head to graze. Slowly, he drew an arrow from his quiver and tightened his grip on his bow. Breathing in deeply, Lucius notched the arrow and pulled back the bowstring. The deer paused and raised its head to look around. The deer seemed to sense his presence but did not run. The arrow released and hit its mark, falling the deer in a quick and painless motion.

Lucius walked up to the beast slowly, drawing a silver dagger out of his belt. He did not kneel to finish the deer. He merely stared down at it with a smirk.

“What’s a mimic like you doing in a place like this?”

The deer peered up at the hunter, clearly not as injured as it had seemed. The creature paused as if to think. Suddenly, the flesh began to warp and tear, and many gaping mouths appeared. During its horrific transformation, it attempted to attack its confident assailant, but something stopped it from being able to move.

“Yeah, no point in trying to attack. That arrow was tipped with some good ol’ demon’s bane extract,” Lucius chuckled.

The mimic spoke the demonic language in a deep guttural voice. *How did you know?*

Lucius understood the demon and laughed. “Where to start? For one thing, normally when a deer bows to graze it actually eats grass. You simply were going through the motions. Also, deer don’t normally have a hoof of wood,” the hunter said pointing to the deer’s back right hoof. “Plus, demons smell, so there’s that...”

The mimic growled and began to reform, attempting to take a more menacing shape.

“Would you stop moving, it’s hard enough to find your heart with all those damned mouths.”

Just because you saw through my ruse does not mean you can slay me, mortal.

Lucius ignored the beast’s threats. “What were you shifted into before? A wooden chest? It’s a classic, I’ll give you that, but there’s no way it still works.”

You’d be surprised how idiotic your race can be.

Lucius nodded in mocking agreement. Then he plunged his dagger forward, piercing the demon’s heart. The mimic shrieked and black ooze poured from its wound. The demon cursed Lucius in its language as it slowly died. It made empty threats and wailed loudly, but already lost the slayer’s attention. Fire in the distance radiated and drew the hunter’s eyes.

“Looks like I almost missed the blood paper ceremony,” he said, glancing over his shoulder at the dying demon. “I’d love to stay and play some more, but I want to catch the second act of the play they call government.”

Lucius made his way quickly to the hollow tree trunk where he had hidden the rest of his supplies. He took them up and began to make his way toward Aarden Hall. Suddenly he stopped, remembering to gather the proof he needed of his kill. Striding across the open field quickly, he returned to the now dead creature. Stooping down,

Lucius yanked a tooth from one of the mimic's mouths. Then he started his hour long journey across the King's Wood.

Chapter 9- Raijin

The Lineage of the First

The midday sun sat at its peak, its rays beamed down hot, and Raijin took refuge under a tall tree. He awaited his father's return and began to fear something happened. Just then, the boy heard the flap of mighty wings. He looked up and spotted the welcome sight of his father, still in the form of an eagle, perched above him. The eagle swooped down, and within moments took the stout form of Borghildr.

“I followed the Wild One who escaped long enough to discover where he was heading. He did not reach his destination. There is a small camp of Exiled several miles east of here. The group we encountered must have been a scouting party.”

“Then they will notice their absence.”

The father nodded in agreement. “Undoubtedly, we have no more than a few hours. There is a great waterfall west of here that I have found the White Deer at before. That is our best course of action. Keep your mind at peace, my son, and hopefully the Great White Deer will find us.”

The young druid hopped up and the two began walking at a brisk pace. Borghildr seemed so calm, regardless of the imminent danger. His son wondered how he managed it and felt ashamed that he was so fearful. His father seemed to sense the young man's fright.

“It is time I told you the full story of the Great White Deer.”

Raijin turned his attention to his father. He had not known that there was more to the story.

“In the time of the five tribes there was constant conflict. Nature fed off this brutality and became just as savage as the tribes. One chieftain grew very tired of the devastation and took to meditation to calm his soul. His tribe became very anxious as their leader became more and more peaceful. They began to turn on him. One day, the leader vanished. He had gone into the savage wilds to search for answers. At first, the forest rejected him and attacked. The leader fought when he had to, but no more than needed, and the wilds took notice. The great tribal leader came to a grove that was lush and lightly bathed in sunlight. He decided this is where he would meditate. The man sat there for days without food or water, and the wilds took notice. The forest around the grove began to calm and began to embrace the peaceful stranger. Eventually, this chieftain became the first druid. He could take any form he wished, but he favored the majestic buck. Though his new-found powers gave him the ability to turn the tides of war he never used it to conquer, only to bring peace. His tribe began to study his ways, and many learned the way of the druid, but none mastered the ability to transform to anything other than their spirit animal. None still have accomplished this feat except his lineage.”

“We’re descended from the first druid? But what does this have to do with the Great White Deer?”

“When the chieftain’s time came to die, the wilds could not let his spirit leave so it granted him the honor of inhabiting one of its most powerful creatures. The spirit chose the animal that it had always been drawn to. And so the protector of the Druid Wood was born, the chieftain became the Great White Deer.”

The young druid contemplated his father's words for several minutes before speaking. The father smiled, watching his son begin to have a better understanding of their people's relationship to the wilds they lived in.

“Why is it just the first druid's lineage that can become more than one beast?”

“None know for sure, but many believe that his enlightenment was the only conceived on his own and that his lineage is granted this ability as a gift of thanks.”

The two walked again in silence and soon they could hear the roaring of the falls in the distance. Behind them, a wolf howl echoed through the trees. Raijin jerked his head around in horror and his father became solemn, clearly wishing his son's meeting with the Great White Deer did not have to be rushed. They quickened their pace. The rushing water's roar became louder. Soon flow of the water blocked all sound of their pursuers. Illuminating rays shone gently from a grove ahead. The young druid was surprised to find the light did not come from the sun, but from the fabled guardian of the wood. They had found the Great White Deer.

Chapter 10- Aeacus

Blood in the Streets

Aeacus simultaneously felt relief and fear upon his first steps into his city. Armed guard following closely, the leader began to feel he appeared to militant and foreboding. He attempted to smile, but it felt forced and he knew it showed. He observed all he could, and was distinctly aware that he was being observed as well. For the first time in his rule Aeacus did not know how to present himself. He worried that he stood too proud, or too defeated. He wanted to convey to his people that he felt the turmoil of their city just as much as they did. He wanted to assure them that he would find a solution.

Uneasiness fell upon the leader's armed guards. Aeacus looked around, searching for the cause of the sudden change. He could find nothing. Did they know something he did not? Were they marching him to his death?

“What is it?” Aeacus asked, not expecting the truth.

The two guards remained silent. He hoped they simply did not know what to say. Fear of his guard overwhelmed him and he stopped walking. The movement of the city around him ceased. All eyes were watching. A blade unsheathed somewhere nearby. The guards responded.

“Down with the king!” a voice shouted as the assailant lunged toward Aeacus.

The guards rushed to the leader's side and intercepted the man. Blood spilled onto the streets as the knife plunged into the guard's neck. The second blocked the assassin from a following strike and the two grappled furiously. The crowd began to divide as citizens revealed their alignment to one another. Anger filled their eyes as well as their

words. Aeacus picked up his fallen guard's sword. The leader moved forward quickly, not giving his foes time to react. He impaled his enemy and shouted for the attention of the crowd. A momentary hush fell over the people, but the fire in their eyes remained.

“It is clear that we can no longer pretend this city isn't fragmenting. Change will come. Change must come, for the good of this kingdom. I cannot make promises I alone cannot repair what is broken. I will promise I will do everything in my power to cease this conflict, even if that means stepping down when the time comes. Until that time, I am open to meeting with leaders of any and all factions to learn their views and examine our options. I will not, however, tolerate violence in my streets and will enforce our laws on any who break them. An attempt on my life will accomplish nothing and I do not wish to spill the blood of one of my own again.”

Aeacus dropped the blade that had been clasped tightly in his hand. He walked away without another word, leaving the gleaming weapon to drip crimson on the Undying streets. The crowd was silent as they watched their leader leave them with devastation in his wake.

Chapter 11- Alwin/Lucius

A Hunter's Bounty

“I just think its bullshit that the King’s Guard can’t enter their blood papers into the fire,” said a guard loudly.

“Keep your voice down. Have some respect for the system,” Alwin responded.

The two guards were standing at the front gate to the city, leaning against walls on either side of the heavy, iron, gate. Anxiously awaiting his friend’s return, Alwin became increasingly annoyed by his loudmouthed associate.

“How can I respect a system that excludes me from a chance to rule?”

“You know very well you could quit the guard at any time and submit your blood papers. You haven’t done it because you know would lose, and then there would be no job left for you except shoveling shit on some pig farm.”

The other guard grumbled and spit on the ground, bringing a grin to Alwin’s face. His smile quickly faded as he peered out beyond the gate to the King’s Wood. He hoped Lucius would make it back in time to submit his paper. Half an hour passed and the two guards stood in silence, neither wanted to talk to the other any longer. Then, Alwin saw a familiar figure in the distance. A wide smile spread across his face as he recognized Lucius’ unmistakable strut, the hunt must have gone well.

“About time you showed up!” Alwin shouted as his friend neared.

“I would have been here sooner if Mimics didn’t have so many mouths,” Lucius responded, holding up his trophy. “Where that drunk of a Captain of yours? He owes me money for this hunt as well as the one before it.”

“That is Captain Flynn to you,” the rude guard interjected.

“That can be resolved after you enter your blood paper,” Alwin said, ignoring his coworker.

Lucius rolled his eyes at his friend. “Not this again, I told you I have no interest in entering. I’ll watch the trials just like everyone else.”

Alwin pulled out a small tan parchment and presented it to Lucius. “I took the liberty of procuring you a note anyways. Just humor me, old friend. If you are truly unworthy, then your flame will glow red and you can go on working your odd jobs.”

Lucius snatched up the paper, giving his friend a stern look. He pulled out his silver dagger and wiped it clean on his pants. Taking the blade to his thumb, Lucius swiftly cut into his skin. Pressing the bleeding appendage to the paper, he sighed.

“You owe me a beer,” he said, shoving the paper back into Alwin’s hand. “I trust you can write my name on it,” he said, walking away to find the Captain of the Guard and claim his bounty. The two guards watched him walk away, one with admiration and the other with scorn.

“If that friend of yours becomes king, I’m quitting the guard.”

“I’m certain we will all miss your unwavering charm.”

Lucius knew he would not find the Captain Flynn doing any work, even on the day of the Passing of the Crown. However, unlike most days, he could not get lost in a bottle in public. He decided the last place anyone would look for the old drunk warrior was in the office that he never used. As soon as Lucius opened the door to the guard house, he knew his theory was correct. An empty wine bottle lay on the ground near the half open door to the captain's office. He did not knock before barging into the room.

“Hello there captain. Fancy seeing you here. You aren't considering actually doing any work are you?”

The captain snarled and took a swig of the half empty bottle of wine in his hand. “I don't have to. I gave my whole life to the king. Won 'em many battles. And all I've gotta show for it is a bum leg and this cushy little job.”

“Glad to find you in a good mood. I'm here to talk about payments.”

“Payments?” the captain hiccupped.

“Yes, for both the rogue druid two weeks ago and the mimic I just killed in the King's Wood.” Lucius tossed the demon's tooth onto the captain's desk. Oh, and just to refresh your memory, I have the warrants your office released right here.” He pulled out two folded papers and tossed them at the drunk man.

The captain read the warrants over and his eyes widened. “Ten fucking gold each? You've gotta be joking! I didn't authorize this!”

“Your stamp and signature is on them.”

“This is absurd. Let’s see if we can find a compromise.”

“I am in no mood to negotiate. Unless you’d like me to go over your head I would like my coin now.”

The captain grumbled and got out of his chair to unlock the safe behind his desk. He slowly began to turn the dial, occasionally looking over his shoulder at the hunter. He quickly stumbled back to his chair and through two small pouches on his desk. Lucius leaned in to pick them up. A grin spread across his face.

“You know, captain, a thank you would be appreciated.”

“Fuck off.”

Lucius chuckled and walked out of the office.

Chapter12- Raijin

The Great White Deer

Moments before, Raijin had felt fear and uncertainty, but all of that had washed away. He felt at peace. He could not take his eyes off the majestic creature before him. He began to wonder how one communicates with a deer to find his own inner peace. Surely it was not just granted to them upon meeting the deer, and the animal certainly didn't talk. The young man turned to his father, but Borghildr had stepped back, closed his eyes, and bowed his head. Clearly, he refused to give any indication to his son of what to do next.

Turning back, the young druid saw that the deer had stepped closer. Raijin slowly reached out toward the animal but stopped when he remembered it had a human soul. He was torn, he knew he should think of man and nature as one and the same, but he couldn't. The Great White Deer caught his glance and the world around them seemed to become out of focus.

“What’s happening?” Raijin asked.

No physical response came from the deer, nor a voice in his head. The answer simply came in the clear understanding of his own thoughts, yet they did not feel like they came from him.

Do not fear, we are bonded. Your sight will return to normal when you can process all around you.

“What does that mean?”

It cannot be explained, only felt.

“I cannot stay for long. My father and I are being pursued by exiled,” the young druid blurted, turning away from the deer and attempting to peer off into the blurry woods.

If your fear of the Wild Ones consumes you, then you risk becoming one yourself.

“I would never let that happen!”

Control of nature is not obtainable.

“Then what is? Your lineage seems to have much more control than any other.”

Not control, understanding.

“Recently, I’ve discovered I understand much less than I believed I did.”

Good, that is the first necessary understanding. Though the road ahead may be unclear, you must stay on it.

Raijin remained quiet, processing his ancestor’s words. He suddenly became aware of the roar of the waterfall again. His sight began to refocus.

The Wild Ones are here. We will continue our conversation some other time.

As if forced back into reality, the young druid suddenly became aware he was surrounded by several wild druids. Borghildr was in the form of a bear, ready for battle. Raijin turned to discover the Great White Deer had vanished. They were alone. He breathed deep and began to take the shape of his spirit animal for the first time.

Chapter13- Aeacus

The Silent Man

Shaking hands reached for the next ingredient. Aeacus sat back in his quarters under armed watch. He, like many others of the Undying, practiced alchemy and sought a solution to their curse. At the time, however, the leader practiced his craft more as a means to distract him than anything else. He had killed one of his own people in the streets of his city. They may have drawn first blood, but he had replicated. There would be consequences for his actions, even if there had been no other options. An urgent knock sounded at his door.

“Come,” he uttered, turning to the door.

Braun briskly walked into the room, accompanied by the remaining guard from his escort.

“Sire, we need to come up with contingency plans for any backlash today’s events may create.”

“I agree, but first I must apologize.”

“Sir?”

“I was not sure I could trust you or your men when ventured into the city today. I was paranoid, distracted. Perhaps, my judgment was clouded by this. You have proven you are trustworthy. I only hope you can forgive my doubts.”

“These are very uncertain times. You can hardly be blamed for questioning.”

“Yet, still, I am sorry.”

“Thank you, sir.”

The leader turned his attention to the guard. “I should apologize to you as well. I did not trust you either. I found your silence unnerving, I am sure you had your reasons.”

“He’s mute,” the head of the guard spoke for the warrior.

“Ah, that explains much. Was the other mute as well?”

“No, he was Fenrik’s brother. He had always sworn a vow of silence any time the two worked together.”

“I am very sorry for your loss... Your brother saved my life, I will not forget that. I am indebted to your family and would be honored if you would continue as my personal guard.”

The mute guard examined the leader closely, his expression showed very little. Aeacus and the head of guard remained silent as if the man were speaking. Then, the mute nodded in agreement.

Aeacus smiled briefly before the grim looked returned to his face. “Now, we must discuss our plan of action.”

“I agree. It is clear that the streets are much too dangerous for you to travel on, especially on short notice.”

The leader held up his hand to stop Braun’s speech. “Yes, yes. I agree. It is also clear to me that the other factions are beyond negotiating, they need to see a dramatic change. However, I believe I should meet with the leaders anyways.”

“I’m not sure that’s wise... You just said they were beyond negotiating.”

“I do not expect results, but I do not want to continue on without having tried.”

Braun shifted uncomfortably, but behind him Fenrik grinned. The two exchanged knowing glances before the leader continued with the conversation.

“I know what you are thinking, what’s to stop them from killing me in the meeting? Nothing, but I hope they are honorable enough to restrain themselves and conduct a civil meeting.”

“Give me time and I will rally as many men as I can to help... delegate this meeting.”

“The delegation will be done by me and me alone and a display of power will not impress these men, it will only bring more to their cause. I must approach them humbly and respectfully and hope they reciprocate.”

“And what about defense? Surely you will want to be guarded.”

“Of course, but I shall hardly need more than Fenrik and myself. We will both come armed into the meeting. I hope this display will not show threat but intent to fight if provoked.”

“Are you sure about this, sir?”

“I am sure of very little anymore, but I am sure of this.”

Chapter 14- Lucius

Fire in the Basin

Flickering fire danced seductively over the brim of the large basin in the center of the city—it stood nearly in the same spot the king’s execution block had hours before. Again, a large crowd gathered, but the ambience felt significantly lighter. Chatter filled the air, vendors moved their shops to circle the crowd, and parents lifted their children to get a glimpse of the fire. Lucius stood near the back of the crowd, speaking with his friend, Bard who built a wobbly wooden cart that he had crowded warm pints of ale onto.

“Alwin actually believes you have a chance?” Bard said.

“He does. I told him he was mad as our late king, but he seemed set on the idea.”

“Well, tell him that in the off chance you are selected he can have free drinks for a year in my tavern. There is no way in hell a blade for hire will rule the kingdom.”

“I happen to agree, but still your tone is not appreciated, Bard.”

“Think back to the last few rulers. Arthturius was well educated and on his way to become a counselor. Darien was a philosopher whose father happened to be one of the greatest knights of all time. He was a fighter and a thinker. They were both “kingly” without the crown. I like you, but kingly is not a word I would use to describe you.”

“Tactful is not a word I would use for you.” Lucius looked around and raised his voice so the surrounding crowd could hear him. “And clean is not a word I would use to describe your tavern.”

Several people turned to look at them. Bard scoffed and shoved Lucius lightly. They both spotted Alwin walking their way. He had been in earshot and was laughing at Lucius's words.

"I once saw him garnishing rat shit and trying to pass it off as an exotic meal," said the knight.

They all began to chuckle. "I'll have you know, several wealthy patrons made that purchase and went on to brag about it to their friends."

Lucius began to say something, but a sudden uproar cut him off. The crowd began to cheer as the Council made its way toward the fire basin, known as the Basin of Veritas. Knights surrounded the procession of politicians, wielding pikes that were more for ceremony than actual defense. Behind the counselors followed their scribes, awkwardly lugging the boxes that contained the blood papers.

The knights surrounded the centerpiece as before but this time looking towards the fire. One of the older counselors and his scribe stepped forward. The young boy opened the chest and averted his eyes from the blood papers. The old man slowly began pulling the papers out of the box and reading the names aloud and then casting them into the fire. If the fire burned red, then they were not eligible for the crown and if it turned blue then they underwent rigorous testing to gain the right to rule.

"You keep your eyes on that flame. I want to see your face when it turns blue as your name is called," Alwin said.

"You are so persistent. You're going to feel very stupid when you're wrong."

“You are going to be very grateful when I’m right.”

“Grateful to be given a cursed crown and a shorter life expectancy?”

“Grateful for the possibilities that power will bring. Plus, you really don’t expect to live that long do you? The way you live your life.”

The two friends were laughing together and had almost forgotten about the ceremony going on. Already, four people stood in front of the basin, they were all deemed worthy but only one would pass the final trial. The crowd had suddenly grown quiet. The flames glowing blue.

“Lucius?” The old man called out.

A burning pain rose up in the wound on Lucius’s hand. He turned to Alwin in shock. Grinning widely, his friend pushed him toward the basin. The crowd parted as Lucius walked slowly to the flames.

“Place your hand in the flames. If you are who you claim, you will not be burned and your wound will heal,” the counselor said.

Shaking, the young hunter placed his hand into the fire. He did not burn—in fact, the burning in his wound disappeared. The old counselor continued with his instructions and Lucius wordlessly followed them. Slowly, he took his place among the other chosen and waited motionless for the ceremony to end.

Chapter 15- Dalia

Visions of a Faceless Man

A hooded man stared straight ahead. His face was completely obscured by darkness. He stood in the middle of an empty street in an empty town. Nothing moved, even the air. Dalia could not breathe—she felt as if all air fled from her lungs. Suddenly, she stood on the edge of a cliff with the faceless figure standing in front of her. Then she fell, the very ground below her seemed to be grabbing at her.

Dalia awoke in her bed. She lay there awhile, staring at the ceiling and contemplating her vision. Usually, she had to evoke the visions, but this one came without any preparation or warning. The old woman felt cold, yet the nearby fire still smoldered. She scrambled out of bed to stoke the embers. She knew it was almost time. She would be needed and would be of no help in her current state. The wind howled fiercely outside and the old woman's bones howled back. She sneered at her detreating body and took a seat near the fire.

Silently she sat for quite some time, contemplating her recent visions and how they all could be connected. Slowly, she reached over to a nearby table and grasped a leather journal. She carefully jotted all her reflections and memories of the visions, then she set the book down lovingly.

The ingredients were already prepared. She needed only to add one more, her blood. The old seer took up the bowl and a nearby dagger. She slit her hand deeply, letting the liquid seep into the bowl. The concoction emitted a light smoke and the woman inhaled deeply, uttering something under her breath. Then Dalia the seer slit her throat and the strange smoke filled the room.

Chapter 16- Kamon

The First King

Kamon's head ached, but he kept on studying. He had been chosen to recite the Poem of the First King at the opening of the trials. He was honored but horrified of speaking in front of everyone, the counselors especially. After all, they all knew the poem and would know if he got it wrong. Gerreon sat quietly at his desk nearby. The elder did not seem to mind the silence, but it weighed uncomfortably on his scribe. Kamon looked around the room. There were so many books, he wondered if Gerreon had read them all. Some of the books looked older than Aarden itself. An assortment of artifacts lingered in the far corners of the office. Kamon's favorite was an unimposing orb that the old Counselor used as a book end next to his desk. This orb was much more than it seemed though. It was an ancient item that allowed him to speak with the leaders of the Undying and Druids. Once, Gerreon had allowed Kamon in to one of the meetings, the men seemed larger than life and the scribe could not understand why Aarden did not have a closer relationship with what seemed to him to be reasonable and fair leaders. The young man moved uneasily in his chair. After the chair creaked for a third time the old man looked up and smiled.

“Do you know the full story behind that poem?” Gerreon broke the silence.

Kamon jerked his head toward the sound. “No, sir. I don't believe so.”

“You don't believe so? Or you know so?”

“Well I've heard what just about everyone in the kingdom knows but the story seems to be missing a lot of important details.”

The old counselor smiled. “Very observant.”

“What happened with the druids? And the Undying? And what caused the two great cities in the east and west to form?” the scribe blurted excitedly.

Gerreon held his hand up to calm young man. “I will share what I know, though I doubt it is still the complete story.”

The young scribe moved his chair to the far end of the counselor’s desk and nodded in acknowledgement, waiting anxiously for the story to begin.

“The story of the first king begins well before the crown was forged. In the Era of Stone there were five tribes, each had their own beliefs and traditions. Of course, this caused constant conflict between the groups until it escalated into all-out war. Progress came to a halt, until the people knew only war. Eventually, the reasons for the conflict were lost and it became a war without purpose and without end.

“Now, there were two tribes whose leaders began to search for a way to end the unending war. One leader went into seclusion in the woods near the area his tribe inhabited. Another commissioned those he could spare to begin building stone walls to protect his village. With a small group, he ventured out to seek anything that could strengthen his forces and bring peace between the tribes. Far to the west, in lands none from the five tribes had ever traveled, the great leader and his followers came across an unnatural cave. The midday sun was bright, but the area at the mouth of the cave was shaded by an unknown object. The interior of the cave itself was said to be blacker than the blackest night. Desperate, the group set forth into the depths with makeshift torches and their swords in hand. Inside, they found a strange ore. It resembled but had a dark

gleam and a depth to it none could describe. All accounts of this metal state that it seemed to draw men unwillingly to it.

“On their return trip they discussed what to forge out of the strange ore, they could not agree and soon all but the leader became disinterested. For, it was he who carried the metal. He never could explain what the initial feeling the ore gave him, but he had somehow felt stronger. While the others viewed their long journey as a waste, the leader began to believe this strange metal would bring peace.

“A crown...’ he muttered to himself.

“His men looked at him puzzled. He gave them a grim smile and elaborated.

“We shall form the metal into a crown. The five tribes will be united under one ruler, me.’

“The men described the look in their leader’s eyes at that moment as horrifying yet upon their return they all followed him, and not out of fear but out of love and respect. They soon discovered that the dark crown did imbue the leader with inexplicable power: he was stronger, quicker both mentally and physically, and he became resistant to the elements and immune to disease. Yet, even with this great power, the man did not rule with an iron fist. He united the tribes, just as he said he would, and brought a fair and just balance between them. For thirty-five years his new kingdom prospered and the walls of Aarden Hall were formed.

“Time, however, was not kind to the king. He secluded himself in his fortress. Those that were close to him said he slept very little and began to look ill. The once great

leader began to pace around his quarters, muttering to himself. Civil unrest began to blossom within the walls of the city. The Church of the Light, which originated in the king's tribe began to have too much power and in the absence of the king forced their doctrine on the populace. Opposition soon developed and the two groups divided the great city. The two sides eventually grew violent toward each other. The king was begged by his council to take action. He declared war on his own people. Both sides were considered disruptors of peace and were treated as traitors to the crown.

“Yet another faction began to grow amongst the druids. Some of them believed they should embrace their bestial nature. Frequent animal attacks occurred in the city walls before it was realized that the perpetrators were, in fact, men. The druid leaders took it upon themselves to force their people into exile, Wild Ones included. This move probably saved many lives, but it also put into motion the division of the kingdom that the tribes had collaborated to build. Following the druid leaders' example, the king banished the faction leaders that were dividing his city. Most of their followers departed with them. The Followers of the Light went east and the Opposition went west. Each developed many villages in both directions until the kingdom was spread thin. Eventually all communication stopped between the regions and the capital. Even though it is all considered the same realm, each city state became foreign to one another.

“Years passed, then word came that one of the settlements in the east was stricken with a strange plague. A vile demon tormented the people of Nox'Ortus who had developed a strong and valiant city. They begged for aid from Aarden Hall. Instead, the king built a wall around their city, quarantining them with archers around the wall. They were left to die. It was soon discovered, however, that they would not die. Their

affliction, however grotesque and painful, made them immune to many things and greatly lengthened their lives. Again, the king's council urged their leader organize a group so they could learn about the disease. The king denied reason, even lashing out violently at one of the council members.

“It was clear the king had gone mad. In secret, the all other high ranking officials of Aarden Hall began to plot to dethrone the ruler, the more sympathetic of them searched for a reason to his madness. When they finally addressed his madness and asked him to stand down, they were surprised by his reaction. He wept and calmly told them the crown was eating away at his mind but he could not live without it. He removed the dark circlet and made a final request. He wished to be beheaded. He promised evil deeds if they did not carry out his wishes so they complied. Very few believe the king's accusation of the crown. However, after the next was given leadership and followed his predecessor it became clear that the first king had spoken the truth. Thusly, the Crown of Madness was revealed.”

“I've always wondered... why do we use the crown? If it drives our leaders insane, why not just rule without it?” the young scribe asked.

“Many before you have asked the very same thing. There is no one true answer. Some fear that without the crown the exiled factions will return to take the throne. Others fear some indescribable evil we have not yet encountered. And yet more simply support its use because of tradition.”

“Those are hardly good reasons... If you don't mind me asking, what do you believe?”

“I believe that the crown’s madness has indirectly created a balance. Our royalty does not inherit the position, they earn it. The tests were designed to find those who can withstand the ill-effects of the madness the longest, but it also ensures we have a strong and mindful leader. The Council exists as a balance to our king or queen, especially when their mind begins to fail them.”

Kamon remained silent for a while, absorbing his master’s words. Eventually he managed a short response. “That makes sense. But what happens if someone wants more power?”

Chapter 17- Lucius

Interviews

They had gathered all of the possible leaders into one room in the barracks. Lucius looked around and wondered if they had intended to convey the coming trials in such a militaristic way. He assumed they had plotted out every detail, but that made the group environment confusing to him. It seemed that all the others thought something similar. Eight people in total inhabited the room, gender was divided evenly, but there was a wide range of social and economic classes. No one had said anything since their escort left. All the candidates sat on their chosen bed, paced, or stared out the only window in the room, which had several thick iron bars across it. Lucius noticed one of the larger and richer looking men was sizing him up.

“Can I help you?” the hunter blurted.

The man grinned smugly. “I find myself wondering, how it is we can both be worthy of the throne when there is such a clear difference.”

“Oh come on now, you’re not that ugly.”

The smug man involuntarily laughed. “And there’s my answer. Here I was trying to hate you.”

“What can I say, I’m a people person.”

The man extended his hand. “I’m Jaron.”

Lucius smiled and shook his hand.

Just then, the door opened, all the contestants turned their heads in anticipation. A nervous looking scribe walked in, eyes staying unfocused on anyone person.

“Interviews with the council will begin shortly. They will be conducted in alphabetical order.”

Everyone stayed silent some nodded, but others didn't even acknowledge the young man.

“Thank you,” Lucius said.

The boy's eyes finally fixed on a position, looking at Lucius. He relaxed a little and pulled out a folded parchment. One by one, names were called and people left with the scribe, returning half an hour later. Lucius waited his turn, observing each person as they came back from their interview. Many people returned looking worried and distant. Finally, his name sounded and he walked out with the scribe. As soon as the door closed behind them, the hunter turned to the young man.

“Any idea what's going on in these interviews?”

“No. But even if I did, I'm sure I would not be allowed to tell you.”

Lucius smiled. “Fair enough. So, what's your name?”

“Kamon,” the scribe answered without looking at the man next to him.

“Nice to meet you, even if you don't like people.”

The young scribe continued looking forward, but seemed to want to say something. He stayed quiet though and they walked on in silence, eventually coming to a

set of iron doors. They stopped. The scribe opened one of the doors and stepped out of the way for Lucius to enter. The hunter noticed the young man purposefully cast his eyes away from the room. As soon as Lucius looked into the room he understood why everyone had acted so strangely, the interviews were being held in the Iron Chamber. The hunter only hesitated for a moment before entering. Around a great wooden table sat the council, the seat closest to the door and one at the far end both remained open. The counselors all stared at Lucius awaiting his decision. The hunter smiled, the easy choice resided in the seat closest seat for it would end the awkward moment more quickly but they wanted someone who would sit in a king's position. Still sure he was not fit to rule, Lucius let his competitive side get the best of him and refuse to allow himself to be counted out of the running this early. Leisurely, the hunter walked toward the far chair, examining each counselor as he walked by. The older men and women seemed to all hold the same stoic expression except one of the eldest who flashed a smile at him as he walked by. Finally, Lucius took his seat at the head of the table.

Chapter 18- Raijin

Wild Blood

The two noble druids, both as bears, grew tired as they fought off waves of Exiles. Had the Wild Ones somehow known the tribe's leader and his son would venture out of the safety of the village alone? Raijin did not want to think of the possibility that a traitor dwelled in the tribe, especially now when he needed to stay focused. He swiped a wolf off of his father's back. Most of the attack focused on Borghildr, the massive bear bled from many bites and gashes. While the young druid's focus was on his father's attackers, a group of Wild Ones pounced on him. The Exiles took many forms, but always favored carnivores, some the creatures the boy had never seen before.

Suddenly, a terrifying growl echoed across the woods. It did not seem to belong to one single creature. The attack stopped, the Exiles backed away from the two druids, creating a circle around them. Borghildr turned human, breathing heavily and bleeding deeply, his son followed suit. A towering druid woman came forward, stepping into the circle with the injured men.

“Hello, sister,” Borghildr spouted through purposeful breathes.

“Dear brother, you have such a fire inside. Why must you fight it? You would fit well amongst our ranks.”

Raijin was stunned. His thoughts raced. His father had never mentioned a sister. Of course, it was clear as to why, but the revelation shocked him nonetheless. The intimidating woman paced back and forth, examining them both. Then her eyes became fixed on him and she grinned mischievously.

“This must be my nephew. I am Nasrin. I assume your father did not tell you about me.”

Raijin could only manage to shake his head no in response, he had trouble keeping his eyes on her, but she stared intently at him. She let out a short, wicked laugh, and then turned her attention back to her brother.

“If you will not join us then you will die and your son will be forced into our ranks.”

“He would never join you... Even if you capture him, you will not break his will.”

“We do not wish to break him, only to mold him. Our methods have proven to be very persuasive.”

“Even if you could persuade me, what good is one more druid in your ranks?” the young druid blurted.

Again, Nasrin grinned. “It’s simple. We need more druids of the first bloodline.”

“We would both sooner end that line, then to allow it to be used for your purposes,” the young man retorted with new found confidence. Finally, his eyes met hers.

The wild druid leader’s grin faded. She snapped her fingers and walked out of the circle which began to close in around the two men. The Wild Ones began to growl and snap their jaws. The beasts circled the two, ready to pounce. Then, light like the sun filled the clearing. All were blinded momentarily and the Great White Deer appeared before them. A mighty wind roared and the light, which emanated from the ancient creature,

fixated toward the exiles. They stumbled backwards, overwhelmed by the guardian's power.

"We must take flight," Borghildr said, turning to his son.

"I can't, I've only just turned into my spirit animal," the boy cried.

"Focus, young one. There is little time for doubt."

Raijin breathed deeply and tried to shut the world out around him. He focused only on escape, only on an eagle. The transformation came suddenly and they took flight before the young druid even realized he had succeeded. A great lamenting roar echoed from the ground below. Raijin knew that was not the last he would see of his aunt.

Chapter 19- Aeacus

Factions

Quietly, the two Undying men sat. Soft flame flickered lightly through the small tent set up for their meeting. The leaders of the two opposing factions were late, this made Aeacus nervous. Fenrik sat as stalwart as ever which comforted the leader a bit, though he knew his guard simply hid his true thoughts well. Footsteps pounded nearby and a single silhouette appeared near the entrance. Both men turned their attention to the figure wordlessly. Cautiously, Savio strode into the small structure with intense and searching eyes. Though a seat sat open near the entrance, the chemist did not sit down and examined the swords at the other two men's sides.

“Savio, please take a seat,” the leader said with a cordial smile.

“I will remain standing,” the uneasy man stated firmly.

Aeacus nodded. “As you wish. We are just waiting on the other representative, though I have not been told who it is.”

“And who is this?” the chemist said with a quick gesture.

“He is my friend, council, and guard if need arise.”

“Can't he speak for himself?”

“He's selective about who he speaks to.”

Silence resonated as the men awaited the final leader. Finally, they showed up. The Undying leader was surprised to see a young woman walk commandingly into the room. There was no doubt she represented the remaining faction.

“My father sends his regards. He apologizes, he couldn’t be here himself,” she said as soon as she came into the room.

“You mean the coward sent his daughter to a meeting, believing they would not kill a woman.” Savio spat.

The woman shot a sharp glance toward the chemist. “Something like that.”

“Your distrust is misplaced, both of you. I assume the perimeter was patrolled before your arrival, which explains your tardiness. Now, please, sit,” the leader said firmly.

The other two took a seat without another word.

“We have not heard your name yet,” Aeacus said in a softened tone.

“Who I am is not important, only the ideas and people I represent.”

Savio scoffed loudly. The woman shot another angry glance at the chemist. Aeacus held his hand up to keep the peace.

“Then what name shall I use when addressing you?” the leader asked.

“You may call me Lady Grey, if you must.”

The leader nodded. “Very well. Let us begin then, shall we?”

The other two nodded in agreement and Aeacus continued. “I will not waste your time by trying to dissuade you on your position. That being said, I cannot possibly meet all of ones demands without contradicting the demands of the other. Therefore, I urge you

to consider compromise. It is my deepest hope that we can all find a middle ground, one that meets each of our goals for the future of our people.”

“You speak as if you still hold all the power, and that we must abide by your laws to reach our goals. I cannot compromise in anything that squanders the gift given to us by the demon, Aerico,” Savio exclaimed.

“Gift? The benefits hardly compare to the plagues this... disease brings,” Lady Grey retorted.

“If your people didn’t squander this power and seethe with self-pity, perhaps they would see the truth!” Savio said.

“And perhaps if you were not so hungry for power you would notice the pain and destruction it inflicts on all of us!” said Lady Grey, rising from her seat.

“Quiet! Both of you!” Aeacus interrupted.

Lady Grey sat back down calmly. Savio sat quietly, but kept his intense gaze fixed on his opposition.

“I brought us all together in hopes to find diplomatic solutions to our political issues. In times such as these, we do not need to create a rift, but form a unity. Now, one at a time. Lady Grey, you shall go first.”

“Thank you,” the Lady said cordially.

Savio looked as if he wished desperately to say something but showed restraint. Aeacus flashed a smile, for the first time he believed that this meeting may actually solve some of their problems.

“I remember the day the wolves came. Hellish and vile they were, gnashing their rotten teeth in all directions. The response was swift and the first wave of the creatures was dealt with but the seed had already been planted. The infection flowed through the streets of our city, slowly condemning all who lived there. I can’t recall a single soul believing it to be a ‘gift’ in the beginning. All equally mourned the affliction.

“Back then, we all searched vigorously for a solution. Whether constant failure or time has made us complacent is irrelevant, however, I suspect it’s a bit of both. The group I represent has discussed the subject of action in depth and the most favorable course is to search for the demon Aerico.” Lady Grey stopped abruptly, awaiting a response from the other leaders.

“We’ve searched for him in the past, each time in vain,” Aeacus responded, choosing his words carefully.

The Lady smiled. “We are aware. We are also aware that there has been no sighting of the demon for some time now. That being said... We have sent scouts into the plague woods and they have discovered a pattern in the rot-hides movements.” She pulled out a scrap of parchment, placing it on the table. A rough sketch scrawled the length of the paper, showing the placement of rot-hide dens with approximations of distance between each. “As you can see, all of the dens seem to surround this larger one here,” she said, pointing to a circled cave on the parchment.

“This formation is strange, but do you have any other proof?” Aeacus asked reluctantly, knowing his response would disappoint the woman.

Lady Grey’s smile faded, she attempted to hide her discontent. “Not as of yet. We were hoping for your permission and assistance to better explore the area.”

“Closer inspection will no doubt cause conflict between us and the rot-hides, a problem we have not had to deal with in quite some time. If you truly believe the demon is there, then I give permission to further observe the den from a distance. I cannot risk my people without solid evidence that it could save us.”

“If I may, your grace, I have held my tongue patiently out of respect, but you are forgetting there are two sides to this issue,” Savio said calmly.

“Go ahead, master chemist. We will hear your position.”

“Firstly, you hardly seemed to notice that the group she represents conducted reconnaissance without your permission that could have, in fact, ‘endangered’ your people. The people I represent would never act without permission from your grace.”

“Would you not? Your people seem perfectly content with acting without me, as they are the most likely candidates for the attempt on my life.”

“Your grace...”

“I am not directly implicating you, Savio, but do not sit here and pretend your people have not acted on their own. We sit here as equals, do not presume to place yourself above us, master chemist,” Aeacus said.

“Of course, your grace... The attempt was regrettable. I only wish they had discussed their plans to the rest of us, so we could have prevented such a loss. Now, there are contradicting ideals between the groups Lady Grey and I represent. She would have the demon Aerico killed in hopes it would end our longstanding condition, but many of my Undying worship him as a god and would view his execution as heresy. We are open to the idea of finding him, but we cannot abide the attempted murder of the giver of our gift. Perhaps... those who are displeased with Aerico’s gift can request he reverse it and leave those who wish to serve him to do so.”

“The demon has never given any indication that we can trust him. It is true that most changed during the rot-hide attacks, but there were many deaths as well,” Aeacus said.

“Maybe he had a bigger plan in mind that caused those losses to be acceptable.”

“Acceptable to him, perhaps, but I cannot justify any purposeful loss of any of my citizens no matter what the demon’s ‘plan’ might have been.”

Lady Grey smiled. Savio stood from his seat. In a sudden burst of anger he banged his fist on the table. Fenrik dashed between the chemist and his leader, hand on his sword hilt.

“That being said...” Aeacus said calmly. “I think the best course of action for all of us is to scout the area around the rot-hide den and observe from a distance. We must find the demon first, before deciding what to do with him.”

Chapter 20- Lucius

A Meeting with the Council

Lucius sat at the head of the table quietly, awaiting the council's questions. A scribe poured water for all the counselors and then, finally, poured some for the hunter.

Everyone at the table looked at him and many leaned close to each other. A few of the counselor's jotted notes down on paper they had lying in front of them. One of the oldest looking council men cleared his throat, drawing attention away from the hunter.

"I understand you have a rather... unusual profession, Lucius," the man stated in a tone Lucius did not like.

"I'm a hunter, more specifically, a hunter of things that hunt people."

"Yes, well I'm sure it's a valuable service."

Lucius took a long drink, holding himself back from spouting anything he would regret. He did not like this counselor.

"And... what caused you to enter your blood papers?"

"I actually wasn't going to, but a friend of mine insisted. He seems to think I'm leader material. I guess he was right," Lucius said.

"That remains to be seen."

Lucius could not hold back any longer. "As I understand it, sir, anyone that does not already work for the crown is eligible to enter their blood papers. I would very much appreciate if you didn't speak to me in that tone just because you don't like me or what I

do. I was under the impression that counselors were professional, but that remains to be seen.”

Once again, the kind looking old counselor smiled briefly and quickly rid it from the others. The inquisitive counselor shot the hunter a fierce glance.

“Diplomacy skills, poor,” the counselor said, jotting down notes.

“Kamon, bring me some parchment and a pen, would you?” Lucius turned and asked the scribe that escorted him.

Kamon looked shocked and glanced at his mentor for direction. The old counselor nodded with a slight grin. The scribe quickly brought Lucius what he asked for.

“Right... Now, what is your name?” the hunter asked the fierce council man.

“I’m not the one being interviewed,” the counselor responded.

“It’s a simple question, counselor.”

The man hesitated a moment. “Finnius Birch,” the counselor quietly stated.

Lucius began to write on his parchment. “Diplomacy goes both ways, does it not, Mr. Birch?”

“Yes of course... but-“

“And are you actually prone to such quick judgment or are your personal attacks on candidates some sort of test?”

Birch began to laugh. “Alright, alright. You caught me. I hope I didn’t offend your obviously delicate sensibilities, Lucius.” Most of the council laughed with Birch, the kind man, however, did not. That bothered the hunter deeply.

“Shall we continue with your line of questioning, Mr. Birch?” Lucius asked, trying to read the room.

“Yes,” Birch said, clearing his throat.

“Now... do you have any blood line connection to any past leaders?”

“Not that I know of, no. But my parents died when I was very young.”

“Then who raised you?”

Lucius smiled. “A hunter raised me, made me the upstanding citizen I am today.”

Birch and many others wrote notes. “So you have no formal education?”

“I didn’t say that. When I wasn’t learning to hunt I was studying.”

Birch nodded, a stern look had returned to his face. He showed no sign that he had been laughing only moments before. Lucius began to wonder if the counselor even had the capacity for genuine joy.

“If I may interrupt, Mr. Birch,” the hunter said cautiously.

“Yes? What is it?”

“I just wanted to say, we can skip all the formality questions that we both know you know already. Let’s skip to the part that seemed to have terrified the candidates before me.”

Finnius Birch smiled, not a pleasant smile but a malicious one. “What you witnessed in those before you was the impact of the truth. The public is rarely lied to directly, but there are certain... details omitted from news of the world around us.”

“I bet the people know more than you think.”

The grin remained plastered to Birch’s face. “Perhaps... Regardless, it is custom to ensure all candidates for the crown are fully aware of the condition of the Kingdom before they endure the trials. This will be your one chance to walk away without consequence...”

Lucius gestured for the counselor to proceed. He did not fear what they might tell him because he did not believe he would be selected. The look the kind old counselor gave him, however, did keep him from showing his thoughts on his face.

“Recently, there has been a surge in wild druids wandering into the King’s Wood to hunt for prey.”

“I know. I’ve been hired to take several of them out.”

“Yes, the public knows of a few strays, but the number is much larger than it might seem, hundreds maybe. We have had to put a great deal of man power into a containment plan along the edge of the Druid Wood. Even with the extra precautions, some of the savages get through. There have been several murders of citizens that live on

the outskirts of small villages around the capital, they have been covered up as regular crimes but the public grows suspicious.”

“Why not just tell the people? They have a right to know.”

Birch grinned. “That brings us to our next topic. Reports from the Plague Wall say there are signs of civil unrest in the Undying. The cause is unknown, but it is assumed it is based on groups forming with different beliefs about their ailment. Many of them seem to be searching for something near the rot-hide dens.”

“What does that have to do with lying to our people?”

“One thing is clear about the situation with the Undying, they are scared. Fear can drive a society to ruin quickly. By limiting the knowledge the public has, we can control our society.”

“That’s wrong,” Lucius blurted.

“It is necessary,” Birch said with fury in his eyes.

“Lies are only necessary for those that fear the truth,” Lucius said, standing up from his seat. His own passion surprised him.

“And, such passions plant the seeds of ruin,” the kind counselor finally spoke.

Lucius turned to respond, but held his tongue when he saw the look in the kind man’s eyes. “Forgive me. I don’t know what came over me.”

“Each candidate is entitled to their views of world events, encouraged even,” said the kind counselor, his eyes briefly flashing to the cup in front of Lucius.

The hunter nodded and turned to Birch. “Anything else counselor? Or may I return to my quarters?”

“That is all for now, young hunter.”

Chapter 21- Kajah

Contemplation

Raijin's father had not ceased his meditations since they had returned. Borghildr sat on the edge of a rocky ridge that hung over the far end of the village. Three days passed since the druid leader had slept or eaten anything. There were whispers among his followers that he had given up and awaited death. Raijin knew better, but he was beginning to fear for his father's health nonetheless.

“Sometimes the minds contemplations hold precedent over the body's demands,” said the boy's mother, Kajah, as she stepped beside her son to observe the druid leader.

“What good is the mind if the body fails it?” Raijin responded.

His mother smiled, gently touching her son's shoulder. “I will go to him, and make my presence known, but he must choose to cease his thoughts, I will not stop him. Perhaps my fasting with him will be motivation enough.”

Raijin nodded, watching as his mother slowly made her way up the ridge to be by his father's side. Borghildr did not budge when his wife sat beside him. The druid leader searched for answers. Slowly their conflict bled into the King's Wood and that would not go unnoticed. He could not, however, bring himself to declare all-out war on the Exiles, not with his sister as part of their ranks. He wanted to create a prosperous future for his people, and for his son but that concept seemed more and more distant.

Borghildr sighed and opened his eyes, turning to look at his wife. “I can see no solution to a problem that does not complicate another.”

“The old king of Aarden Hall is dead. Perhaps our contact within Aarden will believe the new ruler to be noble enough to see past our differences and negotiate new terms.”

“It is possible, but relying on the castle would be foolish. We must find our own solutions, even if we cannot mend every wound.”

Kajah nodded and the two sat there in silent contemplation for some time. Eventually, she spoke again. “Raijin is worried about you, husband. You have not eaten or drank for days. And there are whispers amongst your people...”

“Yes... I suppose it is time to head back.”

The two druids stood and returned home together, hand and hand. They found their son staring into a roaring fire in front of their home. He sat alone, transfixed by the flames and taunting them with a stick. He roused from his trance when he heard them approach.

“Father...are you alright? You need to eat. Let me prepare you something.”

Borghildr held his hand up to silence his son. “I will eat soon, but first we need to discuss the upcoming decisions we must make.”

“What help can I be? You’ve never sought my council before.”

“You have shown great strength in the face of danger. You are ready to be involved in tribal decisions.”

The young druid smiled. “You honor me, father. I will not let you down.”

“I’m afraid we all have no choice now but to make compromises for the ultimate good of our people.”

Raijin’s smile faded. “Tell me, what is going on?”

The druid leader explained everything going on around them and the dangers that threatened their livelihood. The boy listened intently, but gave no input until his father was done.

“I know this is not something you want to hear, but it may come that you must forget the sister you once had. When the time comes, you may have to view Nasrin as an enemy and not as kin,” Raijin said gently but confidently.

The older druid nodded. “I know this, but it is difficult for me to forget the woman she once was.”

“What drives the Exiles so wild?”

“There is nothing that drives them, my son. They chose to embrace their ferocity,” Kajah explained.

“Yes... and that is what pains me the most. They squander our understanding of nature by denying the potential for balance of the ways of man and the wildness of his soul.”

Chapter 22- Aeacus

The Rot-hide Dens

A group of rot-hides snarled and tore at the flesh of a buck. Their eyes burned like fire as they snapped at each other in gluttonous rage. The scouting party of Undying watched cautiously from afar, none dared move in fear of drawing the beast's attention. The group consisted of Aeacus, Fenrik, Lady Grey, one of her supporters named Ash, and two representatives Savio sent in his stead: Argus and Gregor.

“Strange that a worshipper of the demon such as Savio would miss an opportunity to bear see the provider of his so-called gift,” Lady Grey whispered.

Savio's followers glared at her silently. The two men had not spoken the entire time they had been with them, save to say who they represented.

“I see no indications that the demon is anywhere near these dens,” Aeacus said, getting up to start the trek home.

“No! We haven't got a close enough look, perhaps we should move to a different vantage point,” Argus blurted.

Aeacus turned to the man in surprise. “The silence is broken, but for what? Surely you don't believe a different angle will change the view of these hell pits.”

“I do, and I would appreciate if you would not call them ‘hell pits’, sir.”

“Sir? Now isn't that strangely respectful.” It was at that moment Aeacus noticed Gregor was missing. “Where is your comrade, Gregor?”

Argus smiled. “He is getting a closer look. We will find our lord Aerico.”

The leader stumbled quickly back to the hidden vantage point. From there he saw Gregor in the pits with his arms outstretched, surrounded by rot-hides.

“Lord Aerico, giver of new life, I have come to pledge my service to you!”

“You idiots! This was your plan all along, wasn’t it?” Aeacus spat in a fit of rage. “Did you ever for a moment wonder why Savio elected to not come on this trip? Your master doesn’t even fully believe in the demon’s gift. He uses your faith to control you.”

“We should go. Leave the believers to be with the Lord,” Lady Grey said.

They all began to get up to leave Argus and Gregor behind but something caused them to all look back one last time. The growling had stopped. The rot-hides still surrounded Gregor, but they were silent and he was kneeling. The demon Aerico emerged from the depths of the rancid dens. He was very tall but lean. The demon’s pale grey skin clung tightly to his boney structure. Long black hair flowed down to his exposed shoulder blades. He wore nothing but a long, ragged loin cloth. The demon’s eyes were pure white and his teeth pointed and gleaming. The group watched as Aerico said something quietly to Gregor and the undying man stood slowly, looking at the beast as a wide, toothy smile spread across the plague demon’s face. Then, with a quick gesture of the hand the pack of rot-hides jumped onto Gregor, they tore deep into his flesh but he did not scream. Horror rose in Aeacus as the demon’s eyes drifted from the carnage before him to the group’s hiding place.

A low inhuman screech sounded as the demon Aerico lifted his arms in the air, displaying a set of long claw-like hands. Rot-hides poured out of the dens and toward the group at alarming speed. The group all drew their weapons. Ash stood between Lady

Grey and the oncoming horde and Fenrik did the same for Aeacus but Argus stood alone. Fear filled the lone Undying's eyes as his world began to collapse around him. He finally truly saw the creature, but it too late. Argus managed to fend a few of the twisted canines off before succumbing to their attacks. The rest of the group slowly backed away, managing to keep the horde distant by forming a small circle and taking wide, sweeping strikes. Their defensive strategy failed as soon as one of the rot-hides took Ash down, ripping the man's throat out and leaving him to die in short, terrifying gurgling screams. Aeacus pulled out a hollowed horn that he used on hunting trips but as he raised it to his mouth a carnivorous beast leapt for him. Fenrik strode between his master and the creature, catching the brunt of the attack in his face. The rot-hides teeth serrated the mute's cheek, but he managed to slay it with a jab to the heart—they both fell to the ground in a bloody heap. The Undying leader took no pause to blow the horn and shortly after a volley of arrows rained down on the advancing beasts. Many died from the first wave and the rest ran away yelping for their master.

Aeacus and Lady Grey knelt down to examine Fenrik. The mute soldier still breathed, but had fainted from shock. A large group of Undying archers emerged from the trees to surround them. The Lady tore part of her garment, rinsing it with cool water from her supplies and holding it to the fallen guard's face.

“Fenrik, my friend, I will not forget this. I ask only one more thing of you, that you live to see tomorrow,” Aeacus muttered.

“None of us would have lived for tomorrow had you not come prepared,” Lady Grey said.

“My distrust of Savio and the demon had merit. I only hope his people see it that way.”

Chapter 23- Alwin

The Alchemist

Alwin watched from the city walls as the sun set, blood red, behind the hills. He sighed, wondering how the first stage of the trials progressed. This was the only section of the Passing of the Crown that happened behind closed doors, and the general populace knew little about what occurs during the three days it takes to complete. The knight did not know why he worried, assuming the old woman was correct in her foresight, Lucius was practically guaranteed to pass all his trials. Still, something made him very uneasy. Alwin had many more hours on the wall and feared his worry would consume him before the end of his shift.

“Strange to think the same man that retrieved wraith essence for me is the same one that now competes for leadership,” a crackly voice said from behind the guard, startling him.

Alwin turned to see the alchemist that hired Lucius in the Aelwyd Tavern. He wore a tattered black cloak with a large hood that shaded his eyes. The parts of his face that showed were dry and wrinkled and his teeth hung loosely, black with rot.

“Oh, it’s you. What do you want? Your business was with Lucius, not me.”

“Yes well, he is preoccupied at the moment and I am in need of another ingredient.”

“No offense, I trust Lucius, but I have no reason to trust you. What is it that you’re concocting?”

The old man laughed dryly. “Nothing of consequence to you, my young friend.”

“Oh? Then tell me what it is.”

The man took off his hood, revealing cloudy, bloody eyes. “If you must know, I seek to forge a philosopher stone.”

“So you can keep your boyish good looks for eternity?”

“So I can reverse the damage my research has done to me thus far.”

“I pity what your experiments have inflicted on you, but you brought it upon yourself. I can’t in good conscious assist you in your search for immortality. No one man should have that much power.”

“I suppose large sums of gold will not persuade you. I am quite skilled in the art of transfiguration.”

“You suppose correctly,” Alwin said, turning away from the man to find the sun had fully set.

They stood there quietly for some time but the man did not leave. A cool wind began to rise, a storm approached. The young knight just wanted the evening to end—he wished for a warm tavern and his friends.

“You may stand as long as you like, but you cannot change my mind,” Alwin said.

“What if I were to share with you the secrets of life and death.”

The knight scoffed. “You think I believe myself worthy above all others?”

“Perhaps not, but if you help me you will possess the power to save anyone you fear to lose by death’s icy grip.”

Chapter 24- Lucius

A Meeting in Secret

Lucius followed Kamon back through the narrow stone halls. They took a turn that the hunter did not expect, but he followed wordlessly. Certainly, the scribe made no error and the purpose of the detour would become clear in time. Lucius wondered why he became so passionate in the Iron Chamber and if he had imagined the kind of counselor's motion to his drink. Suddenly he began to feel very confined by Aarden Hall's walls and wanted nothing more than to leave. He did not manifest this sudden surge of terror physically and continued on to his unknown destination. He began to fear that his outburst had offended to council and they were going to lock him away. A wave of relief flowed over him as he saw the kind old man waiting for them down the hall.

“Come, we have much to discuss,” the old counselor said.

Lucius quickly walked to his side and then met the counselor's leisurely pace as they began walking down the empty hallway.

“What happened in the Iron Chamber could not be helped, but I would urge you to be more cautious. They put something in your drink, in all the contender's drinks, to make you more... open with your opinions.”

“That explains a lot. Those were opinions I didn't really know I had.”

“Yes, your reaction was rather strong, though not surprising. The trials are meant to test you but I believe some of the council may be using them for more nefarious means.”

“Have you told the other candidates these concerns?”

“No, and you shouldn’t either. I have no proof, only conjecture and it seems likely one or more of those selected were planted as a means to control the trials.”

“You think some of the blood papers weren’t legitimate?”

“I can’t say for sure, but there are more candidates than usual.”

“And how do I know I can trust you?”

“How dare you! Counselor Gerreon is one of the most honest men in the whole Kingdom!” the young scribe interjected.

The kind old man held his hand up to calm his apprentice. “It’s a fair question, Kamon, he does not know me like you do.”

“His outburst is proof enough for me, but just because I trust you does not mean I can fully believe what you say based off of mere conjecture. I believe that you believe to be telling the truth. But what if you’re wrong?”

“If I am wrong, then your caution will be misguided but ultimately have no effect on you. However, if I am right and you do not heed my warning, the consequences could be dire.”

Lucius nodded. “Alright, well I think this detour has taken up enough time, we don’t want to raise suspicion.” The hunter began to walk back to the barracks with Kamon but then stopped and turned. “Oh, and one more thing. Why me?”

Gerreon smiled. “To be honest, you’re the only candidate I knew for sure was not corrupt. No puppet would talk to Birch like that, even to keep up appearances.”

Chapter 25- Raijin/Kajah

Eyes Upon the Druid Wood

The village lay silent in the early hours of the morning. Most of the druids were already up, but they performed their daily routine in relative quiet. This was not always the case, but an air of uneasiness enveloped the community. Borghildr insisted on keeping nothing from his people and informed everyone of the rising strength the Exiles possessed and the possibility of an attack. Raijin could not continue his daily life like the others. He took to patrolling the outer perimeter of the village. Even with his father advising against it, the young druid persisted to survey the surrounding wood. Soon, many of the younger druids, as well as a few of the older ones joined Raijin in his patrol. Though they protected their loved ones, the presence of constant guard only added to the unrest.

Neither of Raijin's parents attempted to stop to patrol, but it pained them that their son would become a man in such a militant environment. Often, Kajah would walk with her son, not scanning the tree-line, but the increasingly serious expression on the young druid's face.

“My son, you must still find time to be young. Go hunting with your friends or swim blissfully in the clear cool waters nature provides.”

“My friends are here with me, on the watch. We no longer have the luxury of mindless fun, not if the tribe is to survive the on-slot of the Wild Ones.”

“I cannot dispute that there is truth to what you speak, but it fills me with a great sadness, my son.”

Kajah walked away from her son, holding back tears. A hate began to rise deep within her, a hate for the Wild Ones and all the suffering they brought. They were selfish and destroyed the balance so many before them had dedicated their life to. It was on the outskirts of the village, away from any nearby patrols and the curious glances of their people that Borghildr found his wife.

“The path may be obscured at the moment, but it will not remain so,” the druid leader reassured her.

“Some paths never clear, they only become deserted and forgotten.”

“Only if those who walk it give up on their journey.”

“I fear if we continue our journey then our son will be lost.”

“I know, I fear the same. We must not lose hope my love,” Borghildr said kissing his wife lovingly on the forehead.

They sat there together, embracing and staring into the Druid Wood. Nothing was clear anymore except their love and to them that was enough. Storm clouds gathered in the distance but the sky above them remained clear.

“Come, let us fly together before the storm overtakes us,” said the druid leader, standing to his feet.

Kajah nodded and they both took the form of birds, he an eagle and her an owl. She was not of the first bloodline, but the two bonded through their love of flight, his choice and her spirit. Raijin watched as the two birds flew high into the air. He hopped

the flight eased their minds, even if for a moment. For, the storm clouds drew ever closer and blood lingered on the wind. The Wild Ones were coming.

Chapter 26- Aeacus

A Pact Over Blood

They burst into Aeacus's quarters, holding a bleeding Fenrik: two soldiers, Lady Grey and the leader himself. The panicked leader of the Undying held a blood-soaked cloth to his friend's face, trying to stop the bleeding.

“You need a new cloth. Here,” said the Lady, handing a clean cloth to Aeacus.

“Do you know any doctors you trust?” he stammered.

“You do not?”

“There are few I trust anymore.”

The Lady nodded. “I will send for him.”

Aeacus lifted the cloth on Fenrik's face to examine the wound. Several distinct tooth marks etched near his cheek bone, but the fleshier parts of his face hung loosely, ripped and mangled. The Undying leader placed the cloth back over the wound, grimacing and holding back tears. This was the second time Savio and his men had spilt blood. The lines had been drawn. There would be no more negotiations. Aeacus only hoped that Lady Grey's people would stand behind him as well—he realized they had no reason to.

A short, stout man came striding in the room followed closely by Lady Grey. He immediately went to Fenrik's side, wordlessly. He motioned for Aeacus to lift the cloth and stared at the wound for over a minute. Then the doctor opened his medical bag and began to rummage through its contents.

“Will he be alright?” the leader stammered.

“I will not know until I begin working,” the doctor said shortly and motioned for them to leave the room.

Aeacus looked stunned, but left with Lady Grey as she ushered him toward the door. The leader took one last look at his fallen friend, hoping it not to be the last time he saw him alive. They sat down in the adjoining room and were silent for some time.

“I realize you are grieving, but we cannot lose time because of it,” the Lady finally spoke.

“Yes, I know. Now is a time for planning and actions must be taken quickly.”

“I am glad you are able to see this through your grief.”

“I still see many things regardless of my demeanor. For instance, you lied to us when you said you were merely a representative for your people, there is no leader above you in your faction.”

The Lady smiled. “There is not. How did you know?”

“Your decisions are much too definitive to come from someone who answers to another.”

“Given Savio’s pride during the meeting and absence at the dens, I hope he is still blind to this fact.”

“We cannot rely on that. Savio has proven to be deceitful every step of the way. His actions at the meeting might have been truth or they might have been a charade.”

The Lady stood, looking very distraught. “True, the mad chemist will no doubt prove to be a formidable enemy. I wish I could offer you my unfaltering allegiance and the backing of my people, but it is not that simple.”

Aeacus stood and attempted to look his ally in the face but she avoided eye contact. “It is my deepest wish to have unity for my people. If they will not bow to one leader, perhaps they will bow to two.”

Lady Grey met Aeacus glance. “I can think of no way this will not be seen as weakness.”

“It will have to be approached very carefully, but it is the only way I see.”

The doctor came into the room covered in blood and sweating, but he was smiling. The two leaders looked toward him longingly, waiting for him to speak.

“He doesn’t have an easy road ahead of him, but I believe he is going to make it.”

A wave of relief washed over Aeacus, his confidence strengthened, though it remained greatly diminished. He stayed in the room with Fenrik until he awoke at last. Lady Grey had sent for her advisors and Aeacus for his, they would meet in the room where hope still lived to the great leader. They would forge a pact over the spilt blood of their countryman no matter the cost.

Chapter 27- Alwin

A Loss Buried Deep

Alwin did not trust the old alchemist but, his offer was tempting. Contemplating, the young guard wandered toward Aelwyd Tavern, not consciously deciding to head there at all. He realized where he was when he came to the door of the welcoming bar. He smiled faintly and went inside—attempting to push back his memories of the past he had long since tried to forget.

“Well if it isn’t our favorite knight, Alwin,” said Prue joyously as he walked up to the bar. She noticed his expression—his attempts to hide his mood had failed. “Oh, but why so distraught?”

“I was reminded tonight... of a ghost,” he responded.

“Nothing a few drinks can’t handle I hope.” Bard said walking up to his friend and patting him on the back. “Besides, there are many things to be celebrating these days.” Alwin nodded to indicate he was listening, and the barman continued. “The rascal, Lucius, is actually in the running to be king, the embargo on the east was lifted and I can finally start using my ‘secret ingredient’ in my ale again, and... not to mention, the wife here is pregnant,” Bard said with a smile, placing his hand on his wife’s stomach.

This statement grabbed Alwin’s full attention at last and he raised his head fully to look at his friends. They both beamed at him and he quickly matched their expression.

“Congratulations. This is very great news. I am sorry to have come in so despondent when the future is indeed bright!”

“No apology needed, my friend. The past has a way of tugging a man’s heart to where it ought not to be. Come, we shall drink to the future and forget the past this evening.”

Bard ushered Alwin toward the best table he owned, he kept it cleared for special occasions only. Suddenly a thought occurred to the barman and he turned around and pointed to his wife. “You, my love, should rest. Do not take in too much of this foul air than you need to. Let the hired help do their jobs I pay them to do. All I need you to do is to remain happy and healthy for what will undoubtedly be the most extraordinary child ever conceived.”

Prue laughed. “I will work less but to not work at all would drive me insane. Besides, we will need the extra money to care for the little one, pay one less to prepare to pay for one more.”

“You are much to wise for me, m’lady. I only hope our child has your sense and my rugged good looks, he will be a forced to be reckoned with.”

“Or she.” Prue replied with a smile, caressing her stomach.

“I do not know if I could survive two of you. I would have to buy a new sword to threaten her future suitors with.”

The couple finally parted with her promising to rest and him promising to return to her quickly. Alwin sat smiling, waiting on his friend to sit with him. Thoughts of the past and the alchemist’s final words began to creep slowly out of the back of his mind but the knight valiantly tried to push them back down out of sight.

“Your smile already fades. Have some ale to wash that frown off,” Bard said sitting down and placing two drinks on the table.

Alwin chuckled lightly. “I never was a good liar.”

“What troubles you so deeply, my friend?”

“Do you remember the stranger Lucius met in here not too long ago?”

“Lucius meets many strange people in here,” Bard laughed.

“Well this last one was more untrustworthy than usual and he came to me in Lucius’ absence to request a second job.”

“If he is so untrustworthy, why bother? Is his offer too substantial to ignore?”

“It wasn’t so much what he offered, though it is substantial, but how he offered it that strikes my curiosity.” Alwin took a long drink from his mug.

“And how did he offer it?”

“He seemed to have known I had lost someone dear to me.”

“Many have lost loved ones. He is simply manipulating you.”

“No... it was more than that. He was attempting to convince me for sure but it was as if he knew exactly what I had lost. He offered not only gold but the knowledge to prevent such a loss from ever happening again.”

“You believe him?”

“I do not know... Many alchemists have attempted the very same that he attempts now, but something is different about him. He told me he has succeeded but not without adverse effects. All he needs now is to discover how to counteract those ailments.”

“Sounds like hogwash to me.” Bard laughed, taking a drink of ale.

“Until you told me you were expecting a child, I thought to ask you to come with me on this job. Now, I could never ask you to take such great risk.”

Bard had a glint in his eye. “One last escapade couldn’t hurt, even if this alchemist is full of shit. Besides, I’ll need all the financing I can get with the baby on the way.”

Chapter 28- Lucius

Candidates

Certainly not all of the candidates were spies. In fact, Lucius was not entirely convinced any of them were. It could be that the old counselor was simply a bit mad. Regardless of the truth, the hunter could not help but wonder who he could trust, if anyone. Even if there was no spy or conspiracy to control the throne, the people around him were still all competing to claim the crown. A slow, aching feeling over-took Lucius as he realized enemies surrounded him wearing cordial masks of society plastered on. This was not an enemy he could simply kill, that in fact would cause more problems instead of solving them. This was an enemy he had to approach as an ally and use cunning on, not force.

“I wish they would just start the trials already, the waiting is killing me,” a sweet looking, olive skinned, young woman said as she sat down next to Lucius.

Everything about her seemed very genuine and made Lucius feel bad about his distrust moments before. She extended her hand and he shook it.

“I’m Grace.”

“Lucius.”

“You’re not very talkative are you, Lucius.”

“I can be, just nerves getting to me I guess.”

“Or, it occurred to you that to win you have to defeat each of us so what’s the point of making friends,” she said with a wry smile.

Lucius met her unfaltering gaze and smiled back. “Something like that... I didn’t even want this, my friend made me enter my blood papers but now...”

“But now everything feels different.”

“Hey you two, join the rest of us. We were just about to tear each other’s heads off!” Jaron shouted from across the room where the others had gathered.

Lucius had wondered how long it would take for the candidates to all finally confront each other, up until now there had been little more than scattered hush discussions and shifting glances. The two got up and joined the others. Jaron smiled.

“Now I would say we should introduce ourselves and where we come from but something tells me everyone here is going to with-hold as much as they can about themselves,” Jaron continued.

“I assume no one would object to stating their name,” Lucius added.

Everyone looked around waiting for someone to start. “Well, I’m Jaron as some of you know.”

The man standing next to him was very broad with short black hair and a stern, scarred face. “Alistair,” he stated plainly.

Judging by the burn marks he had on his hands and his muscular build, Lucius assumed Alistair was a black-smith. He quickly pulled his attention away from the man, though, as his observation was noticed and not well received.

“Connor,” said a thin, sandy haired man. “And I don’t mind stating that I am a scholar of sorts and the son of a knight.”

“But not a knight yourself? Too scrawny eh?” said a man named Amon standing across from Connor.

“Well I couldn’t very well be here as a knight, now could I?” Connor responded, shutting Amon up.

Lucius smiled and gestured for the next in line to give their name. She was a rather rough looking woman with tangled brown hair and fierce eyes. “Gwen. My father was a knight too if anyone has anything smart to say about it.” She glared at the Amon who pretended he did not hear her.

The two remaining were very regal looking twin women named Laurel and Auriel. They had vibrant blue eyes and plastered smug looks on their faces. All they said about themselves is they came from a prosperous old family who had many leaders in their lineage. Lucius wondered if the two would work together against everyone else or if they would soon be at each other’s throats, he assumed the latter.

“Now, anyone have a clue what the trials are to be?” Jaron asked once everyone was introduced.

“I have read all about the past trials, though there does not seem to be a pattern to them. They are different every year,” Connor stated.

“If we did,” said Laurel.

“We wouldn’t tell you,” Auriel finished.

Jaron nodded. "Fair enough."

"Does anyone know when the trials begin?" Lucius added.

As if that were his cue, Kamon strode into the room, carrying a rolled-up parchment with a broken council's seal. "The trials begin in two days. The first will be one at a time in the same order as the meeting. Two will be eliminated. Prepare yourselves for the test of the soul."

Chapter 29- Raijin

The On-Coming Storm

Rain poured down hard, limiting the druids' vision. They could sense something in the air. The enemy prowled nearby. Bows drawn, each guard stared hard into the woods around them, waiting. Footsteps nearby, darting glances followed. Eager eyes searching for the source of the sound.

“Hold your ground! We will fight them as men until they are in melee range,” Raijin commanded.

Some of his men nodded, others continued to look uneasily into the woods. More footsteps sounded and a flash of a figure through the trees. An arrow let loose and stuck solidly into a trunk.

“Hold!” Raijin shouted.

The young druid heard his parents land in the center of the village and take human form. His father approached him, eyes fixed on the tree-line like everyone else.

“Did you see much with your eagle eyes, father?”

“Yes, it seems your caution was warranted though I still wish it not so.”

“How many?”

“They equal us in number and prowl the forest around us, just out of sight of your archers.”

Raijin nodded. Notching an arrow, he stared past the rain and through the trees, catching only glimpses of movement. He could not see them, but he wanted their taunting to end, Raijin anticipated movements he could not see and let lose an arrow. To his surprise, he hit his unseen mark and a wild druid in the form of a wolf let out a loud yelp that echoed through the trees. All was quiet again, except for the rain as the druids waited for their enemies to make a move. Finally, the battle began. Various carnivorous creatures strode through the trees toward the village, their eyes full of fury. The first volley of arrows fell short and hit very few. The reality of his so-called guard began to sink in. They were not warriors and were not prepared for such an assault. Still, the few they might take out at a range would better their chances when it came to close combat.

“Do not become a beast until range is no longer an option! Do not hate your enemy for he is lost! Killing them is showing mercy for they are nothing but fury!”

Raijin shouted.

The next volley took out a few more as the Exiles neared their line. The young druid searched for his aunt in the battle. If she fell then perhaps the Wild Ones would flee. Raijin’s heart sank, he could not find her. In fact, he could not spot any Exile that seemed in charge. The Wild Ones moved as a single wave of fury and there was no single target to be slain that would stop it. His parents came up and stood on either side of him.

“I will lead the assault forward in bear form,” Borghildr said.

“And I will take to the sky, scouting the battle from above. I will return to your side with a report, my son,” Kajah said.

“Forward!” Shouted the druid leader, his words slowly shifting into a loud roar as he transformed.

Those with forms fit for battle followed their leader and ran forward to meet the Wild Ones. Raijin remained behind, surveying the battle in search of a tactical advantage. Fear swelled within him as a dark shape drifted across the clouds toward them. His mother returned to his side.

“A second smaller group of Exiles approach as ravens. They will land behind our defenses in human form,” Kajah reported.

“Tell those who remain in town to take up the bows and to aim toward the foul creatures!”

Raijin drew an arrow from his quiver and aimed toward the mass of black feathers floating towards them. Again, he wondered if Nasrin was amongst them. He had no way of spotting her even if she dwelled in their numbers. The young druid let his arrow loose, soaring into the mass and impaling an Exile—the body began falling as a raven but soon took the shape of a man cascading to the ground below. Many of the villagers joined Raijin. Few had his accuracy but the mass of ravens was so concentrated they need only shoot into the group to hit a mark. Quickly, the birds began to disperse, making it harder for the untrained archers to hit them. They neared the center of town. Soon they would be forced into ground combat in the middle of their village.

“Find father and tell him of the coming danger!” Raijin shouted to his mother who nodded and took form quickly to reach her husband.

Kajah flew low, avoiding the ravens that soared above. She spotted her husband fighting several wolves in his hulking bear form. She dropped out of her form from the air and landed on one of the wolves, breaking its neck.

“Look to the sky, husband! They come as ravens to the center of town! We need you and your best warriors to fight by our side!”

The bear swiped the remaining wolves down and nodded in acknowledgement. Kajah transformed and took flight again to return to her son’s side. She found him in a form not unlike his father. The ravens began to land in the heart of the druid settlement and become savage men with frenzied cries. The remaining villagers huddled together, forming a circle around those unfit to fight.

“Your father and several others will attack from behind as soon as they can rally.” Kajah whispered to her son as soon as she landed next to him.

The Exiles could not break the defensive circle and soon turned their attention to destroying nearby structures. The druids watched in horror as their homes were torn apart.

“Hold the circle! They are trying to draw us out!” Raijin commanded.

Uneasily, the druids listened, but many looked like they could break formation any moment. Raijin wished his father would hurry, but knew that was an unrealistic expectation in battle. Borghdir would come as soon as he was able. Suddenly, an older man broke the circle and ran to defend his home, several followed him and the circle shrank as the druids attempted to fill the gaps. The Wild Ones took advantage of this new

weakness and assaulted the druid perimeter again. Their defenses began to fail as several druids died protecting the elderly and children in the center of the circle. Many of those who left to defend their homes died within the structures they desired to save. Raijin's mind raced, searching for a new plan to protect his people. Anger rose in him, not toward the enemy but toward those who broke the circle and doomed their own for protection of property. Kajah must have sense this in her son, or perhaps felt the same he did.

“Forgive them, my son, they only seek to defend the life they once had!” she shouted.

“That life is over! It does not mean they have the right to deprive others of theirs!”

Raijin wanted to release the anger that swelled within him, but he could not let it go. Each swipe he made at the enemy hit just a little bit harder. His movements began to resemble that of the Wild Ones. Then, Borghildr and his men came and stuck the Exiles from behind. They took utilized the element of surprise as long as it lasted and made a sizeable dent in the wild forces and when their advantage faded they took position in the defensive circle. Again, Raijin's parents stood on either side of him and he felt more at ease. The battle raged on for quite some time, how long was hard to tell for those in its midst. Nasrin never showed her face which relieved the druid leader but angered his son. Eventually the Exile forces were pushed back into the forest and their remaining number disappeared amongst the trees. The druids all stood in silence as the rain still poured. They returned to their human forms and examined everything they had lost. The village lay in disarray, but it was not lost. They won, but felt no victory in killing their own.

Chapter 30- Aeacus

Knife's Edge

Each faction's advisors stood over the table where Fenrik's surgery took place just hours before, his blood still wet and soaking into the wood. Fenrik had been moved to a bed in an adjoining room. They stood silently on either side. All but Aeacus and Lady Grey looked uncomfortable about the setting.

“Thank you all for coming. We have very crucial things to discuss,” Aeacus said.

“What are we doing here? This setting is hardly appropriate for a meeting room,” said one of Lady Grey's advisors, eyeing the glistening blood.

Aeacus smiled, looking to the Lady for confirmation he could continue. She nodded. “Blood has been spilt for a second time in the civil disorder we find ourselves in. Both times, the aggression was perpetrated by Savio and his men. The lines have been drawn. I know now we cannot unite under one ruler.”

“Then what shall we unite under? You are the one true ruler!” Braun exclaimed.

“That once was true, I can no longer lead alone. The people do not trust me.”

“Then who?”

“We shall lead together,” Lady Grey stated plainly.

There was a sudden uproar in the room as all of the advisors voiced their objections at once. The two leaders allowed their followers to vent for a moment and then acted to quiet them down.

“We want to hear your objections, but one at a time, please,” Aeacus said.

“And know that we wish to address our all your issues as best we are able but the decision to unite forces will not change,” Lady Grey added.

“Braun, if you would like to start. Stay as concise as you can,” Aeacus said.

The head of guard cleared his throat, clearly distressed by the news but choosing his words carefully. “How can we justify uniting with a faction that is partially responsible for the unrest?”

“The key word there is partially. We all played a role in creating the environment we find ourselves in. We are just as at fault as them. The only reason this is not a treaty between all factions is that the worshippers of the demon have proven themselves to be uncompromising and violent,” the Undying leader responded gently.

“Our civil disobedience is a product of the neglect of your people!” the Lady’s advisor shouted. “You state very cordially that we are equal in fault but your tone cannot mask the truth. It is time for new leadership!”

“Cyril, please, calm yourself,” Lady Grey said.

Her advisor turned to her, fire still in his eyes, he lowered his voice. “Your worship, how can you condone this failed leader’s request to remain in power when so clearly it should be you who commands our people?”

“And what of those whose opinions differ than yours? It is not a matter I take lightly. Trust that I have put much thought into this, even before I met with Lord Aeacus.” Lady Grey smiled grimly.

Cyril bowed his head. “Yes, your grace,” he said—his voice softer than Aeacus had yet heard it.

“Anyone else want to voice their opinions?”

“How do we know we can trust you?” Lady Grey’s other advisor asked cautiously. “How do we know you’re not making the same deal with Savio?”

“How can we trust you?!” Braun responded. “Lord Aeacus has been observed by the public for years, but your Lady rose out of nowhere with a slew of supporters stating she is what our people without saying what she actually has to offer!”

Aeacus held up his hands to calm the two advisors. “We cannot fully trust in each other, trust is something that is formed over time. What we must trust in is that both of our factions want what is best for our people.”

Silent contemplation filled the room for quite some time until finally Braun spoke. “The factions will not simply accept an alliance. We need something binding to give reason for our merging.”

“I have considered that,” Lady Grey stated. “The simplest solution is marriage.”

The whole conference looked at her in silent shock, including Aeacus who until that moment had seemed unwavering. He considered her words and seemed to find the logic sound.

“So it shall be. We will marry and unite our people.”

Chapter 31- Alwin

Into Darkness

A deep cave filled with Venenum Umbra, more commonly known as Darklings, was their destination. These were foul creatures with a gaunt, manlike form. They often crawl on all fours though they have both legs and arms. Their skin is an unnatural dark that allows them to meld with the shadows of the caves they inhabit. They consume flesh of any kind and have long sharp claws on the ends of their boney fingers. Their most dangerous aspect comes not from their subtlety or claws but from the poison in their fangs that instantaneously stop the heart of any creature unfortunate enough to be bitten by a Darkling.

“I really wish I could have spoken to Lucius before we left for this hunt. I’m certain he has an object that would be perfect for this job,” Alwin said as he and Bard rode toward their destination.

“He does always seem to have the right tool for the job. I guess that’s why he’s still alive, the crazy bastard.”

“That and he is the most knowledgeable creature lorist I have ever met. Well, at least since old Guis disappeared.”

Bard silently nodded, eyes peering into the darkness ahead. He looked very nervous. Alwin noticed doubt was increasingly noticeable on his friend’s face as they neared the cave where Darklings had been spotted.

“We could always turn back... Hunting darkling is not a task many are up to.”

Bard forced a casual gesture. “No, no... the money is well worth it. Even if I don’t see how poison will help this alchemist live forever.”

Alwin took one last long look at his uneasy friend before peering back into the dark ahead. He knew that if his wife was not with child, Bard would not have come. The prospect of offspring changed Bard, he possessed a vigor that he did not have before but also a sort of dread that Alwin assumed he would only understand with a child of his own.

“I have heard that Venenum Umbras are too clever to be drawn into traps but I have brought bait regardless. It is worth attempting to draw them out before considering chasing them into darkness.”

“It is said the Darklings’ realm is shadow and that all who enter it are lost,” Bard responded in a distant tone.

At last they came to the mouth of the cave where the shadows crept. They dismounted their distraught horses and tied them down tight. Alwin pulled a heap of deer meat out of his saddle bag and a jar of the creature’s blood. The two men cautiously approached the dark entrance, warily observing the bones of animals and men strewn about the dark earth around the gaping arch. Alwin placed the flesh down and opened the jar, emptying the contents onto the meat and allowing it to splash onto the nearby ground. The two hunters backed away and waited in the darkness for their target to surface, bows at the ready and arrows resting loosely in their hands. Over an hour passed and no creature surfaced to claim the bounty they had laid out, though the shadowy entrance of the cave seemed to move.

Alwin swallowed hard. “I guess what they say is true. We will have to venture into the cave to obtain what we seek.”

Chapter 32- Lucius

The First Trial

Several of the contenders for the crown huddled around the window facing the courtyard. The first trial was about to begin and a strange sight lay before them, but none of them knew what it could mean. A giant pool of glimmering water seemingly constructed itself overnight in the middle of the yard and from what they could tell the liquid sat at about waist deep. Around the pool were several tower structures, each with a mirror at the top, angled to reflect a direct image of the pool below.

“Could we be fighting some sort of water creature?”

“That’s stupid. What would we need the mirrors for?”

“So the audience can get a good look.”

“Not all leaders are fighters. Why would they have us fight a water monster?”

Lucius listened to the others bounce ideas back and forth, contemplating the pool’s purpose. The mirrors were the key, why have them at such an angle? It was clearly for viewing, but why? The water was not so deep that the audience’s view would be obscured without the mirrors. Kamon walked in nervously. All the competitors looked at him and he forced himself to not look down.

“The first to face the trial shall come with me. The horns are about to be sounded and the audience will gather. Then, we will begin.”

The contestants fell silent and Grace left with Kamon. They listened to the horns sound and the crowd form. Soon a constant roar echoed outside that left an uneasy feeling

in them all. The reality their situation began to sink in, soon, they would compete for leadership of their home in front of the entire kingdom. Their actions from now on would be watched closely by everyone and judged meticulously. Lucius longed to be out in the King's Wood, on a hunt, alone and tracking some foul beast. He did not feel like a leader or that he possessed any right to command over all the people around him. Part of him longed for failure of this first challenge so he could go back to his life. He feared his appointment would be a mistake and cost the lives of many. The hunter could not, however, bring himself fail on purpose, especially if that meant the agent planted by the council won and corruption would spread through the government.

A cheer snapped Lucius out of his thoughts. The first contestant was about to undergo the trial. He rose and took a place at the window next to the others, waiting to discover what challenge they would be met with. Grace was ushered to enter the pool of water. She stood there rigid, awaiting further instruction. The crowd seating was simple wooden bleachers that surrounded the trial area. The council sat at a much more elaborate wooden table directly in front of the pool. Birch spoke to Grace but none of the contestants could hear from their position. Cautiously, she bent over and cupped some of the clear liquid into her hands and drank. The water began to ripple and slowly forms began to take shape in the water. It became clear what the mirrors were for, in them the crowd could see the images in the water as clear as life itself. A unanimous gasp from the crowd sounded at the magical appearance of the image.

The illusions in the pool began to move as if they were real events. They showed Grace with the crown on her head walking towards a group of guards in clear disagreement. The image spoke, causing the crowd to gasp once more. Soon a sort of

play took place in which the guards had a disagreement and sought their Queen's advice to solve it. It quickly became clear that the illusion of Grace did not have a solution for the men and could not calm them with her words, though she tried valiantly. Their argument soon shifted and some of the guards began to direct their anger toward their Queen while others defended her. Fear was evident on Grace's face as she contemplated solutions, but found none.

Finally, she eased the tension by stating, "We find ourselves with a disagreement without a clear solution but that does not mean we must turn on each other. Sometimes to be right is to accept that others have a differing opinion than you and until you have factual and unbiased information to present, only harm can come from trying to sway your opponent. I would suggest we all put this disagreement aside, for it can do nothing but harm us."

The guards seemed to calm down and the image slowly faded. The real Grace still stood in the pool, breathing heavily, as if her actual body was affected by the images the crowd had just observed. The contestants watching began to whisper theories of what they had just witnessed. Some believed it to be entirely fictional and merely meant to test anyone who drank from the pool. Others thought it to be one of many possible futures and each would see themselves as leader and experience a possible future hardship. Lucius was not entirely sure what the waters showed and decided to wait to see more of the trial to determine what it was they were dealing with. One by one the contestants drank from the pool, and the crowd observed their illusions.

Alistair fought a giant creature in his vision. He wore gleaming armor and wielded a huge broadsword. Lucius assumed he had made all his gear himself as he wore it with a sort of pride that came only from one's own craftsmanship. His sword shattered on the creature's thick hide, and dread filled the lumbering man's face. Fear for his life was only part of it. He was ashamed of his work not being fit to withstand the battle. In Alistair's moment of pause, the creature advanced and swiftly knocked him to the ground, damaging his chest plating significantly. Alistair staggered to his feet and cast his armor aside for it could do little but weigh him down at that point. The mighty blacksmith outmaneuvered the beast until he saw an opening and sprinted straight toward his adversary, leaping onto its back and wrestling it to the ground. With his bare hands, Alistair broke the creature's jaw, deftly pulled one of the creature's teeth and thrust it into its neck. The beast was slain and Alistair stood proud once again.

Both twins vision had something to do with money and fighting to not lose it. In fact, their illusions were remarkably similar, and Lucius wondered why they were not allowed to simply complete the trial together until he witnessed the turn out of the second twin's vision. While Auriel succeeded in her challenge to maintain the lifestyle she and her sister were accustomed to, Laurel did not, and her vision ended with her broke and crying. Since everyone performed done well until that point, Lucius had ceased to fear failure, but the feeling came back more powerful than before and a chill slowly crept through the hunter's body.

In Connor's vision, the scholar faced a rival who seemingly knew everything Connor did not, and constantly ridiculed him and demeaned his right to rule. At first it seemed that the knowledgeable contestant for the crown would give in and allow himself

to be defeated by the apparent better man, but the tables turned when the man was caught in a lie and slowly his arguments and lies alike all unraveled and Connor stood confident once again.

Gwen led the royal army against an army of wild druids. The furious beast men were brutal in their methods and the battle long and bloody. Throughout the battle a calm and steady voice echoed, telling Gwen she was not fit to fight for her country and that ‘playing soldier’ would get her and all her men killed. The powerful woman did not seem shaken at all by this voice and stayed on task, slowly making progress through the waves of wild druids. Finally, she obtained victory and all her men turned to their leader and cheered.

Jaron hid his nervousness well, but Lucius had already learned in the short time he had known him that he almost never revealed his true emotions in the way he presented himself. Jaron was very skilled at the game of masks the high society he grew up in required him to play, though seemingly he found the motions of this activity ridiculous. Lucius wondered if Jaron’s vision would have something to do with this dislike of high society, but as soon as his friend stepped in the water it became clear that this was not the case. The images in the pool showed Jaron standing in almost total darkness at the foot of a thin, winding staircase. The shadows around him seemed to be moving towards him. Eyes focused on the shallow steps, Jaron began to sprint up the stairs. The darkness now very clearly followed him. Up and up he went. The incline seemed endless, and Jaron began to sweat visibly. The darkness followed closely behind, kicking at his heels. Finally, he arrived at the top of what was now revealed to be a tower. There was a signal fire waiting to be lit. Jaron grabbed a nearby torch set in a sconce—it

had clearly been placed there for this very purpose as it was the only one in the tower. He lit the tower just as the darkness over-took him and he was consumed by darkness. The crowd remained quiet, the abstract vision provoked stunned contemplation and it was not entirely clear whether Jaron succeeded or not. Then, a faint glow appeared in the darkness of the pool. When the top of the tower came back into focus, Jaron was no longer there. In the distance, other towers began to light up. A weak, confused applause rang out as Jaron walked out of the pool.

Finally, Amon's turn came. He still looked downcast from the other contestants turning against him as he stepped into the water. His vision simply showed him sitting glumly on the throne with the heavy iron crown resting lop-sided on his head. He looked exhausted and had a distant look in his eyes. The door to the throne room rumbled. Again, and again it shook until it finally shattered and a rebellion of commoners burst in all gnashing their teeth and casting accusations his way. He did not say anything in his own defense and the two guards at his side were giving him half-hearted protection, they knew it was over. The tired man took the crown off his head and cast it to the ground. This gesture did not quell the horde and they soon engulfed him. The image faded but the real man collapsed into the water and had to be carried out.

Lucius heart sank, it was his turn. What would he see in the pool? Was it strong enough to overcome this first challenge or would he be cast out of the race in shame. He followed Kamon in silence. The scribe gave him a kind, comforting look. Lucius appreciated his gesture but his anxiety did not relent. The brave hunter involuntarily halted when he reached the threshold to the open courtyard. He had never been one who was concerned with what people thought about him but suddenly his mind was flooded

with fear. Few in the crowd would know him. What would thousands of strangers think of him when he stood before them competing for the crown? The scribe gestured for him to move and he obeyed hesitantly. The sunlight blinded him momentarily. As soon as his vision restored he scanned the masses for his friends but found it impossible to tell if they were present. He felt alone as he stepped into the cool waters, fearing his visions would defeat him.

As soon as he drank from the pool a strange sensation washed over him. He felt relaxed as if falling into a deep sleep. He closed his eyes. The air around him seemed to change, it grew colder, he could hear nearby torch flames fighting against the wind. Lucius opened his eyes. He now stood at the top of the fortified walls of Aarden Hall, crown resting on his head and sword in hand. It was a starless night and a chill came from the west. An army stood down on the ground below, his army. Next to him were rows and rows of armored archers. A scout approached him, looking frightened but remaining calm.

“My Lord, the army of shadow approaches from the northwest with alarming speed.”

“How long until they arrive?”

“I’ve never seen speed like it. No more than an hour, probably less.”

Lucius nodded and began shouting commands to his army. They took their formations and awaited their foes. Soon, on the horizon they could see a mass overtaking the green stretch of field. As the darkness took shape it became clear that the shadows possessed a form similar to that of man but the details were blurred and their movement

seemed to come without the use of their legs, though they moved in a similar motion to that of a man. These shadows imitated life but were something else entirely.

“In the beginning, before man, before Kingdoms, before light, there was darkness. But now is not then and the darkness no longer has claim over us or our lands. This is the era of man. Let us remind the shadows that they are not welcome!” Lucius shouted and his men cheered.

He held up his sword and watched the swift enemy close in. He let his sword fall and shouted “Fire!” and a hail of arrows arched toward the mass of shadows. The arrows hit their mark but had little effect. “We’ll set our arrows ablaze this time. See how they like the light!” He commanded and a flaming volley was cast toward their enemies. This time several of the shapes fell into dust with loud shrieks. “Keep it up!” He shouted as he made his way down from the wall and towards his men on the ground.

“Sir, should you really be on the frontlines?” asked a concerned commander as he approached.

“The kingdom needs defended, there is nowhere else I should be but at the helm of its defense.” Lucius stated plainly and the commander silently responded with a nod. “The beasts seem to be immune to traditional weapons but are dispersed by flame. Have all the men light their torches and wield them in place of their armaments.”

Again, the commander nodded, quickly sprinting to his men to give the order. Lucius took a deep breath, trying to clear his mind and ready for the long battle ahead. Alwin ran to his side, looking more confident than Lucius had ever seen him. There was a

fear in his friend, yes, but a fierce determination that overpowered it and brought comfort to his king.

“You seem in good spirits,” Lucius said.

“I never was afraid of the dark.” Alwin smirked. “Plus, you do always seem to have a plan. You do have a plan, don’t you?”

“Well there is something I never told you of my plans... I just sort of make them up as I go along.”

Alwin laughed. “Well it has seemed to work so far.”

The two men headed out into battle together and slowly the king’s army pushed back the darkness. Few lives were lost and Aarden Hall glowed much like the signal tower in Jaron’s vision. Lucius felt the same relaxed feeling as before and the vision faded. He opened his eyes to sunlight and a roar of applause like he never heard before. Doubt left the brave hunter as he stood before the crowd, he would be king.

Chapter 33- Dalia

Awakening

Sunlight shot through the forest canopy as golden beams constantly interrupted by the gentle sway of green leaves. Dalia lay on her back, staring upwards and wondering where she was. The seer could not remember much: only her name, that she must find the king, and that this was not her first life. She sat up and looked down at her body. She was naked and had young pale skin. How old was she? Or more accurately, how old was her new body? She felt something brush her shoulder—grabbing it she found that she had long black hair.

Snapping branches nearby caught Dalia's attention. Was it just the regular sounds of the woods? Was it predator or prey? Which was she? Regardless of the source of the sound, it was time to move. Finding the king was important, though she could not remember why. She looked in all directions hoping for some kind of sign to guide her path, but all around her was just trees. She decided to climb to the top of one of the towering plants to get a better look of her surroundings. Dalia examined several trees with low hanging branches—gazing up their trunks to discover the tallest of them. At last she found the perfect tree for her purpose. She firmly grabbed hold of a rough branch and hoisted herself up with ease. This body was certainly young, judging by her height, development, and vigor she assumed it was a body at the peak of its prime. With ease, she scaled the tall tree all the way to the top. The sun was straight above her and all around she saw only trees and could not differentiate between any direction. Even if she waited until the sun started to descend, she did not know where she was in reference to the castle so she would not know which direction to head.

Dalia decided her best course would be to find a river and follow it upstream until she found a village and could get her bearings. Below on the forest floor another branch snapped, the seer tried to look through the leaves at the ground below but could not clearly see anything useful. She began her way down carefully, scanning the nearby woods as she descended. There was no sign of any creature until she landed back on the soft earth. Next to the tree was a large paw print of a warg. Her heart began to pound so hard her ribs ached. Without thought her feet began to carry her swiftly through the woods—ears straining for any sound that was not her own. For miles she traveled, the cruel forest floor tore at her bare feet, but she did not stop to treat her wounds, she could not afford the luxury. The warg had no doubt caught her scent and it was likely a pack would be on her by nightfall.

Finally, Dalia came to a river. The water rushed so violently that fording was out of the question. In this brief moment, she took a brief repose to drink from the river and wash her wounds. She looked to the sky through the clearing in the canopy created by the river—the sun was well into its descent. Quickly, she followed the current downstream, hoping to come across civilization before nightfall. For another hour she traveled, but there was no sign of any man or man-made structure. Dalia's heart sank as the sun sank beyond the horizon. She was out of time. With her back to the river, she prepared to make a stand.

Several fist sized stones were stacked at her feet. A large fire was lit, illuminating the tree line. Quickly, Dalia sharpened four arm length branches. She had no time to construct any true clothing but she did manage to wrap some thick bark to her shins and wrists, securing them with strong yet flexible vines. The sun was fully set, but the night

was unusually bright. The moon, nearly full, sat high in the sky. A shrill howl echoed nearby, they were coming. The beats' approach started slow, a snapping branch here and there and brief glimpses of movement in the shadows. Suddenly, the wolf-like creatures had formed a semi-circle around her and were stepping into the flickering fire light. Dalia couldn't help but flash a grin over the success over her perpetrations. The biggest of the wargs stepped slightly forward, clearly the alpha. Most of the smaller wargs were a solid color: black, brown or grey, but the alpha had a half black, half grey face that faded into its dark grey body fur. The alpha snarled its massive jaws, pushing its short and hog-like snout outwards. Dalia tried to scan the surrounding beasts and get a count. There seemed to be about half a dozen or so.

Quickly, not removing her eyes from the alpha, the seer scooped up a rock and chucked it into the nearby flames, throwing embers wildly about. Many of the beasts backed up from the sudden burst but the alpha remained still with its eyes locked on its prey. She scooped up another rock, this time aiming at one of the smaller wargs. She hit the creature square in the face and it yelped and backed away even more. Another regained some bravery and lunged at Dalia. She dodged and snatched a flaming branch from the fire. Arching back around, the courageous woman smacked the warg in the side which briefly caught fire. With this new formidable weapon Dalia was able to pause the assault for yet another brief moment. She took advantage of the repose and picked up one of her make-shift spears in her free hand. She had barely got back to standing position when one of the canines sprinted towards her with open jaws. Her swiftness failed this time and the dog's teeth sank deep into her arm, the bark provided a little protection but it soon splintered. Dalia plunged her spear into the beast and it fell dead, releasing its grip

on her. Another leapt and was met with a torch. Another and another, both were felled with deft movements. The alpha let out a fierce, short howl and started to advance. Dalia kicked the fire pit, burning her foot but also momentarily blinding the creature. It was not enough to stop the gigantic monster and it soon had her pinned to the ground, snapping its jaws in her face as she barely held it off of her. Dalia managed to grab a piece of her now splintered spear and stab the beast in the eye. She got free but not without receiving a new scratch wound to her side. With little hesitation Dalia jumped into the rushing river behind her—she had to risk the rapids to escape the fierce predators. The fire light quickly faded as the seer was whisked away, trying to keep her head above water.

Chapter 34- Alwin

Venom

The two men stepped cautiously into the dark mouth of the cave. Alwin now really wished they had the magical light given to him and Lucius by the seer—their torches barely illuminated a few feet ahead of them. Bard still had his bow out with an arrow loosely notched. Alwin had shouldered his bow and drawn his sword, he had always been more confident in his melee combat. Neither man spoke, though they constantly looked like they wanted to shout in alarm at the moving shadows around them. Alwin looked back, the light of the moon and the stars could no longer be seen—they couldn't possibly be far in enough to lose sight of the entrance. The knight held up his hand to stop his friend's steps.

The two hunters looked around wildly, extending their arms as far ahead of them as they could. Alwin's stomach lurched as a slow bestial clicking echoed off the cave walls. For the first time, he caught a glimpse of the cave floor, they were walking on a path of broken bones.

“We need to head back now, this was a mistake,” the knight said flatly.

Alwin looked to his friend who nodded in agreement. Bard had grown very pale and his eyes were wide and darted about. They turned and made their way back to the mouth of the cave. After a few moments Alwin began to panic, the entrance had to be very near but they could not see any light ahead. Something was blocking their escape. Bard seemed to be thinking the same thing. He stopped walking and drew his bow string back.

“Do me a favor and tie some cloth to my arrow and light it on fire,” Bard stated in a distant echoing voice.

Alwin did as his friend requested as quickly as he could. In the silence of the cavern he heard Bard let out a long steady breath and release the bolt of fire. They watched as the path ahead of them was illuminated and at last plunged into a shadowy mass. A shrill cry echoed out as the creature set on fire and the mass of shadow broke apart into at least a dozen Darklings. The mouth of the cave was exposed and the two men wordlessly began to sprint towards it. Bard drew another arrow and shot it toward a moving shadow, it clanged against the rock wall and fell to the bone covered ground. Alwin had his sword drawn back, ready to strike at anything that jumped out of the shadows. One of the creatures shot out of the shadows and across Alwin’s path, tripping him. Bard turned around before Alwin had hit the ground, he quickly hoisted his friend up and they neared the mouth of the cave. The cool night air welcomed them.

A darkling careened out from one of the dark corners. The brave knight slashed at it while it was mid-air, nearly cutting it in half. Just as they exited the cavern of darkness, a flailing beast landed on Bard, sinking its pointed teeth into his shoulder. Alwin pulled the creature off his friend and beheaded it but the poison from its fangs was already at work. Bard wasn’t moving.

Chapter 35- Lucius

The Second Trial

When Lucius arrived back in the competitor's quarters he was met with congratulations from the very people he was competing against. Even the quiet blacksmith gave him compliment which surprised Lucius greatly. What didn't surprise the hunter was that the remaining twin did not speak to him and sat alone, sulking in the corner. Most likely, Auriel actions were motivated by the loss of her sister in the competition, but Lucius could not help but be suspicious of her. He still wasn't convinced there was a spy amongst them but if there was one Auriel seemed a likely candidate.

“After that display in the vision pool I think it's clear you should win this whole thing,” Jaron interrupted Lucius' contemplations.

“I wouldn't be so hasty. It was only one trial and those of us that remain all passed.”

“I still strive to prove myself to the people but the courage and compassion you showed during the trial was something else. I would be honored to call you my king.”

Lucius grinned. “You know... before all this happened I had never given any thought to politics. I thought my primary concern most of my life had been simply to get by, to make money where I could on the type of job I had been trained for, but I realize now that while that was partially true as necessity I also did it to help people. I've taken some jobs that I am not proud of simply for the reward but the majority have been creatures that pose a threat to the defenseless. I never thought I'd have the power to do

more for people but here I am with an opportunity to do just that. If I do happen to be given the crown I would be proud to have you by my side.”

“Thank you... and I must say, I think you’ll be a great leader but I hope you don’t have too many long speeches,” Jaron chuckled.

Lucius spotted Alistair taking fleeting glances at him from across the room.

“Excuse me.” He told Jaron and headed towards the blacksmith.

“You’re a blacksmith, right?” the hunter said as he approached the massive man.

Alistair looked surprised for a moment but then spotted the burns on his arms and smiled. “Yes I am.”

“I would love to see your craft some time.”

“Perhaps when you are king I will smith you something worthy of your status.”

“You’re the second person to assume I will be the one to be crowned.”

“If you could step out of yourself and witness your vision as we did you would understand.”

“Let me guess, your belief in me won’t stop you from trying to win,” Lucius grinned.

“Not a chance,” the blacksmith smiled, the first-time Lucius had seen him do so.

Just then, Kamon walked into the room and cleared his throat. All the conversations in the room stopped and all eyes turned to the scribe. He looked less nervous than he had the first few times he had stepped into the room.

“It is time for the second task. Each of you will depart at the same time with different counselors to under-go the test.”

“What are we doing for this test?” Grace chimed.

Kamon smiled. “You will see soon enough. I was instructed to not provide any information. The trials will all happen simultaneously so you all have equal chance.”

“Equal, yeah right. Not as long as we are competing with Lucius here,” Jaron retorted.

“Speak for yourself,” Auriel spat.

One by one they stepped into the hall and left with their assigned counselor. There seemed, however to be an uneven number of contestants and even number of counselors. When Lucius stepped into the hall he found two men waiting for him.

“Normally, an eligible leader is assigned one counselor to over-see this trial but given our odd number and Gerreon’s refusal to step down, you shall have two,” Birch stated bitterly.

“Now counselor, it was a unanimous decision amongst our peers. Most seem to think you are too harsh and I am too kind, the combination should even out,” Gerreon said cordially.

Birch involuntarily sneered but quickly forced a smile over it. “Shall we get started? This way, Lucius.”

They walked down several long corridors that Lucius had never been in. As they traveled the passages began to widen and look more inviting, they came to a room that looked like it had been set up for just this occasion. There was a single high back chair with high velvet padding facing outward toward a small wooden stool. The make-shift throne was elevated up a small flight of stairs that consisted of a pointless five steps. The room was lit brightly but there were no windows.

“Sit,” Birch said shortly, ushering toward the throne.

Lucius sat down in the throne wordlessly. He felt out of place and would have preferred to be directed to the stool. The two counselors stood on either side of him, looking forward toward a pair of double doors several feet behind the wooden stool. Within minutes a pair of guards marched through the doors, escorting a defeated looking prisoner. Lucius felt his heart sink. It was now all too clear that he was meant to judge this man.

“This man was caught stealing by a merchant. He has since confessed to his crimes. The usual punishment for such misconducts is life in prison. What is your verdict?” Birch said.

“Just like that? I am supposed to condemn a man with so little information?” Lucius responded, not looking at Birch but the accused. For the first time since he was escorted into the room the man lifted his eyes from the ground and looked at Lucius.

“What did you steal?”

“Food, sir.”

“For yourself?”

“For my family, it has been days since my children have eaten,” the man responded with tears welling up in his eyes.

“What do you do for a living?”

The man cast his eyes down again. “I am without work. I take jobs where I can. I worked on a farm for a while, ran supplies for a market stand, and even cleaned latrines for a time.”

“I sympathize with you, I really do but I need you to also look at this from my position. As a prospective leader, I simply cannot let crimes go unpunished, pure motives or not.”

The man let out a short whimper. “I understand, sir.”

“That being said, I can’t in all good conscious deprive a family of their father when they already deprived by so much.”

“If I may interrupt,” Birch started.

“You may not, counselor. We can discuss your disapproval after my verdict, but until then I will deal with this as I see fit.”

Gerreon was delighted by Lucius’s treatment of his fellow counselor but suppressed his laughter into a sneeze. The hunter looked kindly at him momentarily then turned back toward the stool.

Looking to the guards he said, “Am I to understand it was the man who runs the stall that caught our thief here?”

“Yes, sir,” a guard responded.

“Will one of you go fetch him for me? I have a proposition for him.”

The guard nodded and left the room quickly. They remained in silence for some time. The prisoner shifted uncomfortably as they waited, but there was a glimmer of hope in him now, he constantly looked as if he wanted to say something to Lucius. A thought occurred to the young hunter. He needed to alter his plans slightly to avoid conflict.

“Could you wait just outside the door and prevent those two from coming in, just for a moment. I wish to speak to the vendor in the hall before he comes inside.”

The second guard obeyed. A few minutes later the same guard came back in the room and informed Lucius that the merchant had arrived. He hadn’t needed to be told that, for the man outside was clearly upset and having trouble keeping his voice down. Lucius took a deep breath and walked into the hall.

“Hello, I’m Lucius.”

“I know who you are!”

“I know of your dilemma, but I have not been told your name.”

“Kurt.”

“Pleasure to meet you. Now Kurt I need you to calm down as a have come to a verdict that I believe everyone can benefit from.”

“I don’t want benefits for him! I want punishment!”

“As you so rightfully should with the information you have, but if you will bear with me for a short time I think you will find my decision to your liking.”

The merchant stayed quiet but nodded in acknowledgement. Lucius flashed him a smile and proceeded. “Do you have a family Kurt?”

The man nodded yes, examining the hunter very suspiciously. “So does our culprit in there. His children haven’t eaten in days.”

Kurt began to say something but Lucius held up his hand to stop him. “This does not excuse his crimes and cannot go without some repercussions. But I want you to consider for a minute what the usual punishment would mean for his family. With their father gone would the children not also turn to crime? Or perhaps his wife? And what if she gets caught? The children would be orphaned. We can’t forget that you had losses of course. You’re trying to make a living and that wrong needs to be amended. If you would calmly come into the room with me and face the accused in a civil manner I believe we can get this all sorted out.”

Both the merchant and the guard were gaping at Lucius, but they both followed him into the room. Lucius noticed how upset Birch looked as he approached the throne. Gerreon still looked quite amused. The young hunter sat back down and examined the faces of both the merchant and the thief—they shared a look of deep confusion.

Lucius smiled and clapped his hands together. “Now, having looked at this issue from both sides I have a proposal for you two. The accused turned to crime because he

cannot find regular work and fears for his family and Kurt took considerable loss to his business which is his livelihood. Therefore, to amend not only the damages caused by the crime itself and the source of the issue my verdict is that the accused shall work for our noble merchant free of charge until the cost of what was stolen is paid for.”

The thief let out a weak groan, clearly dreading this punishment almost as much as prison. “But sir, if I am detained working to pay this off, how will my family eat?”

“I simply ask. Kurt that he consider taking on the accused as a paid employee once his debt is paid. He has worked both as a farm hand and on a merchant caravan. I trust you will find he is a hard worker and could help your business expand.”

Kurt remained silent, eyeing the thief next to him but eventually nodded in agreement. He was not ready to let his anger go for the thievery, but clearly felt some sympathy for the man.

“As far as the crown is concerned that is the end of the deliberation I do however wish to lend my personal aid to the accused in his time of need. How much does your family need to live off for a few weeks?”

The thief looked up in surprise, tears flooded his eyes. “I do not know, sir. Not much... We can get by with very little.”

“We can work the details out later then.” Lucius said smiling and stepping down the steps toward that man. “Until then, take what I have. Our government has been kind enough to provide me with what I require while competing for the crown.” He handed the man the coins from his pocket.

The merchant and the thief were both escorted from the room looking very happy with the deliberation. Lucius smile faded, however, as soon as he saw Birch's expression.

“That was very noble of you and all that, but now it will be expected of you. Can you personally pay for all the poor to eat?”

“No but I had to do something, I couldn't let his children go hungry.”

“And what if these children don't exist and you just paid a thief and set him free?”

“He wasn't lying. I saw it in his eyes.”

“Saw it in his eyes, prosperous.”

“I've known thieves counselor, and that man was no thief. And I may not be able to personally attend to everyone in need but with the crown I can take actions to create a better city for them, one that cares for its people.”

Chapter 36- Dalia

The Endless Wood

The current dragged here for miles. Finally, the seer managed to get ashore. She looked around wearily, no sign of the wargs but no sign of civilization either. She sat there on the bank for some time, catching her breathe. As Dalia finally relaxed it dawned on her that hunger gnawed at her gut and she still remained quite exposed to the elements. She realized sleep would soon be necessary. However, clothing, food, and shelter would have to be the priority. She could run on adrenaline for a while more.

Getting up, the seer headed towards the woods with clear goals in mind. She stopped at the edge of the trees and picked up a sharp rock. The trees on her path would need to be marked for her to find her way back to the river. Swiftly she strode through the trees, carving an x into a trunk every once in a while. Eventually Dalia slowed to a more reasonable and steady pace. She needed to conserve energy and her wounds, though no longer bleeding, hurt immensely. The forest was strangely still and unchanging. Though the seer never deviated from her straight path she soon found a freshly carved x in the trunk of a nearby tree. She stared at the carving, confused. Slowly, she approached the trunk and felt the etching. A slight breeze rolled in and Dalia could have sworn a faint giggle came with it. She looked around, the breeze stopped.

Dalia set a slip-knot trap, hoping to catch some food, though she could not remember how or why she knew how to set the trap. She continued on through the wood, hoping that she had not truly gone in a circle. Perhaps exhaustion and hunger were setting in and affecting her mentally—if that was the case then she needed to find food and a safe place to sleep quickly. Again, she quickened her pace and traveled for some time.

The sun was beginning to rise as she stopped to rest once again. Her stomach knotted up when she spotted the slipknot trap she placed earlier. Again, the breeze rolled in accompanied by a quite giggling.

“Who’s there?” she asked the wind.

The breeze stopped but the giggling didn’t. “You look tired, miss,” A childish voice said.

“I am. Very tired and hungry. Please, just let me continue my travels.”

“Why? This game is fun!”

Dalia again set off. She hoped to somehow outrun whatever was looping the forest around her. The loop only became shorter as she almost immediately came back to the trap she had set. The seer stopped again and scanned for movement in the trees, not moving her head and hoping whatever it was could not see she was searching for them.

“I’m over here!” The voice called mockingly.

“No! Over here!” it said from another direction.

Dalia could not discover the creature’s location nor could she see any sign of movement but, clearly, it dwelled in the canopy. With heavy limbs, the tired seer struggled her way up a tree with low hanging branches. Above her, leaves rustled and again the voice spoke.

“Come and get me!” It said, giggling.

Again, Dalia began to climb toward the sound, but stopped mid ascension as she sensed a presence very near to her. Suddenly, a pair of big, curious eyes appeared above the branch she had ahold of. The seer realized that whatever it was it was the color of the tree bark and quite small.

“Oops!” The voice sang as a thin human like hand reached out and snapped the branch Dalia had ahold of.

Down she fell, waiting for the impact of the forest floor and not knowing how many more injuries she could sustain in her current condition. However, the impact never came. She hovered less than a foot above the forest floor.

“Please, forgive my children. They are so young and they do love their games,” a woman’s voice echoed.

Dalia slowly turned over until she could stand on her feet. She began scanning the area, expecting this new voice to also have a hidden voice but found a short slender human like creature dressed in clothing made of leaves standing in front of her, looking curiously at her.

“What are you?” Dalia asked and immediately feeling rude for asking.

The woman smiled softly. “We are Wood Sprites.”

Chapter 37- Alwin

Consequences

The young knight rode quickly but carefully as he pulled the other horse along towards the city. Bard was tied securely to the horse he had ridden out on and was covered so he appeared to be nothing but baggage. Tears flooded Alwin's eyes as he rode but he held them in, searching for a solution. The alchemist would expect the poison promised to him, however, none was recovered... the guard's heart sank when he realized they did get what they came for. The darkling poison lingered amongst Bard's blood. Perhaps he could change the terms of their agreement. He would change the terms. No payment, just the use of the alchemist's life elixir. Alwin would make the mad man bring his friend back or keep the ingredient he longed for from him.

The knight slowed to a steady trot as he approached the front gate of the city. He pulled out the parchment that the alchemist had given him. It outlined instructions and the location of his lab in town. The lab resided in The Gutter, the southern of the two major slums of Aarden. Of course, it would be in the most dangerous part of the city Alwin thought as he scanned the dark streets ahead over the paper. The rest of his trip through the city was a blur. He was hyper vigilant but not fully conscious, acting off a frenzied instinct. Horse hooves pounded through the quiet streets. Lit torches became less and less frequent as the city became more uninviting. The slums smelled like a sewer. They were the perfect place to conceal the odor of alchemy experiments. Few in the slums asked questions so it was likely no one paid the alchemist any mind. For that matter, it was unlikely anyone, if they saw Alwin, would think to question what lay limp on the other horse. They wouldn't want to know.

At last Alwin stopped a medium sized building, it was one of the few permanent structures of the slums and its size was somewhere between the shacks strewn about and the average building of the rest of the city. A warm glow streamed through the window shutters and the old, cracked, wooden door. The panicked knight knocked frantically. The door was opened immediately—the alchemist had taken notice of his approach.

“Well, where is it?” the chemist said dryly.

“The terms have changed,” Alwin said, pulling back the cover over Bard’s body.

“You knew there were risks.”

“I’ll give you what you seek if you promise to revive him.”

The alchemist felt for breath and listened for a heart-beat on Bard. “Revive? This is a corpse.”

“I know,” Alwin stated grimly.

The two stared at each other for quite some time. A cool night wind rolled in, seemingly snapping them out of their momentary trances.

“Bring it in then.”

“Him... not it,” Alwin replied bitterly.

The alchemist did not say anything in response, he merely shrugged and went back into his lab and left the door open. The young knight carefully hoisted his friend off the horse and over his shoulder. The air of the room was heavy and smelled of chemicals, many of which could be found in various states around the edge of the room: some being

boiled some sealed, others open, and yet more were being stirred or shaken by strange contraptions. There were books and loose parchment scattered all around the room, some stained with liquid and some with scorch marks.

“You can put the body on that table over there.” The alchemist pointed to a clear table in the far-right corner of the room. “I had it cleared to begin my experiments with the Darkling poison... Speaking of which, where is it? I’ll need it to revive your friend.”

“The poison is what killed him, it’s in his blood.”

The alchemist made a twisted expression that was hard to read. “I can extract it but no promises it works the way I originally intended.”

“I fail to see how poison is supposed to help bring life in the first place.”

The alchemist sighed. “It isn’t the poison I need but its delivery system. You witnessed how fast acting it was on your friend... I don’t have time to explain it if you want your friend back.”

“I’ll let you get to work. I’m going to get some fresh air. I’ll be close by.”

“Yes, yes...” The alchemist waved him off lazily.

Chapter 38- Lucius

The Third Trial

“As much as I hate to agree with Counselor Birch, what you did in there was very foolish. You set a precedent you cannot possibly live up to,” Gerreon stated firmly.

Lucius and the old counselor leisurely returned to the contestant housing. The young hunter knew he would be powerless to give that kind of attention to every case brought to him if he became king, but that was not the point.

“You don’t get it. You told me to hide my motives from those who may be working against me, but I’m not hiding. That is why I did what I did in there. I’m not stupid, there is no way in hell I can give special exception to every petty thief, but I needed to make it clear to the council what type of leadership I plan on molding.”

The counselor did not respond immediately, he let what the young man said sink in. “What you’re trying to do is admirable but naïve. You seem to believe the leadership will follow in your footsteps and make some miraculous changes that better the city.”

“They will or they will be replaced.”

“You’re an idealist, even if you achieve half of what you have in mind, you will be disappointed.”

“Striving for lofty ideals is better than remaining idle in fear of failure.”

Their conversation ended there and Gerreon gave Lucius one more concerned look before leaving him at the door and wishing him luck on his next trial. As he reached for the door handle Lucius realized there would be less people inside, he wondered who

had succeeded. As soon as the door swung open he scanned the room and spotted Auriel, Connor, Gwen, Grace, and Jaron. That meant Alistair was gone. Lucius supposed it made sense that the quiet blacksmith would fail the challenge that required him to speak his mind in a case. Alistair was brave, strong, and talented in his craft, but judgement and public speaking was certainly not his forte.

“You made it,” Grace smiled.

“I told you,” Jaron said confidently.

“You sure took your time,” Connor added.

“Yeah well, I didn’t exactly do it by the book. I may have pissed of old Gerreon a bit.”

“That sweet old guy? You have talents I never even dreamed of,” Jaron joked.

Lucius chuckled and took a seat nearby. He did not want to think about what the next trial could have in store for them. He just wanted to relax. He spotted Auriel across the room, reading and occasionally shooting judgmental glances at the others in the room. Gwen sat on her bed with her eyes closed, breathing deeply. Jaron and Grace were lost in conversation a ways off. Connor cautiously approached Lucius.

“I need to talk to you about something,” he said uncharacteristically timid.

“Alright... what is it?”

“I could be wrong... But I think Grace is an Artificer.”

The thought hit Lucius much harder than he expected. Was it possible that Grace used magic to persuade? If she was, does that make her the spy? “What makes you say that?” he responded, trying to sound calm.

“I wouldn’t have said anything if I did not think there was a good chance I was right. I’ve read a lot about magical manipulation.”

“You didn’t answer my question.”

“Well... by all accounts you are not supposed to be able to tell when an Artificer is manipulating you, that’s kind of the point.”

“Connor, you’re stalling.”

“Isn’t it funny how when she speaks to you it feels like you’ve known her all your life but when you are away from her or just observing her talk to another she feels like a stranger?”

“That’s just because she is friendly. You don’t get out much do you, Connor?”

Connor frowned. “I need you to take this seriously.”

Lucius forced himself to stop smiling. “I’m trying, but you aren’t giving me much to go off of.”

Connor stayed quiet for some time, clearly contemplating how to word what he was so sure of in his mind. Occasionally, he shot a searching glance toward Grace as if she would do something to make his job easier. He did not, however, seem to get a clear answer during his search.

Finally, he spoke, “Artificer’s aren’t necessarily bad they just need to be watched carefully. Has she tried to convince you of anything?”

“No,” Lucius said plainly.

Connor looked lost. “Just... just watch her. Okay?”

“Sure, I’ll keep an eye on her,” the hunter said sympathetically.

“Oh... and don’t tell her about this... Please.”

“This is just between us.” Lucius swore.

The thin scholar walked away awkwardly, seeming like he still had much he wanted to say, but thought better of it. Grace and Jaron came over quickly after he left.

“What was all that about? Connor looked more fidgety than usual,” Jaron said as he and Grace both observed the scholar from a distance.

“He has a theory that he doesn’t have enough to prove yet. I guess he was upset about my lack of backing his thoughts.”

“That’s vague...” Jaron grinned.

“Clearly, it’s meant to be just between them, Jaron,” Grace said softly.

Jaron raised an eyebrow and Lucius stated quickly, “It really isn’t anything big, but he did ask to keep it between us.”

“I didn’t realize you too were such close friends.”

“Come now Jaron, set your pride aside for just a moment and let it go,” Grace stated smoothly.

Jaron looked as if he were about to say something else when Kamon came back into the room looking rather pale. Instinctively, they all looked at the young scribe and grew quiet to await instruction. Kamon looked reluctant to inform them of their next task.

“Would you like to take a seat, Kamon?” Lucius asked, concerned.

Wordlessly the scribe sat down where the hunter had motioned. Breathing deeply, Kamon looked up at the contenders grimly. “I don’t find out what the trials are until they give me the order and send me over here. I suppose I should have known they would do something like this... it makes sense.”

“What makes sense, my dear?” Grace said soothingly, placing a hand on the nervous scribe’s shoulder.

Kamon seemed to relax a little and looked at Grace. “They will be putting each of you in the Black Cell, alone, for an undisclosed amount of time.”

Everyone instantly looked very grim. “Wait, the Black Cell is real?” Jaron spouted.

“They can’t...” Grace gasped.

Lucius remained quiet.

“Is... is it true that it is constructed entirely of the same metal as the crown?”

Kamon shook his head. “I don’t know...”

“Same order?” Jaron stated glumly.

“Actually, they said it was up to the remaining contenders to decide the order.”

“Hell, I’ll go first. How bad can it be?” Jaron blurted.

“That’s just as well. I would prefer to have time to at least observe one other person to go through it before I just jump in there.” Connor nodded, agreeing with Jaron’s volunteering.

“You will not return to this room when you complete the trial. It would be unfair for the others to know how long you were in there,” Kamon told them.

“I think we’ll figure that out when you come and get us,” Gwen stated plainly.

Kamon smiled weakly and fidgeted. It seemed he could no longer make eye contact with the contenders.

“Of course, they could simply delay retrieving us to make it unclear how long the previous had been in there,” Grace said.

“Plus, they could take people away early and keep them somewhere else to confuse the others,” Jaron added, he then turned to Lucius. “You’ve been rather quiet. What’s your take on this?”

“I think they have undoubtedly thought the process out. Perhaps even to the point of assuming the order based on our previous actions.”

“Could that effect how they conduct the trial?” Connor asked.

Jaron shrugged. "I suppose it could. Depends on how highly you think of the council's competence."

"We could draw straws. To make the order random, rather than following any kind of pattern the council may assume," Gwen said.

There were nods and mutters of agreement. Kamon exited to room and asked a guard to retrieve straw from the stables. He returned with the links already broken and clasped in his hand. In no particular order, they all grabbed a piece in quick succession and held up their pick: Lucius was first, followed by Gwen, Jaron, Connor, Grace, and Auriel.

"Good luck," Jaron said. "I'd say I envy you but I actually was lying when I said I wanted to go first." He winked.

Lucius didn't speak but smiled as he left the room with Kamon. The scribe looked even more nervous than before.

"I'm sure half the things they say about the Black Cell aren't true," Lucius said reassuringly.

"It's not that... I think, I think you're in danger."

"In danger? Why would you think that?"

"I don't know all the details, but whoever is pulling the strings behind the council has had a reason to prevent you from obtaining the crown."

"Why not just stop me from competing at all then?"

“I’m not entirely sure they knew who their enemy was at first but you have made that very clear. Gerreon seems more worried than usual about this particular trial... He wouldn’t tell me why.”

“Forgive me, Kamon, but that just doesn’t make much sense. They could have lied at any moment and said I failed a trial.”

“You haven’t been outside since the first trial. It wouldn’t be that simple anymore. You are immensely popular and many already are sure you will win. You losing would bring up questions. Plus, not all the council is against you and they are not the only ones in the room when the decision is made.”

Lucius had not been paying any attention where they were going and found himself in a much darker, more menacing hall than accustomed to in Aarden Hall. The stone, much darker and less even, reflected less light from the torches. Down the long corridor, a member of the council that Lucius was unfamiliar with awaited his arrival. The man wordlessly took over as guide to the Black Cell. They traveled through the prison which was highly populated with guards, but soon turned through a hard to see alcove and into a less populated area. The cells in this section had barbed bars and two sets of locks. In between every other cell were various interrogation and torture devices. Finally, they came to a dark iron door which the counselor promptly unlocked and opened for Lucius to step inside. A short hallway with two personal guards stood before him and at the end of the hall was very clearly the door to the Black Cell.

“Someone will come and retrieve you when the trial is over. There will be a short interview afterward to assess your... mental stability,” said the counselor, eyeing the

Black Cell. He very clearly did not want to get any close to the cell then he had to. “Good luck,” he added and walked away.

Lucius strode confidently toward the menacing door as each guard used a key to unlock it. The hunter paused for only a moment to allow the guards to open the cell. Quickly, Lucius scanned the chamber, it was very small and the walls were made out of a dark metal, rumored to be the same metal as the crown. There was nothing else in the cell and clearly no source of light. Judging by the door’s construction Lucius doubted any light even made it through the seams of the entrance. The hunter stepped in and the door immediately swung shut behind him. He was engulfed in total darkness as he heard the locks click into place of the Black Cell.

Lucius sat down on the cold, hard floor. He closed his eyes, knowing straining his eyes to adjust to the darkness would be a waste of energy. He begun to contemplate what Kamon had told him on the way over. Could he really be in danger? He highly doubted there was any merit in worrying about an unknown threat. Suddenly, the hunter remembered the bug shaped lumi-stone given to him by the seer in the swamp. He pulled out the magical item and whispered a command—the stone once again became a flying, luminescent bug. Even the light of the bug could only manage to light the area directly in front of Lucius. For the first time in a while Lucius began to think of his friends outside of the castle. He felt guilty for becoming so wrapped up in the world of Aarden Hall.

A chill crept through him. Suddenly he felt as if he was not alone in the dark. Trying to shake the feeling, Lucius moved uneasily where he sat. He felt as if he wanted to call out into the darkness but resisted. He wondered if the ruler ever felt alone when

wearing the crown, he doubted it. Suddenly, the young hunter no longer wanted the crown. He wanted out of this damned cell and to return home. He stood quickly to his feet and raised his fist to knock on the cell door. Hesitating, Lucius began to laugh involuntarily. This alarmed him and he fell back into the wall, sliding down back into a sitting position. He heard the guards mumble something and walk away. He wondered if that were real. Lucius was beginning to question everything. No... he was sure he had heard correctly. He took a deep breath, trying to regain control of his mind. A single person approached the cell. The stranger inserted a key into the door. Lucius quickly depowered the lumi-stone and pocketed it. How long had he been in here? Lucius stood up. It could not have been that long. Why had the guards left? They had, after all, been the ones to let him into the cell. It certainly wasn't the same counselor, he refused to get too close to the Black Cell. The key turned and the lock clicked open. The hunter felt on guard but was not sure if he could trust the feeling or if it were the work of Black Cell.

Light streamed in from the corridor outside as the heavy door opened. The dark figure that stood in the frame took advantage of Lucius' momentary blindness and lunged forward with what appeared to be a dagger. The hunter dodged instinctively, a loud crack bounced off the cell walls as metal collided with metal. The assailant rebounded quickly, this time taking a wide, sweeping strike. The arc of the blade prevented Lucius from dodging, forcing him to block as best he could and take the brunt of the attack on his forearms. Knowing he would soon be weakened by the attack the hunter jumped forward. Utilizing the burst of energy given to him by his fresh wound he elbowed the would-be assassin in the face and grabbed the wrist of the hand that clasped the blade. He felt their grip loosen and punched at their arm with his free hand. The blade fell to the ground, but

as it did the assassin swung their free hand into Lucius' stomach. Becoming winded by the blow, the hunter allowed himself to fall to the ground, grabbing his aching midsection with one hand and grasping wildly for the fallen blade with the other. He could not find it and soon a knee came flying toward his face. He blocked just in time and used the counterforce gained to push the assailant back into the hall. Lucius was not on top of the attacker and was making short quick jabs anywhere that would inflict damage. For the first time the hunter got a look at his attacker, they were clothed in all black. Their face was hooded and face wrapped in dark cloth, all that could be seen was a thin slit for their eyes that were surrounded by black paint. Suddenly, the assassin contorted their body and the tables turned. Lucius readied himself and prepared to block, but the attacker jumped to their feet, scanned their opponent briefly and bound out of the hall. The young hunter breathed heavily, staring toward the door and wondering why they had left so quickly, surely the fight was not over. He stood, keeping his eyes on the door, ready for a fight but the assailant did not return. In the distance he heard guard's boots banging against the stone. Lucius looked around for the dagger and deftly pocketed it as the security bound in the room accompanied by the counselor that had escorted him to the cell. The guards' faces were stern and the counselor looked shocked, whether or not it was because he had survived or was attacked in the first place was unclear. Lucius did not let his guard down. He waited for their next move.

Chapter 39- Dalia

The Grove

Surrounding the seer, the Wood Sprites looked on curiously as their matriarch addressed the stranger. Many of the young sprites that previously laughed mischievously now looked very serious and their eyes darted between their leader and Dalia.

“How did you come to be in this state?” the matriarch asked plainly.

“I was attacked by warg... and escaped by river,” Dalia responded breathlessly.

The sprite leader smiled. “That answers half of my question. But why, darling, are you naked.”

“I woke up this way.”

“Many wake up unclothed but do not stay so.”

“I awoke in the woods nearby.”

“Curious... The circumstances are strange, but I sense no malice in your intentions. We shall heal your wounds, clothe you and send you on your way.”

“Thank you,” Dalia said graciously with a short bow of her head.

Nearby, a group of vibrant green bushes were moved aside, creating a path to a previously unseen pool of clear sparkling water. Dalia could not take her eyes off the water. She cautiously made her way to the pool wordlessly.

“These waters have healing properties and will soothe your wounds. Bathe and be comforted by the cool ripples of the pond. Afterwards, we shall clothe you and give you shelter to rest.”

The seer walked eagerly to the pool and stopped at the water’s edge. She gazed into the liquid, mystified—it seemed to give off a faint glow and did not reflect the world around it. Even as Dalia stood at its very edge, the pond did not show her reflection. Gently, the seer stepped into the cool waters and instantly felt relief wash over her body. She examined where her wounds only to find they were completely healed. She never wanted to leave the grove of the Wood Sprites, this haven in a vicious and unforgiving forest. She took slow, deep breathes and looked upward. The sky was a brilliant blue and the sun was just past its noon position and began its climb down toward the horizon. The young seer closed her eyes, taking in the gentle rays of the sun as a gentle breeze caressed her body that rested above the surface of the pool. She cupped some liquid in her hands and cast it into her hair, feeling cool relief as it trickled down. Suddenly, Dalia was aware of a presence nearby and opened her eyes to the Wood Sprite matriarch standing over her.

“To remain in the waters of this pool is a temptation known to few but my kind. But you must fight that temptation. Drink now from the pool, then climb out so we may clothe you,” said the sprite kindly but firmly.

Dalia immediately did as she was told. All thirst and hunger left her body from the single drink that she took and stepped from the waters with new found strength. Many of the Matriarch’s children rushed from their hiding places in the trees holding garments made of leaves and plant fibers much like their own. They helped the seer into the

clothing. The fitting was perfect as if they had taken precise measurements of Dalia. Once again, she found herself surrounded by the Wood Sprites. This time, however, they were smiling at her.

“Thank you again for all of your help. I have lost most of my memory but I know my mission is important. I doubt I would have been able to complete it without your help,” Dalia said, scanning the woods around her.

A tree previously unperceived came into her line of sight. It had several low hanging branches starting from about four feet off the ground and continuing up another eight feet or so in steady succession. At that point, the branches evened out and grew closer together. This bed of branches grew outwards for about six feet where they then curved upwards. Clearly, this tree had been crafted for Dalia to sleep in. The seer was speechless, enamored by the power of the Wood Sprites. Their manipulation of the forest was astounding.

“You should rest soon. But first... tell me. What are you? I sense no hostility in you yet there are traces of an essence that makes the forest want to recoil,” the leader of the sprites said.

Dalia was taken aback. “I honestly know very little about who or what I am. When I awoke in your wood I had gone through a sort of re-birth.”

The matriarch nodded. “I believe you speak the truth. Beware of the twisted essence within, young one.”

Dalia nodded and carefully climbed up into the canopy bed. A warm breeze washed over her, a faint pleasant smell came with it. Suddenly, the seer was very tired and wished for nothing more but a restful night. As she faded into gentle rest Dalia noticed the curious eyes of the young Wood Sprites around her. Then the world vanished into darkness.

Chapter 40- Alwin

After-life

Shaking, the young knight walked down the empty streets. Awaiting any signal from the Gnarled Man, he kept the shack within his line of sight. He could not think straight and wandered tirelessly. He did not know how long he paced the streets waiting. Eventually, he came across a discarded news flyer talking about the Trials of the Crown. Alwin lost track of his friend's progress since getting mixed up with the Gnarled Man and a curiosity suddenly filled him, momentarily replacing his anxiety. The flyer read: *Lucius fan favorite after dazzling display at Pools of Vision. Faced against a terrifying unknown enemy, the brave contender for the crown showed true heroics with his selfless schemes to battle the mysterious shadow-men.*

Alwin's heart leapt with excitement. Lucius publicly revealed the side of him that the knight had always known existed. Almost as quickly as it leapt, his heart sank. He wished he had been there for his friend, to witness his triumph. He had been selfish and greedy. He did not need the extra gold from the alchemist job but he took it anyways and got Bard killed. A light from the direction of the shack snapped him out of his thoughts. The alchemist hobbled out looking tired but proud. Alwin hurried over to him.

“Well?” the knight said a bit too loudly.

“The experiment was a success, but the results are not yet clear.”

“What does that mean?”

“It means there could be side-effects.”

Alwin simply nodded and followed the alchemist into the poorly lit shack. Bard was still lying on the table he had been placed on, but now the slow and steady movement of breathing could be seen.

“What can we expect when he wakes up?” the knight asked, not taking his eyes off his friend.

“The one thing I am certain of is he will be very disoriented. However... I do have some ideas on different possibilities of his mental state. If his brain was deprived of air for too long he could very well have memory problems or even be slower than he used to be. If he escaped that inconvenience there is always the possibility that the combination of chemicals changed his body chemistry. He could be more aggressive. He may even be entirely mad.”

“I hope for your sake he is not mad,” Alwin spat.

“I told you there would be risks. I have not tried this combination of chemicals. Frankly, I’m astounded it worked at all.”

They stood there quietly, neither taking their eyes off of Bard. The night wore on and it began to become unclear if Alwin’s friend would wake up at all. The alchemist began to try different methods of waking the unconscious man, but nothing seemed to rouse him.

“Smelling salts were certainly the safest option to wake him... there are chemicals that might do the trick, but they could react badly with the chemicals already in his body.”

“We’ll give him more time. I know he’ll wake up. He just needs more time...”

Bard’s breathing quickened. His movements became much more erratic and his face muscles contorted as if he were having a nightmare. He remained this way for some time. The sun began to rise, its rays snuck between the uneven planks of the shack. One of the sneaking rays of light slowly crept toward the unconscious man’s face until finally resting on his eyes. This, it seemed, was what Bard had been waiting for. The newly restored man bolted upright and began to wail. The two other men in the room froze with shock.

“Shut him up! Shut him up! People are bound to ask questions if he screams like that!” the alchemist shouted as he came to his senses.

Alwin snapped to attention and ran to his friend’s side, trying to console him. His movements did nothing to soothe the mad man and only caused him to thrash in surprise. The alchemist began rifling through various concoctions on a nearby table.

“Shut him up or I will! Your way will be much more friendly I assure you!”

Alwin caught Bard’s wide, darting eyes. “Shh... Bard, it’s me, Alwin, your friend. Shh... everything’s okay now. We saved you.”

Bard would not be consoled and continued to scream. Alwin fought back tears as he realized there was no recognition of him in his friend’s face, only fear and agony. The screaming did not cease until the alchemist forced a dark blue potion down the mad man’s throat.

Chapter 41- Kamon

The Builder

Kamon could not concentrate on his work. He and Gerreon were waiting to hear the results of Lucius' trial and while the old counselor seemed content to quietly work the young scribe needed answers to the council's actions.

“Have you heard from the leaders of the other societies?” Kamon asked, trying to not pry into council affairs.

“Yes, quite recently in fact.”

“How are they fairing?”

“They are in times of great unrest, the same as us, unfortunately, but I believe they will endure.”

“Did you tell them of our political situation?”

“Yes. I have a feeling we are just now getting to what you really wish to speak about,” Gerreon smiled.

“Master Gerreon, there is something I don't understand.”

“There are many things I don't understand. If you only lack knowledge of one then you are ahead of me,” the old man smiled wryly.

“There are many things I don't understand but this one plagues me of recent,” Kamon stated unamused.

Gerreon nodded knowingly. “You question the council's actions of late.”

“How did you know?”

“Because it should be obvious to an educated young man such as yourself, but I trust you will be wise enough to not express this opinion to anyone but me. It could be dangerous. Do you understand?”

“Do you really think they will take actions against fair opposition? And why does some of the council seem to hate Lucius so much when he is clearly the most eligible for leadership?”

The old man sighed. “There are members in the council that want to control everything and therefore want a leader they can mold to their liking. They do not understand Lucius. All they know is they cannot control him and that scares them.”

“The council is not here to control, only to advise the leader and observe his judgements to make sure the crown isn’t affecting his mental state too strongly.”

Gerreon nodded gently. “I have a story I wish to share with you, scribe. Will you hear it?”

“Of course, master.”

“There were two brothers being pursued by enemy forces. They knew not why the men chasing them wished them dead only that they could not be reasoned with. On and on—the chase went for days, weeks, months, until finally the brothers came across an old man standing in the middle of a forked road. Before the two men could say a word the elder spoke.

“The path ahead will decide your fate. The left path will imbue the first to travel down it with the knowledge of destruction, while the first to take the right will learn of construction. Each of you must choose a path. If you choose to remain on the path together only one of you will obtain the knowledge they strive for. But know this, if you take separate paths it will be impossible to see each other again, for this knowledge must be limited to one and cannot be taught to any other.’

“Hearing the angry mob gaining on them the first brother chose the path on the left. He thought that surely the knowledge of destruction would benefit him most to defeat his enemy. The first brother strode quickly down his chosen path and did not look back. He was entirely unaware that he had just destroyed the bond he and his sibling shared. The second brother felt abandoned and upset that he had not been consulted to decide their course of action. He turned his head away from the left path and noticed the old man was gone. The pursuing army could now be seen in the distance. The second brother needed somewhere to hide and defend himself so he to the right path. As the knowledge of construction filled his mind he was met with a great sadness. Not because he feared the oncoming siege nor because he had taken his path without choice, but because he realized now what his brother had not. While the power of destruction would certainly help to fight back enemies it would not create an environment one would want to live in after the battle. Construction, conversely, created a safe haven for those who use it and help them to mold the world as they see fit for the good of all.”

“But construction can’t defeat the army, it can only defend against it,” the scribe blurted.

Gerreon smiled. “This is how most people see it, but consider this: destruction imbues the user with a solitary skill while construction is actually based on understanding both concepts. In order to construct a defense, one must understand how an enemy might destroy it. Those who choose the path of destruction can certainly achieve their means, but do not possess the knowledge to build a foundation to support their new world.”

“You believe Lucius is a builder?”

“Unless my judgment has finally been overcome by age, I believe so, yes.”

Suddenly a guard strode in the room without knocking. “Begging your apologies, sir, but the first contestant to enter the Black Cell has just been attacked.

Both the scribe and the counselor stood up immediately. They began to make their way to Lucius, hoping for his safety. And, for the first time, Kamon saw his mentor fail to contain his emotions. Raw fear filled the old counselor’s face.

Chapter 42- Lucius

Truth

Lucius was led down a series of familiar corridors. His stomach knotted up when he realized their path led to the Iron Chamber, surely this was not where they were to wait for the others. His attack must have prompted a meeting. But why not simply have him wait where he was meant to? He sat, once more, at the head of the table, but this time he did not feel in charge. Only a few of the council members arrived before him and they all sat quietly as the remaining filled their seats one by one. The look on Gerreon's face when he hurried into the chamber did nothing to alleviate Lucius' anxiety. Finally, when they were all seated, Birch spoke up.

“You have been called to this emergency meeting because there is dispute between your colleges. Lucius preposterously claims to have been attacked while in the Black Cell. Some tend to believe his story and many do not. I am part of the latter, of course, and it seems to me that this contestant broke out of the cell in a fit of fright and invented a story to cover up his failing.”

“We are not yet to that part yet, Counselor Birch,” Gerreon spoke strongly. “For those unfamiliar with what happened, it would be useful to hear unbiased accounts that state only the facts we know and not mere conjectures based on emotion.”

Birch scowled, quickly covering it with a cordial nod. “We will bring in the guards that were outside of the door.”

“They weren't there! Someone clearly paid them to leave. What's to stop them from paying them to lie?” Lucius spat.

“And we are simply supposed to believe you in the matter? A conspiracy to murder you, involving bribery and an assassin, and in the infamous Black Cell nonetheless,” Birch retorted.

“An attempt on an eligible leader’s life is not unheard of,” a short, bald counselor unknown to Lucius replied.

“Especially if someone is trying to control the outcome,” Gerreon added.

Birch shot Gerreon a fierce look, but did not respond. “Call for the guards who were at the cell,” he commanded to his scribe who scurried out of the room with his head down.

The room waited uneasily for several minutes until the guards finally came into the room, closely followed by Birch’s scribe. The soldiers stood at attention and hardly moved a muscle, but their eyes occasionally darted toward Birch. Lucius felt a sudden sense of dread, this was it, he was going to be out of the running and the corrupt part of the council would rule behind their puppet leader. He considered, for a moment, showing them all the dagger of his would-be assassin but thought better of it. The dagger was something he did not want his enemies to know he had and the council would probably dismiss it as his own that he carried into the Black Cell illegally. He would hide it away, until he had time to track down the assassin.

“Please, if you will, give your accounts of the events that occurred at the Black Cell.”

One of the guards spoke up, “We were posted by the cell and a counselor brought that man” he pointed at Lucius, “to the cell and he was locked inside. It was quiet for some time. We uh... stepped out of the hall for a quick minute and in that time we heard a bunch of loud noises inside. When we came back he was out of the cell and in a panic.”

“Why did you leave your post?” Gerreon asked.

“Sir?” the guard asked as if he had not expected this question.

“You were tasked with standing directly outside the cell. Why did you leave?”

The guards both fidgeted and were very clearly thinking about their response. A faint hope filled the young hunter, perhaps the guards would slip up. There was hope yet that he would stay.

“I had to take a piss,” one of them said shortly.

“Yeah, me too!” the other agreed, grinning.

“There you have it! You can hardly blame them for nature calling.” Birch said.

“Actually, it is the duty of all guards to remain at their post no matter what, until they are relieved of duty by the following shift. Even if that were not so, why not simply take turns leaving the room?” the old counselor replied sternly.

The guards suddenly looked panicked. “We aren’t in trouble, are we? Like he said, nature calls and all that.”

“I’m afraid if you left your post by your own choosing then you are very much in trouble.”

“It wasn’t exactly our own choosing, sir!” One of the guards burst out.

“Yeh, it was more advised to us that we leave.”

“By whom?” Gerreon asked smiling.

“We uh... can’t say.”

“If I cannot check with that person, how do I know you aren’t lying?”

“This isn’t a meeting to discuss whether the guards went piss or not! We are here because Lucius failed his trial but some of you refuse to believe it!” The counselor that escorted Lucius to the Black Cell suddenly shouted.

All eyes turned to him as silence fell. The tension was palpable and the guards’ eyes were now darting back and forth between the shaken counselor and Birch. Lucius felt a sudden urge grow in him to shout accusations at who he believed to be the guilty parties, but resisted, knowing it would do no good.

“Seeing as they were the only ones nearby to explain what happened, other than Lucius, himself, their whereabouts are essential. And what’s more, the idea that they may have not left on their own accord is highly disturbing. So, unless you have something you would like to say on the matter, I would ask you to remain silent,” Gerreon said calmly.

“We can go around and around with this all day. I hardly believe we can get much more from these gentlemen at this time. Why not simply put the decision to a vote?”

Birch spoke up.

“We have not even allowed Lucius to speak for himself,” Gerreon said, fear entering his eyes once more.

“All in favor of Lucius remaining,” Birch said, grinning and raising his hand. Most of the council followed suit. “Looks to be the majority. Any last words in opposition?”

Gerreon and Birch’s eyes were locked, each inquisitively sizing-up the other. No one in the Iron Chamber spoke. Relief washed over Lucius but a different sense of uneasiness crept in the back of his mind. Had they been on to something with the guards? Did Birch allow him to stay simply to get them off his trail?

“Then it is decided. The events at the Black Cell, though still unknown, were no fault of the contenders and therefore he is allowed to stay in the running for the crown.”

Chapter 43- Dalia

The Two Beasts

Dalia awoke to a new and bright day. Though she still lay in the bed made for her by the sprites, the grove that spawned the tree was gone. She was now back in the seemingly endless woods she roamed before her encounter. She remained in her bed made out of limbs for quite some time, not looking forward to venturing back into the unforgiving wilderness. Part of Dalia also feared that as soon as she left the sprites final gift, it too would disappear. When she finally managed to force herself down from the tree she quickly looked up to see if the bed remained and smiled when she saw that it had. The young woman quickly created markers to help her find the bed again. There was no reason to blindly choose a direction and leave the shelter behind. Dalia decided she would scout the area until dusk and would head back if she had no clear path by then.

Marking as she went, the seer covered as much ground as she could, however, there seemed to be no end to the forest. As the sun began to set she searched for her markers, to lead her back to the sprite's shelter. A deep howl stopped her in her tracks. It couldn't possibly be the same warg could it? How far had she drifted down the river? Her heart began to race. She was torn between the idea of running to shelter and the fear of leading the beast back to her home and becoming trapped. The option of a safe place to regain some energy in a fight sounded better than an attempt to keep the beasts from finding where she slept. Striding towards the tree, Dalia began to wonder if she could mask her scent to hide from her pursuers but nothing came to mind. She would have to fight. That did not mean, however, that she had to simply wait around like the last time, she could spring a trap. The seer hoped dearly that she had the time to hatch such a

scheme. She arrived at the group of trees her bed was located. All at once, each possible plan filled her mind. They were not just thoughts, they were possible realities, and she saw them as if she had already lived them. Some choices ended in her death or being wounded and trapped, but most ended in victory. There was a clear choice in her mind, which path she should take. Suddenly, she was entirely back in the present. Dalia stood there a moment, soaking in all that just happened. She had known since she woke that she possessed some kind of precognition ability but this was the first vision of her new life. She knew she could not hesitate now, and began to make the necessary preparations for the wargs who would be on her within the hour.

Creating a weapon and setting a perimeter of snares, Dalia rushed to match her premonition. The outcome was certainly favorable, though very unlikely and dependent on a variety of outcomes that would happen in quick succession. She could not falter. Soon, the seer heard movement in the trees around her. The wargs were being cautious, but not completely silent. Occasionally, one would step on a fallen branch and give away their position. Dalia stood tall and motionless, showing no fear. Out of the darkness a warg sprang right into a snare and let out a yelp. Several of the beasts filed through the new opening in Dalia's defenses. This was a smaller group than before. There were three remaining wargs and the alpha.

The seer kept her eyes on the alpha. The others did not intimidate her. In quick succession, the smaller wargs bound for her and, just as quickly, she dispatched them. Finally, it came down to Dalia and the alpha. She got down low, staring him in the eyes. Fear melted away from her, she knew what to do and acted on instinct alone. The seer reached out slowly to the massive warg, it did not flinch. As soon as her hand touched the

beast's face, images the wargs various hunts flashed through her mind in quick succession. The violent images soon switched to those of a calmer nature. The warg was in his den with a female and their litter. Another flash, followed by images of fire and the pack being drawn out of their den, the hunters waiting with their bows drawn and dispatched most of the pack swiftly. The alpha was left with almost nothing. What Dalia killed in self-defense had been all that remained. A high-pitched whimper brought the seer out of her visions. She could see the pain in the alpha's eyes. Reaching out with her free hand, Dalia petted either side of the wild beast's neck.

“It's okay boy. I'll be your pack, if you let me.”

The giant warg leaned into Dalia's hands and whimpered. She soothed the beast and it returned her kindness, licking her hands gently. The seer only had momentary solace in this victory. She did not know what was to come, but she knew it would be a monumental task. She had to find the king and stop the darkness, but first she simply needed to find her way back to civilization.

Chapter 44- Alwin

After-death

Bard seemed at peace when he slept, but every time he woke he began to scream. The alchemist tried various chemical mixtures, but nothing soothed the mad man in the slightest. he knew only two extremes: full mania or unconsciousness. Alwin sat silently on a stack of rickety boxes in the far corner, shaking. He was as far as he could get from Bard as he could be without leaving the shack. A chill filled Alwin as he noticed his friend's unconscious body seemed stiller than usual. The knight stood to his feet. The alchemist strode between Alwin and Bard, checking the latter's pulse.

“I told you the mixture of chemicals could have dire consequences. Looks like I was right,” the Gnarled Man said coldly.

Alwin nodded in understanding. His friend was lost, whatever he had once been vanished with the darkling attack. All that remained of Bard was a mad and wailing husk. It was better that he died in his sleep. The knight began to contemplate what he would tell Lucius, they had all been friends for so long. Even worse, he could not begin to imagine how he would explain to Bard's pregnant wife.

“You can leave. I will dispose of your mess,” the Gnarled Man broke Alwin out of his thoughts.

“Mess? He was a person. He was my friend,” Alwin responded flatly.

“Fine, fine. I will dispose of your friend,” the Gnarled Man grumbled, extending a sack full of gold toward Alwin. “Here is your pay for the ingredients.”

The knight could not help but stare at the man in disbelief. "I do not want it."

"Take it. I won't have you coming back later, saying I owe you," the Gnarled Man thrust the money into Alwin's hands.

"Will you tell me where he's buried?"

"Buried? I'm not a grave keeper. He will be cast down river."

"He deserves better."

"None of us deserve anything. If we want something we must take it. The dead don't have the luxury of making requests."

"Then let me burry him."

The alchemist hesitated. "No, I cannot afford for you to get caught and risk everything I have built."

"Disposed of a lot of bodies?" Alwin asked sharply, eyes gleaming with a mixture of sadness and rage.

The Gnarled Man ignored what the knight had to say and began making preparations, presumably to haul the body to the river. He packed up several bottles of ingredients as well as various dry ingredients in a tattered leather satchel. Then, he wrapped Bard in a cloth and tightly bound it to him with leather straps.

Alwin stammered. "I can give you the time the guards change posts. You should have a window there to get out of town. But if I do, you must promise to bury him."

“Fine... fine. Write down the times and locations. I will send word of his locations when the time is right.”

“The right time best not be too long. His widow will want to visit his resting place.”

The alchemist laughed. “Ha! Resting place... That is my favorite of the ridiculous phrases man has come up with to ignore the finality of death. Gone is gone, m’boy.”

The knight stayed silent, sadness replaced by rage. He scribbled the change of guard times and their locations and shoved the parchment into the Gnarled Man’s hands. The Gnarled Man’s grin widened.

“Don’t be like that... You did decent work as far as I’m concerned. One loss for an ingredient that may unlock immortality is a small price.”

“I curse the day I met you...” Alwin said as he began his way out the door. He stopped in the open port and turned. “I expect the grave location by end of week or I’m coming to find you.”

Chapter 45- Lucius

Know Thy Enemy

Lucius knew that the council had continued to conduct the trial in the Black Cell even when debating his fate in the Iron Chamber. Jaron, Grace, Connor, and Auriel all sat in the contenders' chamber, all with distant looks in their eyes. They gradually came out of the stupor and took notice of Lucius's presence. A faint spark returned in Jaron's gaze.

“We thought you were a gone,” he grinned lightly.

“I nearly was.” Lucius paused. He had briefly forgotten that one of his fellow contenders could be working with the council. He would be selective with his words. Perhaps retelling the events would reveal pre-knowledge of events in one of their faces. “I was attacked in the Dark Cell. An assassin was sent to kill me while I was disoriented by the darkness.”

These words finally brought life back to his fellow contenders' faces. Jaron stood abruptly. Grace gasped. Connor shifted and quietly turned toward Lucius. Auriel, to Lucius surprise, gave a fiercely defensive look that was partially in place to hold back tears. Not a single one of their responses indicated any kind of knowledge of the attack beforehand and they all seemed genuinely concerned.

“What happened?!” Jaron blurted, waiting eagerly for Lucius to explain.

Lucius explained everything that happened including his suspicions of who plotted the attack. All the contenders hung on his every word. They did not fully calm

down about the attempt on Lucius' life until it was time for bed. Jaron, the hunter noticed, hung back when the group parted. He had been waiting to be alone.

“I have to tell you something...”

“Okay?”

“Just know... I had no idea they would send an assassin.”

“Out with it!”

“They have my brother! I've been spying for them, you were right to be suspicious.”

Lucius examined Jaron closely, his heart clawed at his ribs. The feeling of betrayal oozed slowly throughout the young hunter's body.

“I know where they are keeping him,” Jaron said, his voice seemed faint to Lucius. “I know it's asking a lot considering what I just told you but...”

Focus returned to Lucius world. “We'll go rescue your brother and put an end to their schemes,” the hunter firmly recited, surprising himself. The distrust still lingered, but he could sense it was irrational.

“You are a better man and will be a better King than any of us deserve,” Jaron said, placing his hand on the hunter's shoulder. “So, we rest for an hour to make sure everyone is asleep?”

Lucius nodded. “Yes, but there is still the matter of the guards stationed outside.”

“My dear boy, I’m rich! We’ll bribe the pants off them and simply stroll out the door.”

Lucius chuckled and they went their separate ways to wait for the other contender’s breathing to become deep and even as they drifted out of consciousness.

“Lucius, wake up,” Jaron jarred his friend out of his unintended slumber. “Sleeping on the job, eh?”

“No, I was just resting my eyes,” Lucius mumbled through a faint grin.

The young hunter slid out of his bed silently, Jaron anxiously lead him towards the door. “I bribed the guards watching us easily enough but the ones guarding my brother won’t be so easy.”

Lucius nodded in agreement as they strode into the empty hallway. Both contenders were taken aback by the sense of freedom they had not realized they were deprived of since their names were called. The two exchanged knowing glances, but continued on in silence. They made their way out of Aarden Hall with relative ease, only having to pause a few times to let guards pass before continuing. The two men breathed a sigh of relief at the sight of the city they had known all their lives.

“First thing you should do as king is tighten security in the ol’ castle.” Jaron said pointing his thumb over his shoulder, back toward Aarden Hall. “That was just a travesty, not that I don’t appreciate the simplicity of our escape.”

“It did feel a bit too easy...” Lucius responded.

“You don’t think... They can’t possibly know. How would they know?”

“A second spy maybe? Or a failsafe to alert them if you spoke the truth about your brother or your assignment.”

“I realize they used magic for the reflecting pool, but I highly doubt any of the ‘Shadow Council’ themselves are magic. They must have a mage tucked away somewhere and I certainly never came into contact with them.”

Lucius shrugged. “We may never know, but if they do know then we need to be very careful on how we approach your brother’s prison.”

“One thing we count on is if we do get away they wouldn’t dare accuse us of anything upon our return, it would cause too many questions.”

“Yes, but if we outright accuse them then our knowledge loses its power, as soon the public is told they could swing either way. We may just come off as conspiracy theorists. We need proof, not just you and your brother’s testimony, but physical evidence.”

Jaron stopped and Lucius followed suit. The house was quite obviously a prison: the windows were barred, the doors heavy and latched, and there were more guards than they had seen sneaking out of Aarden Hall.

“Not exactly subtle,” Jaron whispered.

“No way we are getting in without a fight.”

“Where would be the fun in that?”

“I count a total of six in the area.”

“Three each is better odds than I hoped for.”

“Three each, without setting off any kind of alarm.”

Jaron had nothing to say to this. The gravity of the situation had set in. He nodded solemnly. They set off to opposite ends of the building without any stated plan. They were pressed for time and would need to act on instinct alone. They caught each other’s eyes from their cover. Jaron nodded. There were two at the door and were momentarily isolated. Jaron stood and approached them.

“Excuse me. I was wondering if you could give me directions. I’m on my way home from the tavern and seem to have lost my way,” he said with a slight slur.

“Get lost,” one of the guards responded.

“If you could just point me towards...”

Lucius crept out from behind his cover, unheard.

“I said get lost,” the guard retorted more harshly.

The hunter was now directly behind them. Jaron smiled.

“Good night, gentlemen,” he stated, slur now absent.

Lucius crashed the two men’s helmeted heads together swiftly, knocking them both unconscious. Nearby, the remaining guards stirred. Hushed voices muttered from the other side of the door. Jaron put one of the fallen guard’s helmets on and knocked on the door. The port opened a crack. The helmet was enough to momentarily confuse the unarmored guard to open the door a bit more. Panic filled his eyes as the indoor light

spilled out and made it clear Jaron was not a comrade. The guard began to unsheathe his sword but Jaron forced his way in and head-butted the man before the weapon could be fully drawn.

“Thomas? What was that?” A voice echoed from up the stairs.

Jaron remained quiet and crept to the side of the stairway. Outside guards were rushing to the source of the commotion. Lucius closed the open door from the outside.

“Who was at the door?” the guard inquired, a chair creaked as he stood and peered down the stairs.

Outside, two guards approached the front of the house, swords drawn. Lucius sank into the shadows just as the guards spotted their two fallen allies.

“This isn’t funny, Thomas,” whispered the voice at the top of the stairs. The steps creaked as the man cautiously ventured down them.

Jaron positioned himself so he could reach the first visible step past the ceiling. The guard’s foot fell into position and Jaron yanked on his ankle. With a thud, the man cascaded down the remaining steps.

“Sound the alarm! Someone’s after the prisoner!” one of the guards outside shouted.

One man turned quickly and began to run to get help. Lucius jumped onto the remaining guard, knocking him down. The man quickly recovered and took a swing at the young hunter. Lucius caught his fist, glancing at the guard going to get help, he was still visible. He forced the man’s hand down and slammed his helmeted head into the stone

street. Lucius grabbed a dagger from the unconscious guard's boot and heaved it at the escaping man—the blade penetrated the runner's lower calf.

Inside, the guard rebounded with surprising swiftness and lunged at Jaron, attempting to choke him. The rogue pushed the man's arms to either side and punched him in the kidney. The guard countered with a punch to the face.

“Hey! Not the face, mate!” Jaron shouted, returning the favor and angling himself quickly behind the momentarily dazed guard.

Outside, the newly fallen guard screamed in surprise. Lucius advanced and grabbed the man from the ground. “The blade did not hit anything vital. You'll be fine,” the hunter spoke before knocking the panicked man unconscious.

Lucius burst into the house, to find Jaron choking the last guard into unconsciousness with his forearm. The hunter breathed a sigh of relief. The security was neutralized.

“How'd you fair?” Jaron said, standing and brushing himself off.

Lucius chuckled. “Better than you it seems,” he said, pointing to Jaron's bleeding nose.

The rogue dabbed his nose with a cloth from his pocket. “Yeah... the bastard was quick.”

“Any idea where they are keeping your brother?”

“Upstairs, they had a guard by the door.”

They climbed the stairs together, Jaron eagerly in the lead. The door at the top of the flight was locked. There was only silence on the other side. Jaron began rummaging through his pockets.

“Emery, it’s me. I’ve come to take you home.”

There was stirring on the other side of the door but no response. Jaron pulled out a lock pick and began to fiddle with the door. Deftly, all the lock pins fell place and the door swung open. A frightened young boy lay in a sparse bed, covered entirely by a tattered blanket except his face.

“Jaron? I thought I was dreaming when I heard your voice. What was that crash?”

“We had a bit of a disagreement with the men outside, brother. Are you okay?”

Emery sat up warily, still covered by the blanket. “I’m okay. Are the bad men gone?”

Jaron smiled. “Yes, they’re gone. I’m taking you home.”

Chapter 46- Raijin

The Dark Totem

They moved silently through the forest, following the trail left by the Wild Ones that survived the battle. Raijin's hoped they would lead them right to their camp. Four of the most skilled hunters of the village, excluding Borghildr, took on this task. The druid leader remained behind to oversee repairs and rebuild his people's moral. The Wild Ones traveled cautiously, their path veered frequently making it hard to trace, but they were injured and often missed a step, leaving a marker for the young druids to follow.

A flurry of emotions swarmed Raijin's soul: anger at the destruction the Wild Ones caused, pride that his clan claimed victory in the skirmish, and excitement in the hunt before them. He knew all the young men at his side well—they had grown up together, and though he was of the first blood line, he often been jealous of his friend Siv for his natural hunting abilities. Siv's was so closely bound to his spirit animal, a wolf, that the beast's traits crossed over even when he took human form. The other two young druids Raijin saw much more equivalent to himself, in that their doubts were sometimes apparent, where Siv always seemed sure of his actions. The remaining two druids, Calemous and Tven, were brothers and their spirits bound them to the animal of an elk and a lynx, respectively.

The tracks suddenly stopped their elusive patterns. Raijin halted his comrades. They neared the camp of the Wild Ones. All at once, the troop crept low, taking slow deliberate steps. Raijin's heart clawed at his ribs in rabid fury as he spotted smoke just over a small incline. The young druid tamed his vengeful desires as best he could. Now was not the time to strike. They were there to merely observe. The others seemed to have

similar conflicts as they all exchanged knowing glances before going prone to climb the hill.

Nearing the crest, Raijin thought the air felt different, heavier yet invigorating. His thoughts swirled as he peered slowly over the incline and caught his first quick glimpse the mysterious dark totem that loomed in the center of the Wild Ones village.

“The air is strange here,” Siv said quietly.

Raijin nodded, taking another survey of the camp. The Wild Ones surrounded the totem, several bonfires encircling the ritual object. Three older druids adorned in pelts and skulls cast herbs into the flames and motioned for the wounded to breathe deeply. The wounded did as they commanded, but they did not rest, many of them beat their chests and scream in bestial anger. The few that made it back to camp, energy drained and no longer able to stand were brought to rest their backs against the dark construct.

“What is that thing?” Tven said with obvious fear in his voice.

Raijin ignored his friend’s question and directed his attention back to the Wild Ones. The severely injured were now being coaxed to stand as the fires fumes were wafted their direction. A few of them managed to stagger up and join the others in their ritualistic howls. The few that remained had accepted death and their fellow Wild Ones brought it to them, transforming into beasts to savagely rip their allies apart. The group of young druids looked away in disgust.

“Rabid monsters...” Siv spat.

“We need to get out of here,” Calemous said.

They all nodded in agreement and began making their way down the slope. A sudden voice froze them in place.

“Dear nephew, welcome to my home.”

Stealth deserted them and they sprang to life, running for the trees. The laughter of Nasrin pursued them but they dared not glance back. Raijin listened to closely to the footsteps around them, there were at least a dozen. His panic increased as the druids around him shifted and split off in different directions. Raijin changed shape into an eagle and took to the skies, quickly losing all but his aunt who took the form of a vulture. The great talons of the scavenger clawed to grasp the feathers of the young hawk who desperately attempted to spot his frightened comrades.

Wind whipped violently around Raijin’s feathers as he fell into a dive, knowing the larger build of the vulture could not maneuver as swiftly as the eagle. Nasrin screeched at his sudden maneuver. The lumbering form of the vulture halted midair and shifted into a falcon, immediately falling in pursuit of the young hawk. The momentary delay, however, had been enough for Raijin to vanish into the tree line. He could be in size and shape amongst the trees. The furious falcon doubled back in search for easier prey.

Chapter 47- Alwin

The Widow

Shame choked the knight's very breath as he gazed at the familiar tavern. It had already been too long to make Bard's pregnant wife wait, not knowing what became of her husband. Alwin's feet fell like lead with each step, the force caused him to stumble as he moved in a daze toward the warm glow of the tavern.

Her eyes were knowing when Alwin walked in alone. The young knight's heart shattered. He no longer knew of any way fit to tell her that Bard was dead. Not only had he died on a job he should never had gone on but his body was being hidden by a criminal alchemist whose illegal experiments prevented the widow from having any sort of proper closure.

"Where's Bard?" she asked in a shaky voice.

Alwin cast his eyes down to the dirty wooden floor. His gaze could not linger away from the floor no matter how hard he tried. He should look her in the eyes so she knows what he has to tell her is the truth.

"We went on a job... We weren't prepared. We should have done more research on the Darklings. Bard just wanted some extra money for the baby..."

"Alwin... where is my husband?"

The knight finally managed to raise his eyes. When the two pairs of eyes met they locked and everything that needed to be said was understood.

"Bard is dead, Prue," he said in conformation.

The widow sank into a nearby seat, her eyes weld with tears, and her jaw dropped open which she quickly covered with her hand. “How?”

“Poison. We did everything we could. We were working for an alchemist, and he tried various concoctions, nothing worked. But... there is one more thing.”

Anger fired behind the water that filled Prue’s eyes. “What more can there be? My husband is dead.”

Alwin was petrified by the widow’s gaze. “There was some illegality involved and the alchemist insisted on burying the body himself so no one asked questions.”

The widow stood swiftly. “You had no right to make that decision! He must have a service, a proper burial!”

The knight’s eyes were cast down once again. He knew she was right but there was nothing they could do about it. “The alchemist promised a good location and that he would send word about where Bard was laid to rest.”

“I suppose that is meant to comfort me,” Prue began to cry.

Fumbling, Alwin brought out both his own and Bard’s share of the reward. “This... this is for you, and the baby. It’s both shares... I promise to take care of the both of you.”

The tears in her eyes stopped. Anger returned but she hesitated in her actions. The widow became distracted by thought. Emotion and reason were at war inside her. She approached Alwin slowly, took the gold, and slapped him. The tears began to flow once more.

“Would you like me to stay or do you need to be alone? I can run the tavern in your stead,” Alwin said, ignoring his stinging cheek.

Prue sighed. “I despise the sight of you right now, but I don’t know what I want. I know this is not your fault and it pains you the same as me. I just... I cannot think.”

Alwin nodded in understanding. He did not know what to say or do. He wanted to comfort her, but he knew he could not. The knight needed to be comforted himself. They stood there for a long time in silence. It was not until a brawl broke out over a card game that the two came to their senses and got to work. The fight was dealt with and the instigators reluctantly left with the threat of the city guard being called to resolve the matter.

Prue threw herself into her work. Occasionally her eyes would well up but it faded quickly and she continued to serve guests and clean up messes. Alwin kept an eye on inventory and on patrons, making sure that the remainder of the evening ran smoothly. Luckily, there had been a short stint when he was given leave from the guard due to an injury and worked for Bard. He knew how the place operated. Being back at work in his friend’s establishment made Alwin feel the weight of the loss even more.

The knight scanned the room. Everything was calm for the time being. He watched as the widow went behind the bar to lock up payment she just received. His heart sank as he saw her knees go weak. She gazed at something behind the counter with wide eyes. Alwin ran to her side.

“What is it?” he said consolingly.

“It’s nothing... Just the first coin the tavern ever made. Bard always said it was lucky.”

“Yeah... I remember when he got that...” Alwin responded distantly.

“When the nights got rough as they often did with this lot,” Prue said gesturing to her patrons, “Or if money was tight, or food hard to come by...He would always come back here and fiddle with that old coin. I don’t even know if he did it on purpose or if it was just habit.”

The two stood there in silence. Prue clasped the coin tightly in her hands and held it close to her chest. Alwin scanned the tavern protectively. Quietly, the widow began to cry. The vigilant knight took notice and began closing duties for the bar.

“What are you doing?” Prue said weakly.

“Closing up just a bit early. It’s best we got you home.”

“You don’t get to decide that. This is my tavern now. It is my decision when we open and close.”

Alwin stopped his duties and looked at her, waiting for approval or disapproval. The widow nodded in agreement after a moment’s hesitation.

“Last call for tonight! Last call! We’re closing up early,” the knight called out to the room.

“Last call, m’ ass! We got n’other hour at least!” a particularly drunk man responded.

The man had a bad effect on the crowd around them, a few mumbled in agreement and everyone looked expectantly towards the bar.

“We’ll be open normal hours every other day! It’s just this once,” Prue said.

The drunken man stood, ready to say something when Alwin strode across the room and stopped him. The knight stood very close to the man, intimidating but not threatening, cordial yet firm. “Sir, I recommend this is an argument you don’t start. How does a whole bottle sound? On the house,” the knight said quietly to the man.

The drunk looked confused for a moment but even through his haze could see the seriousness in Alwin’s eyes. “Yeah... s’good.”

Alwin walked behind the bar and grabbed a cheap bottle leaving his own money in its place. The room was silent as the knight strode back across the room and pushed the bottle into the man’s hands. The room slowly cleared out until the two were finally left alone in their grief.

Chapter 48- Dalia

A New Kind of Beast

Side-by-side they walked under the shade of the canopy. Their newly formed unity brought much needed peace to their souls. Dalia scanned the tree lines while the warg listened carefully to every sound that enveloped them. Both had significant reasons to not trust the other, but they put that aside once an understanding had been established. It was as if this was how it had always been.

Overhead an eagle glided swiftly across the sky. The bird's sudden presence got the attention of both travelers on the ground below. Through a hole in the thick forest canopy they watched with curiosity as a large vulture swiped its great talons at the eagle. Dalia gasped as she watched the possibly injured eagle plummet to the forest below. Unable to maneuver as deftly as the smaller bird of prey, the vulture followed suit, but soon returned to the sky disappointed.

“This is a very strange forest,” Dalia said.

The warg nuzzled against her hand as if to agree. The two set off again. Having no notion of which way they needed to go, they wordlessly decided to walk toward where the eagle had fallen. The forest was strangely still. The warg whimpered lightly in warning to its new-found friend.

“I know, boy,” Dalia muttered.

Commotion echoed through the silence of the forest. The sound of animals fighting drew the attention of the two wanderers. They followed the noise until they

spotted a group of wolves fighting amongst themselves. Dalia crouched cautiously behind a cluster of bushes, peering through the jutting branches. Three particularly vicious looking wolves all surrounded a wounded one who was valiantly attempting to hold them off. Before she knew what she was doing, the seer stepped out of cover with her warg close behind. The wolves turned toward the newcomer.

“Come now, hardly a fair fight, three on one. Shame.”

Reluctantly, the three wolves backed away. They kept their eyes on their three adversaries as they disappeared into the thick of the woods. Dalia smiled at the injured wolf who was now licking his wounds.

“Now then, I am Dalia and this here is... you know what? I haven't given him a name yet-“

The seer cut off mid talk as the wolf's form began to shift into that of a human. He was a young man, tall and broad with a tan complexion and confident eyes. He returned the smile Dalia gave him, partially out of gratitude and partially amusement.

“Oh... Alright then. Who might you be?” Dalia said.

“I am Siv.”

“Druid?”

Siv nodded. “I must go. My attack must be reported.”

“Wait. I'm lost in these woods. Can you point me in the direction of the King?”

“You mean the king of Aarden Hall?” the druid said, puzzled.

“Yes, I suppose. I need to find him.”

“There is no king at this time.”

“What do you mean?”

“They are undergoing the selection process for a new leader. Now, I must go.”

Siv began to walk away.

“I need more information. Can I come with you? Just to gather my thoughts and learn what your tribe knows that may help me on my journey,” Dalia said, grabbing the druid’s arm.

“That is not my decision.”

“Whose is it then?”

“It is mine,” a voice said from nearby.

A slender young man emerged from the nearby trees. Neither Dalia nor her warg had heard him approach. The seer was taken aback, but hesitated for only a moment before imploring the newcomer.

“Please, I awoke in these woods without my memory. I know only that I am searching for a leader that I met once before.”

The newcomer observed Dalia and her companion silently for some time. No one moved or spoke. “You may come with us. Our people may be able to help you recover what you have lost.”

“Thank you,” Dalia said, lightly bowing her head in appreciation.

Chapter 49- Lucius

Reunion

Jaron's brother was safe. They dropped him off with a family friend who was informed of the danger posed. They were assured for the child's safety. The two men now walked down the empty streets, taking in the cool night air.

"I can never thank you enough, my friend," Jaron said.

Lucius smiled, but did not respond. The hunter merely put his hand on Jaron's shoulder. Lucius' smile faded as he suddenly remembered his friends that he had not seen in quiet some time. He became so caught up in the moment, vying for the crown and fighting against conspiracy had consumed his thoughts. Now that he was out on familiar streets, Lucius began to feel the pain the distance from those he loved was causing.

"I'll tell you what, you can start thanking me by buying me a drink," Lucius said.

Jaron smiled. "Deal. I'm afraid I don't know this part of town, however. Point the way."

The two walked in uncertain silence as they came down from the high of the successful rescue. They both began to wonder if there would be repercussions for their actions. Soon their uneasy journey came to an end and they came to, out of their own thoughts. They shifted back into the masquerade of victory. As the two were about to stride into the tavern together a drunk burst out of the door, bottle clinched in his rough hands.

“D’nt go in thr. Bitch is kick’n evr’n out early,” he muttered as he pushed past a confused Jaron and Lucius.

The young hunter’s mind was a flurry of thoughts. Bard never closed the tavern early. Had something happened? Why was Prue the one kicking people out? Was she giving birth? As his mind raced, Lucius burst into the room, met by the shocked faces of Alwin and Prue.

“Lucius? You’re here... Why? How?” Alwin said.

“Just out for a little stroll. Your friend hasn’t won just yet,” Jaron responded.

Lucius stood still, examining the pain he read on the familiar faces. Jaron soon noticed the pain too.

“What happened?” Lucius asked.

Prue began to cry. Alwin stopped trying to conceal his hurt. Jaron shifted uncomfortably.

“I’ll just... wait outside,” Jaron said.

Lucius nodded, but his friend had not waited for a response and was already walking towards the exit. Alwin motioned for Lucius to take a seat at a nearby table. Prue walked in the opposite direction, busying herself with cleaning the bar that already looked spotless.

“You remember the alchemist that wanted the wraith essence?” Alwin asked.

Lucius nodded.

“Well he came back. He knew you were gone so he asked me to do another job for him.”

Lucius started to say something, but Alwin held up his hand and cut him short.

“I didn’t trust him. He was very insistent. He told me he was brewing a concoction for immortality.”

“Alwin... What happened? What did he have you get? And where is Bard?”

The young knight sighed. “Bard decided to come along for some extra gold to help support the new baby. ‘One last job’ he said... We were hunting darklings, Lucius.”

All at once, the hunter understood what had happened. Yet, he still needed to hear it. He needed confirmation of what his mind simply would not allow him to believe.

“Was he bit?” he mumbled, battling to force the words past a lump in his throat.

Alwin nodded. “I wish that were the worst of it.”

Lucius listened intently. A darkling bite was certain death. He wondered what could possibly be worse.

“I took the b-... I took him to the alchemist. I told him he couldn’t have the poison in Bard’s blood without saving his life...He succeeded, at least at first. Bard was mad, nothing could calm his screams. The alchemist warned me that the wrong mixture could kill him, but I insisted that we try and calm him down. I just wanted my friend back...”

All at once, the full scope of the situation sunk in. Lucius fought back tears. “The alchemist’s experiments are far from legal...He would not allow the death to be reported. What did he do with the body, Alwin?”

“He insisted on disposing of it himself.” A tear rolled down the knight’s face. “He was just going to cast him down the river, but I made him promise to give him a proper burial. He I supposed to send me the location of the grave in the next few days.”

“Where is the alchemist now?” Lucius said in restrained rage.

“I don’t know... He made it sound like he was leaving town.”

“What’s to stop him from discarding my husband like a piece of trash and vanishing?” Prue cut into the conversation.

“I had no choice but to take him at his word.”

“You trusted the word of a power hungry criminal?” the widow blurted.

“Like I said, I had no choice,” Alwin said, casting his eyes at the ground.

Lucius sighed. “We’ll find a way to track the alchemist down if he does not make contact soon.”

“I don’t mean to interrupt what is clearly a private matter...” Jaron said, meekly pushing the door open and coming into the room. “I have the resources to track this man down. I can guarantee results.”

The room was silent for some time. No one looked at each other for longer than a passing glance. Lucius stood and cleared his throat.

“I presume these resources are how you found your brother?”

Jaron nodded. “Not without a price, but money has never been a problem for me.”

“Contact them. Find my husband’s grave,” Prue said with newly found vigor.

Jaron nodded. “We gotta get back to Aarden Hall. I promise we will find the alchemist.”

Without another word, Jaron and Lucius walked out of the tavern. The young hunter felt numb. He did not know how he could go back to vying for the crown with the knowledge that Bard was dead and his grave location was unknown. Jaron seemed to know what he was thinking.

“I know it will be hard to jump back into things like none of this ever happened... But believe it or not, the Kingdom needs a man like you running things.”

“Maybe they will postpone events for just a few days, at least until we find Bard...”

Jaron nodded solemnly, “You know they won’t. The Shadow Council has hardly allowed your progress as is. We can’t give them another reason to disqualify you.”

“I can’t just do nothing...”

“You can and you will... If it brings you any comfort, I planned on staying behind anyways.”

Lucius turned to his friend in shock. “What are you talking about?”

“I knew you wouldn’t be for it so I neglected to mention it earlier, but I am officially stepping out of the race to be with my brother and now, to find this alchemist of yours.”

“Fine...” Lucius sighed, pulling the bug shaped lumi-stone out of his pocket. “Give this to Alwin, tell him I entrusted it to you,” Lucius said handing Jaron the stone. “Oh, and one more thing, tell him I will be sending him a letter soon that explains everything that has occurred in Aarden Hall.”

Lucius wanted to argue, but he didn’t see any other solution to their problems. Without speaking the two understood what must be done. Jaron might be seen as the only one that escaped Aarden Hall to save his brother, taking attention away from Lucius. In addition, Jaron’s resources on the street could not only retrieve Bard’s body but also begin to build a case against the Shadow Council. They were going to war.

Chapter 50- Aeacus

Worshippers of the Demon

Preparations were already underway for the wedding of the two Undying leaders, yet, no formal announcement was made. They decided to ease their people into the idea and increase their public interaction before proclaiming their union. They knew that the Undying would see the purpose of their actions and know it was not for love, but Aeacus hoped the symbolic gesture would be enough to satiate the unrest that divided his people. There were those with immovable convictions. The Worshippers of the Demon, though weakened, were unfaltering in their loyalty to the provider of what they believed to be a gift.

Fenrik's condition was stable, but he had not fully gained consciousness. The leader's bodyguard drifted in and out of sleep, partially due to his body needing the rest to recover and partially due to the alchemic concoctions brewed to dull the pain of his wounds. Aeacus knew they were progressing, yet he was plagued by doubt. He was often found pacing in his quarters. He anticipated another attack by the Worshippers at any moment. Concern locked his brow into a furrow and nothing those close to him said would alleviate his unrest.

Carelessly, as if in a trance, the Undying leader strode out of the security of his quarters and into the streets. Wordlessly, his guard followed their leader. Though lost in thought, Aeacus seemed to walk with purpose. He had a destination in mind. Many observed their leader's demeanor but none disturbed him, they stepped aside and merely observed. Eventually, he came to a graveyard. A solemn peace filled him as he walked

amongst the tombstones. When he arrived to a pair of headstones, the leader sat down on the damp ground and reached out toward the granite slabs.

Lady Grey was informed of her future husband's unplanned excursion by one of her followers. Immediately, she made the order to secure the streets. Awaiting the all clear, the leader tidied herself in the mirror. Shortly after, her escort arrived and they set off to find Aeacus. When they found him, he had not moved for some time.

"Who were they?" Lady Grey said, motioning for her escort to give the two leaders space.

Aeacus broke out of his trance but did not move. "My wife and son... They died in the attacks that made our people what they are today."

"I'm sorry... I didn't know."

"It's okay, it was long ago. Still, I do like to come here to think from time to time. Their presence comforts me."

"I had no family of my own when the rot-hides came. I will not pretend to know your grief."

"I wonder, at times, if I would be a different man if they had remained with me. What would my late wife say to the times we now find ourselves? I was not a leader before the plague. Would she be proud? Or have I failed to keep our people together..."

Lady Grey sat down next to Aeacus. "This division in our people is not your doing. It is no fault of any Undying. It is simply a factor of our ailment that we have long ignored. The demon changed our bodies, yes, but he also plagues our minds."

“The demon freed our minds to pursue greater things. Without the fear of death, we were to become greater! But we have squandered his gift! For too long we have denied him! For too long we have dwelled in self-pity!” a voice came from behind them.

The two leaders stood and turned calmly to face their opponent. He was a frail man, with passion in his eyes and a scowl on his face. Aeacus’s guard restrained the Worshipper.

“We are cursed, my fellow Undying. Make no mistake there. The demon did not have kindness in his heart when he cast this plague upon us. His heart has never known kindness, nor ever will it,” Aeacus said.

The guard searched the man for weapons. “He’s unarmed,” the guard reported. “What should we do with him, sir?”

“He has done nothing wrong. My people are allowed to speak their minds.”

The guards lessened their grip.

“Wait,” Lady Grey commanded.

The guards tightened their grips. The Worshipper turned his attention to Lady Grey, contempt in his eyes.

“He is obviously radical enough to track down where we are just to shout at us, perhaps he should be detained. At least for a short period, for a review process.”

The Worshipper scoffed, but before he could protest, Aeacus spoke up. "I won't hear of it. He could have just as easily been walking by. And even if he did track us down, voicing your opinion should be a right shared by all, no matter their faction."

Lady Grey turned to her soon to be husband and opened her mouth to speak when they were interrupted by a guard carrying news. "Savio has been killed, sire!"

Chapter 51- Raijin

The Stranger

The entire village stopped the rebuilding of their homes to stare at the stranger and her warg. Raijin and Siv walked briskly through the town, the newcomers closely behind. Raijin did nothing to alleviate the other druids' concerns—he simply walked towards his family home. Borghildr met them halfway, blocking their entrance to the house.

“Son, who is this you brought into our village at such a dire time?”

“She saved Siv’s life, and communes with a warg. I believe she may be able to assist us.”

The druid leader examined Dalia closely—it was not quite threatening but certainly intimidating. Dalia sensed good in him. Her fear melted away. She trusted this man.

“I will do what I can to help your people, but it is not without condition,” the seer said.

“What is it you would ask?”

“I awoke in these woods, not too long ago with no memory of who I was or how I got here. Your son suggested you may be able to help me recover what I have lost.”

Borghildr nodded and gestured for Dalia to come inside. Siv took his leave silently. Raijin followed close behind the seer as they stepped into the small home. The room was lit by a fire pit, a warm glow danced across the walls.

“Father, we must discuss what we found at the Wild Ones’ camp,” the young druid said.

They all sat down together at a low sitting table. The druid leader gestured for his son to proceed. The seer waited quietly in apprehension.

“The Exiles worship a dark totem. It may very well be the source of their madness. Their berserker state seems fueled by the presence of this dark relic. I saw them force their injured to recover or be killed by their fellow Exiles.”

Borghildr soaked in the information his son presented. He nodded silently, pondering the possibilities the discovery could mean. “The destruction of this totem could mean the end of our civil war.”

Raijin’s heart leapt in his chest. “You can’t mean to accept them back into the tribe once the conflict ends?”

“I do. They are our brothers and sisters. They may be lost now, but we cannot give up on them.”

“Father, your judgement is clouded by your love for your lost sister.”

“And yours is clouded by your hate for a dehumanized enemy you simply do not understand.”

Dalia sat quietly, watching this scene unfold. She did not take a side, she knew too little of the conflict to decide. “If I may interrupt... This is clearly a heated subject. I am sure the difference is the fine line between knowing those maddened by the totem before their current state and knowing them only as they are now. I will not pretend to

know anything on the subject, but as an outsider, my limited experience of the Wild Ones left me with only a view of savagery. That being said, strategically, it might be easier to take out a single target rather than attempt to kill every one of their numbers. As for accepting them back... that seems like a matter to be taken up after it even becomes an option, and I hardly think two of the tribe alone will be able to speak for everyone.”

Raijin shot the seer a fierce look, but his father smiled. The young druid’s hard gaze slowly softened. There was silence in the room as they all collected their thoughts and chose their next words carefully.

“It is true that our first priority should be to destroy the dark idol. Given how well protected it will undoubtedly be, it would be wise to focus on this task alone.”

“It is not normally our way to ask everyone’s opinion. Our people trust their leader’s decisions,” Raijin blurted.

The druid leader nodded knowingly. “Yes, but it has been a long time since a decision such as this has come along. Though she is unfamiliar with our ways, I believe she is right.”

Again silence filled the room. All eyes were on the fire, the flames dancing in their eyes. Raijin stood. “I am going to find mother. She should be here for this discussion.”

The cool air was a comfort to the young druid. He knew that the stranger was right, but could not help succumbing to the fear of change. In his haste, Raijin ignored his father’s parting words. He realized he did not know his mother’s location, but his pride

prevented him from going back in to ask his father. He set of slow, trying to present an air of confidence as he strode through town. He wanted his people to feel that whatever their leaders discussed, it was important and that they had a plan to keep them safe from another Wild Ones attack.

“Who was that woman?” asked a bold villager.

Other druids cautiously got closer to hear Raijin’s response. He hesitated for a moment, but then decided to be forthcoming with at least who the stranger was and hoped the conversation would not progress to the scouting excursion.

“The stranger helped us with some Wild Ones in the woods. She has lost her memory and asked for our assistance.”

“There was another fight with the Wild Ones? What happened? Where are the missing two of your party?” a voice sounded from the crowd.

Raijin’s heart pounded. He dared not tell his people the dangers that they faced until they a plan formulated. The young druid saw in the faces of the crowd that his mask of confidence failed him.

“All your questions will be answered in due time. As for now, I would ask you to not crowd my soon. He has clearly been through a lot the past few days,” the druid matriarch said plainly, emerging from the crowd. The druids dispersed without another word. Kajah strode forward and embraced her son. “Come, and tell me about this stranger I have heard about.”

Chapter 52 –Dalia

Flickering Light

“You must forgive my son’s... rash demeanor. He means well, but has yet to conquer his fears of becoming leader. The prospect of the responsibility weighs heavy on him,”

Borghildr said to the seer.

“I understand. He is young. It must be very difficult for him.”

The druid leader smiled. “You appear almost as young, but it is clear that you are not.”

Dalia looked at him inquisitively. “The Matriarch of the Woods sensed something similar. As I told her, I have no knowledge of my past to confirm your suspicions.”

Borghildr nodded. “I recognized the clothing. We are among a privileged few that have beheld the glory of the Matriarch. Though it has been many years, I vividly remember her followers’ craftsmanship.”

“I feel as if the Matriarch knew more than she let on.”

“No doubt she did. Clearly, she intended you to discover your identity on your own. I also have a theory I choose to withhold until the time is right.”

“Why?”

“Because, if you are who I believe you to be, it is part of the process. If you are who I think you are, this cycle has gone on many times before and I have no right to interfere.”

Dalia stood. “I was told you could help.”

Borghildr calm demeanor did not falter. “I will help in any way I can without directly leading you to the answer you must find for yourself. Understand that if you are this person, you are not held by your past to repeat what you have done. This... life grants you opportunity to be the person you believe yourself to be right now, before the knowledge of your past clouds the matter.”

The way he chose his words so carefully frightened the seer. Who did he believe her to be that could be so different from who she felt she was now? Why had the Matriarch feared her, yet aided her on her path? Dalia was lost in thought. Sweat permeated her entire body. Her head began to pound. Her heart screamed with dread. What was the truth? Who was she? Then the world went black.

She awoke in a twisted and lonely swamp. The darkness of the night air was as thick as the muck that smothered the ground. Her heart did not beating. No breathe escaped her lungs. She was not there, not really. The seer realized her present reality to be a vision and with renewed confidence began to stride forward towards the unknown. Time moved differently in the vision and Dalia could not keep track of how long she moved forward through the unknown. The sounds of wildlife filled her ears. All around her rang the sounds of the swamp, but beneath them was a faint whisper that sent a chill through the seer.

“You did this,” the voice whispered.

Dalia glanced around cautiously for the source of the voice. She realized the thorny brambles surrounding her multiplied as she moved forward. The barbs grew closer

and closer as she sludged forward. Glancing backwards, it became clear that the swamp had a life of its own—there was nothing but a twisted wall of jagged vines.

“For so long you have moved forward through the dark, leaving only destruction in your path. What makes you think this time will be different?”

“I choose who I am in this life. I search only for the past so I may learn from it,” Dalia responded in an unwavering voice.

All the sounds of the swamped ceased. A faint light appeared in the distance. The thicket became so narrow that the seer had no choice but to push through. The barbs burned as if coated in toxin. A small house formed in the distance. Slowly, Dalia made her way toward the shelter. The muck beneath became thicker, producing the feeling that hands were attempting to pull her under. Finally, the house came into full view, it was familiar to her. The rough wooden door opened with a creak. The light of a fierce fire momentarily blinded her as her eyes adjusted from the darkness of the swamp.

As soon as Dalia stepped into the shack, the world she had inhabited outside turned to complete blackness. She knew there was nothing out there for her anymore. Turning her attention to the room before her, the seer saw a set of old chairs sitting in front of the crackling fire. There was a multitude of containers inhabiting strange contents, but everything but the chairs seemed somehow out of focus. Dalia could not differentiate between anything in the rest of the room. She only gathered a vague notion of her surroundings. Suddenly, she noticed a hooded figure sitting in one of the chairs.

“You weren’t there before,” Dalia said, taking a seat in the adjacent chair.

“Neither of us is truly here.”

Dalia craned her head in an attempted to see under the hood. “Who are you?”

Gnarled and shaking hands emerged from the blanketing of the robe they were draped in. The hands grasped the dark hood and slowly slid it off, revealing the eyeless and grey face of an ancient woman. Her appearance did not shock Dalia and that troubled her. The ancient grinned faintly.

“You wonder why you are not surprised. The truth that is already known cannot elicit anything but acceptance.”

“But what is the truth? I feel a deep sense of understanding without any method of putting it to words.”

The ancient nodded. “All in time. Find the king. He can lead you to this place in the physical world. There you will find your answers. Be wary, however, a dark magic twisted the swamp for many years and now that the presence is gone, nature is fighting back. It will not be an inviting environment.”

Breath returned to the seer. Blackness overtook her swiftly. At a matched speed, light returned to Dalia’s world and she realized her eyes gazed into the flames of the druid’s home. Borghildr examined her quietly. It took several moments for it to set in this was reality and she should speak. Words did not find her. The seer opened her mouth to speak, but the druid leader held his hand up to silence her.

“Process what you have seen and heard. I do not possess the impatience of youth and will wait until you are ready.”

They sat for so long that Borghildr's duties as chieftain interfered. He silently excused himself at the request of his wife. The seer sat in a daze for some time. Her warg loyally lay at her side, resting his head in her lap. She did not stir, not even to place a hand on her companion to show affection. Nature eventually awoke her from her stupor. The pang of hunger compelled Dalia to become aware of her surroundings. Standing, she left the hut and was met with the cool, reviving air of the night.

Chapter 53- Alwin

Pieces

Several days had passed since they reunited with Lucius. His momentary presence had sparked Alwin's will back to life, but now that his friend resided back in Aarden Hall the young knight felt drained again. Jaron, practically a stranger, stayed behind in Lucius's stead. He had not been seen for a day, but promised to return with news of the Gnarled Man's location. Prue moved sluggish but steadily as she went through the paces and completed what was needed of her each day at the tavern. Their interruption of regular business hours did not seem to detour any customers. No one seemed to notice any sort of change, they simply came and went. They all just wanted their drink after a long day's work.

“You know, you don't have to always stay here and keep an eye on me. You can go back to work for the guard,” the widow said one night.

“My captain owed me a favor. I have covered so many shifts. He couldn't refuse a few days paid leave.”

“Yeah... but I don't like it. Feeling like I am always being watched like a child, like I can't take care of myself.”

“I know you can care for yourself. I just... want to be here if you need anything. I think it's what Bard would have wanted...”

Prue scoffed. “That’s the problem with the dead. You can’t very well know what they want. But I know what I want. I don’t want to feel haunted by my husband’s ghost, and that’s all I ever see with you hovering around me.”

Jaron strode into the tavern before Alwin could respond. Their newly acquired ally looked like he had not slept in days. He was in the same clothes they had last seen him in. As he neared, his smell confirmed to them that he had not rested nor bathed since setting off in search of the allusive Alchemist.

“Well...” Jaron said, sighing and falling into a nearby seat. “I have yet to find him. Though I have picked up stray traces of his handy-work here and there, he has almost all-together vanished.” Upon seeing the disappointment on their faces, Jaron continued. “But I will not give up the search. I am preoccupied with my other task as well, but I do not show favor among them. Each holds its own importance of course.”

“You should rest. I do not think Lucius intended you to wear yourself to the brink of death for tasks you hold no stake in.”

“Yes... I will rest.” Jaron stood, wobbling a bit as he did. “But you are wrong... I do hold stake in these conflicts, both of them. Lucius is to be king and for him to meet his potential as a ruler, all his foes must be dealt with. I believe in him, so I believe in any cause he does.”

Jaron left just as quickly as he had entered. Silence fell between the two old friends. They knew each other even before Prue and Bard met. Their families were well acquainted and the two had always got along from a very young age. For the first time in

a long time, Alwin did not know what to say to his friend. She seemed to have dropped the subject of his leaving and went back to going through the motions of her job.

Alwin wondered if they would ever be able to pick up the pieces. He wondered if their friendship could withstand their mutual loss. The knight considered leaving on several occasions, the unwanted glances he received from Prue were enough to drive him away, yet something made him stay. He could not simply abandon his widowed friend because her grief manifested as anger towards him. He could hardly blame her anyways. It was his fault. It ate him up inside that he brought such a dangerous job to Bard.

“You know what has always astounded me about you?” Prue said, breaking the knight out of his thoughts. There was a renewed kindness in her eyes. “Your restraint. I see the way you look at drink. It isn’t always... but occasionally you get that thirst your father had. But I’ve never seen you give into to it. Even now, smothered in grief and surrounded by booze, you don’t give in.”

“You make it sound difficult, but the fact of the matter is that stubbornness comes naturally. I so long to not follow in his footsteps, to be the man he could have been that I resist without a thought. There is no struggle in it for me, only spite.”

Prue smiled for the first time since Alwin told her of Bard’s death, it faded quickly but it was enough to reenergize the young knight. His purpose for remaining was clear again. He would endure what he had to for the greater good. Even if it could be said that he was not wholly responsible for Bard’s death, he had played his part and he would

atone. He swore to ensure the safety and happiness of his fallen friend's widow and his unborn child. No matter what happened, he would be there for them.

Chapter 54- Lucius

Artificer

Getting back into Aarden Hall the night they rescued Jaron's brother proved surprisingly simple. Lucius counted himself lucky, he was so absorbed in thought at the time that it was uncertain whether or not he could have navigated a well-guarded castle. Only Grace had inquired as to what happened, and she immediately sensed that Lucius was not ready to discuss it. Uneasiness over-took the young hunter as he awaited some kind of response from the council. Even if they never acknowledged they knew about the break out, they would certainly have to address Jaron's absence to the public. An unnatural stillness inhabited the corridors of Aarden Hall for several days.

“What do you think is going on? We haven't had any news in days,” Conner said.

“Maybe the trials just take a bit longer now that we are in the final stretch,” Grace shrugged.

“I bet it has something to do with Jaron leaving,” Auriel replied.

“He didn't just up and leave...” Lucius found himself saying before he had considered whether or not he was ready to share what happened. “He volunteered to stay behind.” He told them all what happened. They listened intently, no one spoke until he was finished.

“But what is the Shadow Council going to do about all that?” Connor said.

“What can they do? Their hands are tied. Outing Jaron risks shedding light onto some of their shadier dealings,” Auriel said.

“I fear they won’t let it all go unpunished,” Grace said.

They bounced ideas back in forth about how the Shadow Council might respond to the late night rescue. Lucius had withheld the part of the night about discovering Bard’s death. Only Grace seemed to notice when he glossed over the latter half of the night, but she remained silent. Hours passed before their conversation ended and they separated into different parts of their housing. Lucius knowingly found a secluded area and waited for Grace to follow.

“You know the hardest thing I had to learn growing up as an Artificer was?” she said slowly rounding the corner. Lucius indicated that he didn’t and she continued, “Being an Artificer also means being an empath, I can always tell when someone is lying, or withholding the entire truth.” She attempted to catch his gaze. “I had to learn when the right moments were to share this knowledge and when it was right to let the illusion continue.”

“Must have been hard,” Lucius said, still avoiding eye contact.

“Not as hard as what you are going through now, I gather. What happened?”

He did not want to say it aloud. Since Alwin recounted what happened to Bard, Lucius had done his best to avoid dwelling on it for too long. The thoughts crept back into his mind over and over, no matter how hard he fought it. Like a poison, the reality of what happened seared through his body, causing pain all over, and there was nothing he could do to stop it.

“We went to celebrate our successful rescue mission. Some friends of mine own a bar so we stopped by...And when we got there... I told you I hunt beasts for a living right?” Lucius found himself sidetracking, he justified it with the fact that it was partially his occupation that led up to the job Alwin and Bard went on. Grace, allowed him to get off subject with only a weak smile of acceptance. “Well, before my name was drawn and this whole mess began, I did a job for an Alchemist...”

He recounted everything about the job and the Gnarled Man until he finally came back to what Alwin had told him the other night. Grace quietly nodded and listened. Tears welled in her eyes when he finally said what he had tried so hard to avoid, “He’s dead.”

“I am so sorry, Lucius,” she said, hugging him.

Her affection surprised him at first, but he accepted her kind gesture and embraced her back. The pain in his chest set in hard. He felt it would never leave him. He knew he had to move on, he had many other concerns, but he did not see how he was going to.

“There is nothing I can say to make this pain stop. It does not work that way, I wish with all my heart that it did. Just know that I feel it too and will stay up with you all night if I need to. I doubt you can sleep.”

“Thank you, Grace... I...” Lucius was at a loss for words. He wanted to tell her how impressed he was that she used such powerful abilities for good and not for self-gain. He wanted to tell her a lot of things, but instead remained quiet.

“Why don’t you tell me about him?” she said, ushering for them to take a seat nearby.

Lucius smiled, but there was pain behind it. “He was as stubborn as they come. In truth, we didn’t always get along, but we were there when it mattered... Well, except this time when I couldn’t be there...” he cut off.

Grace placed a reassuring hand on his shoulder. He began to say more, to continue remembering his friend with her, Kamon suddenly burst through the door, however. The scribe looked very worried, his brow was fixed in a harsh furrow and his hands constantly fidgeted.

“Whatever you did has Birch and his men in a frenzy. They have been searching for ways to disqualify you. Apparently leaving the grounds is permitted it is just advised against, so you in the clear there.”

“Is that all they have on us? Leaving the grounds?”

Kamon gave Lucius an unsure look. “I believe so. They clearly know more, but are electing to ignore it.”

“Any idea how they are going to explain Jaron’s absence to the public?” Lucius said, standing, his usual confidence had returned.

“No... Gerreon wants to meet with you as soon as possible. However, under the circumstances that is proving to be difficult.”

“Someone is going to have to make a move at some point. We can’t sit in this stalemate forever.”

Grace stood, joining the conversation. “Might another attempt be made on Lucius’s life? There is no simple answer here and taking him out of the picture seems like the simplest solution.”

“Fortunately, there are no signs to indicate they are taking that path. Of course, even Gerreon has no idea where their hired assassin is from.”

“They may not have to make any arrangements,” Lucius suddenly realized. “If they already have a previously signed contract with the man who already tried to kill me once.”

Kamon nodded. “The counselor has lived in fear of that since the attempt. He trusts his men, but they have come up with no results. The assailant simply vanished.”

“Unless he never left...”

It all seemed clear to Lucius now. A surge of intertwining joy and anger swelled within him. “Is there any suspected Shadow Council members with new scribes?”

Chapter 55- Aeacus

Undying Blood

A clean, precise incision traced along the outside of the neck. Blood soaked the area. Sacio must have bled out in a matter of seconds. The two remaining leaders of the Undying factions stood over the body.

“Create a secure perimeter around the area until we can figure out what to do with the body,” Aeacus said to a guard captain.

The sentinel nodded and signaled his men. Lady Grey stooped over to examine the body closer. Her eyes scanned the area diligently. After a short while she sighed and stood.

“Not a trace. Not as far as I can see. Of course we will want as many trusted eyes in the area before we can say for sure. Whoever did this was good. I doubt having more eyes on the ground will yield different results.”

“Still... Our people will expect it. Until we get indisputable proof otherwise, we are likely to be suspected to have a hand in Sacio’s death.”

Lady Grey turned and looked at her future husband searchingly. He returned her examination. For a moment they both hesitated to ask what was on their mind.

“You didn’t have a hand in Sacio’s death, did you?” the Lady asked first.

“Of course not. I will assume you did not either. If you did and you had not told me already, I do not see why you would now.”

Braun strode towards them quickly. Aeacus was surprised to see his Head of the Guard smiling. He wondered if they already apprehended a suspect.

“Sir, Fenrik is awake.”

In the chaos of Sacio’s abrupt death, Aeacus had forgotten his injured friend. I mixture of guilt and joy filled him. How could he forget the man who had risked his life for him so many times?

“I will go to him as soon as possible. I must deal with the matter at hand first...”
the leader said weakly.

“Go, Braun and I have this covered. Isn’t that right Braun?”

“Yes, my Lady.”

Aeacus said nothing more. He made quickly for the quarters Fenrik rested in. His heart stopped when the realization that he was alone set in. Surely, Braun would have sent some guards after him. Should he stop and wait? Or would that only make him more vulnerable to attack? Could whoever assassinated Sacio be looking to take out the other leaders as well? Aeacus could not believe how foolish he had been to so blindly trudge forward without thought. Two guards came to his side, but his anxiety did not dissipate. What helpful would a couple of guards be against an organized attack like the one on Sacio appeared to be. Then again, he thought, maybe the murder was perpetrated by one of his own supporters. He saw his destination ahead. He longed to get out of the open.

Aeacus’s heart beat slowed as he entered the building. The guards stopped at either side of the door, blocking the entrance. The smell of chemicals met the leader’s

nostrils as he neared Fenrik's room. Being an alchemist himself, many of the scents were familiar, but the combination itself was foreign to him. Fear struck him again as he wondered if someone tampered with Fenrik's concoction to harm its recipient, or even worse to catalyze into an airborne weapon and choke the life from Aeacus. As he opened the door, the Undying leader once again felt foolish. Fenrik lay bandaged in a bed. Next to him was a standard mixture used for medicinal purposes. There was nothing imposing about the environment. Aeacus chuckled at his own paranoia. Fenrik looked up.

“Hello, my friend. How are you feeling?”

The mute warrior gestured that he felt okay.

“No doubt, you should not feel much of anything with that combination of chemicals they are giving you.”

Fenrik watched as Aeacus slowly crossed the room to sit down at his bedside. His guilt showed, he was sure of that, but he was also sure that his friend would not know its source. It would most likely be linked with the injury itself, which he did indeed feel guilty for but that guilt was overshadowed by the gnawing pain that he had forgotten his self-sacrificing guard even for a moment. The mute placed an unsteady hand on Aeacus in comfort. The Undying leader smiled weakly. He tried to look at his friend, but could not.

“Forgive me. I look away not from the sight of you, but from guilt.”

Fenrik looked at him inquisitively, attempting to catch Aeacus's gaze.

“A lot has happened since your injury. We attempted a treaty... over your blood actually. But... that seems to have failed. Someone has assassinated Sacio. I cannot be sure it was not Lady Grey. I wish I could trust her. She is to be my future bride after all... We agreed on a political marriage to unite our two factions.”

The mute man listened, but not with his usual focus. He fought the effects of his medication. It pained Aeacus to see his friend this way. He wondered how severe the injuries were underneath the bandages, he hoped that they appeared worse at the time they were inflicted because of all the blood.

“The truth is... Fenrik, I feel guilty. Not only for your injuries, but also because I forgot you in all the turmoil. I should have been here by your side until you awoke.”

Fenrik shook his head in disagreement, continuing the motion longer than necessary as if trying to express to Aeacus just how wrong he was. The mute warrior stopped his motion, his eyes widened and he pointed towards the door. A tall, broad, and imposing Undying man stood in the door way watching them and grinning maliciously.

Chapter 56- Raijin

Fear

Raijin felt like a child again. Alone with his mother, they sat on the edge of a cliff listening to the sounds of the night. The young druid felt more relaxed than he had in a long time. He did not feel like anything needed proven or that he needed to hold himself a certain way. Raijin took a sigh of relief.

“You have taken on a lot lately, my son.”

“I am only doing what is expected of me.”

“It is, but not this fast. Everything has happened all at once. In normal times...”

“These are not normal times, mother. I must adapt.”

“You are still young. You cannot go from child to man in a day.”

“I know... but I also cannot hesitate to take the actions necessary for the good of our people, even if it means personal sacrifice.”

The silence returned and Raijin soaked it in. He wanted to stay out in the darkness and silence forever. No fear of what to do next or what not to do.

“Who is the stranger you brought home with you?” Kajah broke the silence.

“I do not know. She has no memory. But she saved Siv from the Wild Ones and somehow tamed a wild warg.”

Kajah nodded in acknowledgement. “If she did these things, then why did you get angry?”

“She came in and acted like she had a place with our people and that she knew enough to give input about matters she knows nothing of.”

“If she has no memory, then she does not know who she is or what her place is. Were her comments wrong?”

“No, they were well reasoned and fair, but they were not our usual ways.”

Kajah nodded. “These are not usual times, my son. We may not be able to follow our usual methods so strictly.”

“If we stray from tradition, what stops us from becoming like the Wild Ones?”

“You are mistaken if you think it is simply the adherence to tradition that makes us different from the Exiles. What did you see when you followed their injured?”

“Chaos, hatred... A ravenous people that worship nothing but their own ferocity and the Dark Totem that grants it to them.”

“You fear you will become like them,” Kajah stated not as a question, but as fact.

Raijin was taken by surprise, but nodded in agreement.

“All druids have wildness in them. We are bound to spirits in the forest, it is only natural to be affected by them, but that does not mean we sit on the edge of sanity. The Wild Ones did not merely embrace their wildness, they were consumed by it. They are lost in madness and resemble rabid beasts more than the natural spirits they are linked to.”

Raijin wanted to believe his mother. What she said made sense, but he could not see how so many could become so lost. There was nothing to insight such a deviation except for the mysterious Dark Totem.

“Mother, what do you think the Dark Totem the Exiles worship could be?”

“I do not know. You are one of a few of our number that has seen this structure. What do you think it is?”

“I think it must be the source of their madness... it has to be. How else could they become so lost... Do you still consider them our people?”

“Your father does. I would like to believe as he does.”

“But you don’t?”

“No. I saw no way of redeeming them before the discovery of the Dark Totem. Even with its destruction... I do not know if I can forgive them.”

“If they truly are like us, I doubt they will forgive themselves after the totems destroyed.”

Footsteps sounded from behind them. A druid ran from the village, the moonlight revealed it to be Siv’s mother. The two looked inquisitively at the newcomer. Her face revealed sheer panic.

“Siv has gone mad. He tore up his bedding and changed into is wolf. We managed to keep him locked in the house. He won’t talk to anyone and he won’t change back.”

Chapter 57- Alwin

The Laboratory

Jaron found a second laboratory location used by the mysterious alchemist. There were signs of recent activity, possibly just before he presumably left town. Alwin and Jaron walked quickly down the cobbled street. The knight knew the area well, it was commonly known as the Thieves' Grotto and even guards avoided the area. The knight hoped he would not be noticed and was surprised with how confidently Jaron walked down the muck covered street. Much like the first building the alchemist used the building they approached was tattered and looked uninhabited. The smells of the street almost masked the chemical fumes that permeated from the structure, but to someone searching the reek was obvious.

“This must be the place,” Alwin said, his nose scrunching as if in retreat from the smell.

“This alchemist sure knows how to pick his property.”

“He prefers areas where no one will ask questions.”

“What a charming person.”

They walked into the room at the same time and both simultaneously covered their face as they stepped past the threshold. Alwin's eyes uncontrollably squinted. The air was thick and stung his entire body.

“He must have spilled something in a hurry...Or polluted the place to keep unwelcomed guests out,” the knight thought out loud.

Jaron nodded in agreement and pulled a handkerchief out of his pocket, tying it around his mouth and nose. Alwin wished he had something similar to guard him against the chemicals lingering in the air, though he doubted the cloth did much good anyways.

“Let’s go through this place as fast as possible,” Jaron said coughing. “This does very little in way of helping,” he said pointing to his mask.

Alwin glanced around, trying to keep his eyes open wide enough to not miss anything. The place was dark, he wished he could light a torch, but he dare not risk the chemicals combusting. A table lay on its side, cracked and splintered. Stained papers were strewn about, many of them had only a few words scrawled on them and they all seemed to be written in some sort of personal code devised by the alchemist. The two men began gathering the papers, all the while looking for any other trace of the Gnarled Man.

“That paper is still wet. I do hope it isn’t anything too unusual,” Jaron said, wiping his hands on his pants.

“I wouldn’t put it past him to put poison on important documents he left behind.”

“Very reassuring... I guess that means we should take it with us. Can you hand me those tongs over by the table?”

Alwin spotted what Jaron was referring to. About a foot away from the fallen table laid a pair of metal tongs used for grasping bottles filled with chemicals. The area was littered with the broken glass of what was most likely one of the many flasks of chemicals the alchemist tossed into the room. The glass cracked as the knight made his

way over to the requested item. A movement from somewhere below them made both of the men stop dead in their tracks.

“Did you hear that?” Jaron whispered.

Alwin nodded and strained his ears for any further sound. When nothing sounded for several moments the knight picked up the tool and handed it to Jaron. He scanned the ground for a hatch to a lower level as his companion carefully picked up the wet pages. The knights hear began to pound, in the far corner lay a near seamless hatch, its handle had been broken off and the wood was soaked in a chemical.

“Jaron, over here. I found a hatch.” Alwin pointed.

Jaron turned quickly in the direction Alwin had pointed and they bound towards it together. No doubt the compound that soaked into the wood was dangerous to the touch—they would need to find a way to pry the hatch open without their hands.

“This alchemist is all kinds of cliché diabolical, isn’t he? Secrets hidden away in his secret base in the bad part of town.”

Alwin grinned, keeping his mouth closed in an attempt to not expose himself to more chemicals than he needed to. The knight did a quick scan of the room and realized they would need help if they wanted to open the hatch and search the polluted place in full.

Chapter 58- Dalia

The Madness of the Dark Totem

The refreshing breeze of the night air only alleviated Dalia's troubled mind for a few brief moments before she saw the congregation of druids around a nearby hut. She approached cautiously, she knew many of the village did not welcome her presence, but her curiosity overpowered her candor. She spotted the broad stature of the druid leader from a distance and made her way to him.

“What's going on?” she asked quietly.

“Madness has consumed one of the few that saw the Dark Totem,” Borghildr said grimly.

At first, Dalia feared that the corruption consumed Raijin after-all. He had been rather hostile towards her once they came into town. A mixture of relief and confusion washed over the seer when she saw Raijin calmly approaching the surrounded hut. It was now clear that the seemingly ever-calm Siv that succumbed to madness.

The crowd's nervous murmurs ceased as the young druid entered the barricaded home the wild Siv was trapped in. It was quiet for some time. The entire village strained their ears to make out what Raijin's muffled voice was saying. The low growl of the wolf obscured Raijin's voice and it seemed no one knew what was being said. Then, the sounds of a wild and vicious attack sounded from the building. A few villagers gasped, others prepared to go in to rescue their leader's son. Most of the crowd, however, remained in silent anticipation.

Raijin burst out of the make-shift cage. A long set of scratches across his left eye bled heavily, but he remained mostly unharmed. It was clear that most the damage the wolf dealt was to the young druid's pride. Siv's mother began to cry out in despair as Raijin walked with his eyes to the ground.

“Someone do something! He can't be lost! I won't let him be one of those things!” the mother shouted.

The crowd murmured, but none stepped forward.

“If this boy is lost, then my people will believe all Wild Ones to be unredeemable,” Borghildr spoke quietly, looking at Dalia.

He expected her to calm the beast inside. It was a logical conclusion that since she tamed a warg she could do this, but doubt plagued the seer's mind. Dalia found her feet moving towards the barricaded door before she made up her mind. The tamed warg followed close at her heels. The crowd grew silent once more as Dalia pushed her way into the home. Gesturing for her warg to remain in the entry way, the seer walked cautiously towards the savage sounds of the snarling beast. A heavy musk hung in the air. Tattered remnants of the family's personal belongings lay scattered across the floor. The wild wolf had kicked up a lot of dust and the floating granular stung Dalia's eyes.

Siv spotted the seer as soon as she came around the corner. Their eyes locked. All was quiet. A surprising calm overtook Dalia. Slowly, she inched toward the beast. The wolf did not growl, but gazed fiercely in distrust. She moved, breathing slowly and evenly—taking one step at a time. Finally, she was close enough to reach out to the wild animal. Extending her hand, Dalia confidently made contact with the wolf's fur. A low

growl hummed from the back of the beast's throat. The seer placed a second hand on the other side of the wolf's neck. Sitting directly in front of the wild wolf, Dalia kept her eyes locked. The madness sat insatiable in the eyes of the wolf, she knew it was only temporarily subdued. Intuitively, she placed her forehead to the wolf's and the world went black.

Instantaneously, Dalia woke up in a forest populated by black crystalline trees. They shone in a furious manner reflecting the burning sky above. Instead of soft blue, the sky itself was consumed in flames which crackled spitefully as it burned up the air. The heavy breathing and low growls of an unseen beast echoed throughout the entire woods, seemingly close and distant all at once. Dalia made her way forward, searching for a way to calm the chaotic world inhabiting Siv's mind. Shadows moved about in the distance. All around her, the dark forest stirred, but there was no sign of the one she searched for. Eventually, Dalia came to a cave that contrasted the world around it. The cave consisted of ordinary stone, and whereas the rest of the world seemed angry, the cave exuberated tranquility. Yet, the seer hesitated. Something menacing nearby lurked just out of sight, perhaps prepared to prevent her progression. Cautiously, she moved forward. The growling in the sky grew louder and nearer.

Out of darkness the beast emerged. Snarling and seething the wolf blocked Dalia's path to the cave. The creature gave every indication that it intended to attack, yet the seer continued on her path. She did not pause even for a moment. The wild wolf grew in size and ferocity. It leapt forward and swallowed the seer whole. Now engulfed in utter and complete darkness the seer paused. She knew what she was seeking must be near. All that could be distinguished through the pitch was the steady breathing of the beast.

“Who’s there?” a voice echoed.

“Siv? I’ve come to get you out of here.”

“Where are we?”

“No matter, we just need to get out of here.”

Nearby, she heard him stand. Groping in the dark, they found each other. He breathed heavy from fright, but her breathing remained steady.

“So where is this way out?”

“I wish I knew.”

The two stood in silence for some time. Dalia closed her eyes. Over and over she told herself that this was not real. It was merely a manifestation of Siv’s mental state. Suddenly an idea struck her.

“Close your eyes,” she said.

“What? Why?”

“Trust me. I can get us out of here.”

She kept her own eyes shut and they began to walk aimlessly, arm and arm. They walked for quite some time until finally the seer decided to stop.

“Okay, we’re out,” she lied.

“Yes, I can feel the breeze.”

After he spoke, a cool wind rolled by. They both opened their eyes to find they were at the mouth the cave, the wolf was nowhere to be seen. In place of the once fiery red sky, a placid black night sky emerged.

Dalia sighed. "It's time to wake up now, Siv."

Then, they both opened their eyes in the waking world. Siv was in human form again. He looked curiously at Dalia, still disoriented from all that had transpired. Glancing around the room, the reality of what he had done began to sink in. Shame filled the druid's eyes which he cast down and refused to make eye contact with the seer.

"Thank you. I was lost...unaware of my actions. I only hope I have not shamed my family beyond repair."

"Step outside with me. I think you'll find everyone is just relieved to have your true form return."

Chapter 59- Lucius

Battle Lines

The long-awaited response to Lucius and Jaron's night time rescue finally came. The Shadow Council did all they could do defame Jaron whom they publicly stated had fled due to a late night cowardly flight from the challenges of the Passing of the Crown ceremony. They made no mention of Lucius. That, in a way, was more troubling. Since they did not publicly acknowledge his involvement the young hunter could not help but wonder if his theory on the assassin possessed an element of true.

Officially, all the Council had said in way of the next trial was that it had to be postponed so it could be readjusted to the new number of contestants. This sparked rumors about what the next task could be and the possibility that it would involve all the contestants at once. Some of the public theories were more absurd than others, Lucius favorite improbability was that there would be a battle to the death and the last man, or woman standing would be crowned. While most of the remaining contenders preferred to keep their personal theories to themselves, Connor grew increasingly nervous and ecstatic about the prospect and constantly felt the need to relay his newest ideas on what the Council had in store.

"Maybe it will be some sort of mock battle where we are put in charge of battalions..." Connor voiced his newest theory.

"Possibly," Lucius murmured. He hadn't considered the idea before, but found it more plausible than most the ramblings of the public.

The young hunter could hardly focus on the next trial, he was more concerned with the thought that his would-be assassin could return at any moment. The fact that his potential murder could be residing in Aarden Hall haunted Lucius. He felt drawn to take action as soon as possible. The Shadow Council made it clear they were willing to go to extremes to achieve their goals. Lucius could not help but pace as his mind reeled with possible next steps. Grace did not need her empathetic powers to sense the young hunter's uneasiness. She did her best to calm him, but he was plagued by the unknown. Everything changed in a moment. A quick and calming coldness came over Lucius as the Shadow Council's first move was revealed.

"Counselor Birch would like to meet with you in his quarters," Birch's scribe said flatly as he entered the room.

"I will meet with him, but on my terms. There's a courtyard in the west wing of the building that is always empty, we can meet there. Relay that to your... master and tell him I will be waiting."

As soon as the scribe left, everyone in the room crowded around Lucius.

"What are you doing?" Connor said.

"Are you suicidal?" Auriel hissed.

Lucius caught eyes with Grace. "I presume you have a plan?" she said calmly.

He nodded. "I need someone to inform Gerreon."

"I'm on it," Connor said, leaving immediately.

“Auriel, I need you there to hear what he says. Stay back and don’t be seen, but your account of what was said may help put him away.”

“And me?” Grace inquired.

“I need you to sneak around and see how many guards he brings with him, get a count so we have some idea of what we may be dealing with. I wouldn’t ask you to do it if I didn’t think you can talk your way out of anything.”

“Understood.”

With that, they all set off in silence. The familiar feeling of the hunt caught Lucius off guard. Hunting monsters and politics were surprisingly similar, if he did not bring the right tools for the job that could mark an end for him. Guilt filled the young hunter. He did not want to put his friends in danger, but he needed them. In hunting he might need the right blade or alchemic concoction, but in politics he needed his allies. The fear of just how deep the Shadow Council may permeate through Aarden Hall made him shudder.

Finally, they came to the courtyard. It appeared that they had arrived first. They stood there for quite some time. It had always been a possibility that Birch refused to come with the change of venue. Lucius caught sight of a guard through an alcove. The man nodded in acknowledgement. The hunter was relieved to know Gerreon’s men made it before the discussion even began. Unless... It had simply become an assassination attempt. The upper balcony of the courtyard suddenly became very intimidating to the young hunter. Cautiously, Lucius motioned in suggestion that the upper floor be secured.

The guard in the alcove silently signaled to a few of his men. Lucius turned back toward the courtyard and saw Counselor Birch making his way down the long corridor ahead.

“I see we have given up the pretense of trust,” the counselor said, stopping several feet from Lucius.

“The Shadow Council thrives in the dark. I can no longer play by your rules.”

Birch smirked. “The Shadow Council... so that’s what they are calling us these days. I suppose it may seem appropriate to those who are uninformed of our true goals.”

“And what would those be?”

“All in good time,” Birch replied, his smile widening.

Lucius, infuriated by the smug disposition of the counselor, dared not let his emotions show. Birch though he held all the power, Lucius needed to find a way to position himself as a viable threat instead of a minor nuisance.

“Since you failed to kill me and you failed to coerce my allies against me, what is there left for you to do? You can make more attempts at my life, but I promise they will not work out in your favor.”

Birch’s smile faded. “So blunt...so arrogant. Who are you to think you can stand against us. You are not King yet, boy, and I will make sure that never comes to pass. Without the power of the crown you are nothing, just a poor orphan brought up to be a slayer of beasts.”

“From where I’m standing, you and the beasts don’t seem so different.”

“You have no idea what we are.”

“You say ‘we,’ but you’re the only face I have seen from the Shadow Council. Are you the leader? Or should I be talking to someone else.”

Birch scoffed. “Leader... We are a tribunal. I can speak for the group just as well as the next man.”

“Tell me... how many would I have to kill or imprison to deplete this tribunal of yours?”

“Tsk, tsk. That would spoil the fun. Now, we will give you one last chance to drop to foolish endeavor of yours.”

Lucius spotted movement out of the corner of his eye. He wondered whose men crept just out of sight. Yet, more movement in the balcony. This time the young hunter was sure that they were Birch’s men and not Gerreon’s.

“We can’t have our little meeting becoming the center piece for a case against me, now can we? No... I have taken precautions. Greased the right palms... Tell Gerreon the loss of his men solely rests on your shoulders. It is a shame to imprison so many skilled soldiers, sadly though, they chose the wrong side.”

All around the clanging of armor echoed. The court yard burst into chaos. The once hidden soldiers came into view, grappling with their brothers in arms. Lucius acknowledged his utter powerlessness in the moment. He watched as Birch walked away. He met the gaze of the soldier he had seen hidden away just moments before, the soldier that had sworn to uphold the law at any cost. Lucius could only hope that the arrests

stopped with the soldiers and this power move did not cost him his friends too. He walked back towards the contenders' quarters in a daze. They knew the Shadow Council desperately wanted to end his chance at power, but they had not expected such a bold first move. The lines were drawn. The stakes were clear. They were at war.

Chapter 60- Aeacus

Undying Malice

All three Undying men remained speechless for quite some time. The intruder's grin only widened. The stranger began to approach the other two, but stopped when they shifted defensively.

“You need not worry about Sacio's followers blaming you for his death, they will know the truth soon enough.”

“And what is the truth?” Aeacus said.

“I killed him. He was weak, the worshippers of the demon need... no, deserve a strong leader.”

“Let me guess, you will graciously volunteer.”

The stranger laughed. “I will not deceive them in my motivations for his murder other than to succeed him.”

“Why come here? I could have you arrested.”

“Could you?”

“You are here, alone, and confessing to murder.”

“Yet you have not arrested me yet. Why is that?”

“You do not appear to be a man who believes he has made a mistake... Are my men outside alive?”

“For now. I am truly hoping this little movement of ours will not require any more bloodshed.”

“If you attempt to make contact with the demon again, many more will die. Sacio would not see reason, but maybe you will.”

“I have no desire to contact Aerico. Nor do I have any intention in personally worshipping him... But, I saw an opportunity for advancement.”

“And here you are.”

“Here I am,” the stranger said, holding up his arms mockingly. “I came to speak to you today to inform you I do not plan on fracturing the Undying... merely reorienting the social structure, you and our fair Undying Lady as political leadership and I as a religious one. There is no reason we cannot coexist in the same society.”

“True... there would be no reason if you were not a confessed murderer and a fraud.”

The stranger's smile faded. “That is... disappointing. I was hoping someone who has lead for so long would be more pragmatic.”

“My people deserve more than to be manipulated by a criminal.”

The stranger began walking out of the room. “It's a shame what's going to happen next...”

“It truly is. What shall I call my adversary?”

“I am Deimos, but you will come to know me as the High Priest of the Demon.”

Chapter 61- Raijin

Alignment

Burning pain shot through the left side of Raijin's face. The cuts Siv had made were healing but very slowly. The wrath the wound had been inflicted with resonated in the injury itself. It would scar, Raijin was sure of it. What stung him more than his fresh wound was the fact that all his unwarranted assumptions about Dalia wrong. He felt shame for making such a fool of himself. He brought her into the village as thanks for helping them with the Wild Ones and promptly had contradicted himself and attempted to cast doubt on her worthiness of being involved with the druids any further. It was humbling to see how wrong he was. Raijin was haunted by the fact that became increasingly obvious, he was not yet ready to rule.

“What troubles you, my son?” Kajah asked.

“I trouble myself... We have new hope for the future of our conflict. Yet, the most recent threat to progress was my own arrogance.”

His mother nodded knowingly. “It is hard to find inner peace at such a young age. Self-awareness is good. It will lead you down the right path.”

Raijin sat in silent contemplation for some time. His mother sat with him, never trying to coax him into conversation. Worry clouded his thoughts as he pondered the power of the Dark Totem. How could they manage to get close enough to destroy the artifact if its very presence drove them as insane as the Wild Ones? The young druid stood to his feet suddenly.

“I must speak to our guest. She may be our only hope of overcoming the power of the Dark Totem.”

Raijin began searching for the stranger without any idea of where to start. He did not want to go back and ask his mother since he left with such purpose. Luckily, it did not take him long to cross her path. The young druid began to make his way to Dalia when insecurity suddenly halted him. He felt inferior to his guest, after all she knew nothing of the ways of the druid, yet she was able to soothe the savage beast Siv had become. Once again, Raijin’s injury burned. For a time, he stood back observing Dalia, unsure of what to say. Eventually, he became aware she knew of his presence and simply entertained his demeanor. Bashfully, Raijin walked up to the seer who was now sitting calmly under a tree, warg resting his head in her lap.

“Have you named him?” the young druid blurted.

Dalia shook her head no, smiling kindly.

Raijin intently thought of a fitting name for the tamed wild beast. “The creature is an extension of you in a way...” he thought out loud. “Not just any name will do. I have never known of any to tame a warg, not even a druid.”

“I agree.” Dalia replied, she seemed amused.

“How about Geirolf? My people have a story about a great warrior by that name. Legend says the nights were dark with no moon or no stars until one day the wolves came to him and promised to honor his deeds for all time if he would bring light to the night

sky. Geirolf agreed and threw a spear so hard that it pierced the dark veil in the sky and revealed the moon and stars.”

The seer paused, letting the suggested settle in. “I like it.” She turned to the warg. “How about you? Would you like to be Geirolf?”

The warg lifted his head lazily and looked his owner in the eyes. This was enough of a confirmation for Dalia. She tousled the warg’s fur on his head and repeated his name. Raijin stood there quietly. Dalia turned her attention back to the druid.

“Please, have a seat,” the seer said, gesturing to the ground near her.

The young druid sat. “How did you free Siv from his madness?”

Dalia smiled knowingly, she expected this. “The short answer is I don’t know.”

“What’s the long answer?”

“I somehow knew what to do. I made contact with the wolf and entered his mind much like I did with Geirolf here. I found Siv’s mind to be plagued by nightmare, one in which the Siv you know had become lost. I merely found his humanity amongst the chaos and brought him out.”

“Do you think you could do it again?”

“Yes, I am sure of that. However, I am more interested in the how. An answer to which you promised to help me find.”

Anger briefly swelled in Raijin, which he promptly extinguished. “Perhaps we can make a deal,” he said sighing.

“What did you have in mind?”

“I will take you to where you may find answers if you help me find a way for my warriors to resist the Dark Totem’s madness.”

“And how do you expect to find this method resistance?”

“I want to go back and expose myself to its dark power. I know what to expect now and you know how it manifests in the mind. Hopefully, together we can overcome the madness within.”

Chapter 62- Alwin

Dissention

The toxic musk faded with time. They were now amidst a small trusted team of men Jaron swore by. They searched through the rest of the house, their increased numbers drew attention and they were soon forced to close themselves in with the lingering scents of the Gnarled Man's concoctions. Prying the trap door open, Alwin and the others stood gazing into the black unknown before them.

“For all we know the bastard trapped whatever is down there,” Jaron said.

“We could throw a torch down there,” one of his men suggested.

“No... There could be flammable chemicals,” Alwin replied.

They stood in quiet contemplation. No one wanted to state the obvious that the safest course of action was for someone to simply risk the endeavor. A draft blew through the unlit room and a menacing scent stung Alwin's nostrils. The knight took a deep breath and began his way cautiously into the unknown. Trusting his hands nervously into his pockets, Alwin found the lumi-stone Lucius relayed to him through Jaron. He felt foolish for not having thought of it before. He pulled out the bug shaped stone and whispered a command. The men above watched in awe as the magical stone became and gently drifting beetle that illuminated the darkness of the hidden room.

The wonder the lumi-stone created soon faded as the horrors of the room were revealed. Various animal embryos sat in jars of liquid on shelves resting on the side walls. An assortment of sharp surgical instruments lined the back wall. In the middle of

the room lay two surgical tables: one lay empty and covered in dried blood. On the other the clearly defined shape of a human lay motionless under a bloody sheet. Alwin made his way over to the sheet covered body, unsure if he would prefer it to be Bard or not. Soon, Jaron was at his side. The rest of the search team waited up above and continued their search for evidence even though the place had already been thoroughly combed.

“I can look first, to make sure it isn’t too shocking. There is no need to see your friend deformed by this mad man’s science,” Jaron whispered.

“No... I need to see. This is my fault. I need to face the consequences.”

Extending a shaking hand, Alwin pulled the crusted sheet back slowly. A face he did not recognize was uncovered. The knight breathed out, he had not realized he had been holding his breath.

“Not him?” Jaron searched for confirmation.

“No.”

“We’ll find him... And the Gnarled Man.”

Alwin searched the face of the dead man, his eyes stared forward, dry and crusting. His lips cracked and peeled. His skin sat like gentle powder on an uneven surface. Slowly, a tear drop trailed down the face, cutting a crease in the powdery skin. Alwin gasped. Making eye contact with the man, he noticed a slight, but definite movement.

“He’s alive!”

“What? Impossible...” Jaron began, stopping abruptly when he too saw the movement.

The two men stared down at the alchemist’s victim in silence. His condition was beyond what they would expect a human to survive. His frame was frail and bruised. Puncture wounds seeped blood and puss on various places on his body. It was clear the Gnarled Man experimented on him heavily. Though he seemed unable to move, the man’s eyes were full of life, fear could not radiate so powerfully in the eyes of the dead.

“Do any of your men understand alchemy?”

“I don’t know...”

“I think the alchemist must have given him something to paralyze him. He must have not had enough time to dispose of everything.”

Jaron called his men down into the dark room, but none knew much about alchemy. There were no clues to what the alchemist may have dosed the man with anyways. They sat in stunned silence for some time. One of the men had to leave the room, as the smell began to make him dry heave.

“We could try a blood transfusion... Get the tainted blood out and some fresh in,” Alwin said.

“These aren’t exactly the cleanest conditions,” Jaron retorted.

“So we find a way to move him. Clean him up. Get the man some water and a sense of safety.”

“It’s worth a try, but there is no way of telling if he will even survive the trip.”

Jaron’s men fetched a cart which they promptly loaded the nearly dead man into, covering him with a fresh blanket. The group made haste to Prue’s house which was the closest. Alwin went ahead of the group to give the recently widowed woman a heads up. When the knight knocked gently on her door he distinctly heard the sound of crying. The mourning ceased at the sound on the door.

“Who is it?” Prue said flatly.

“It’s Alwin.”

There was a shuffling inside as Prue presumably covered up any sign that she had been crying. Eventually, he heard the latch snap back and his friend opened the door. She stepped aside, letting him in.

“It’s very late,” she said.

“I know... but Prue, we were just at the alchemist’s house and we found a man on the verge of death.”

Her face briefly contorted, but she remained composed. “Any sign of my husband?”

“No...” Alwin nodded. “But your home was the nearest and we needed somewhere to treat the alchemist’s victim...”

“Of course. Are they on their way now?”

He nodded and helped her clear away her dining table, placing two layers of clean linen over it. Within half an hour of them completing this task, the rest of the group arrived. The clean sheet that had been placed over the man was now spotted with variously colored fluids.

“Is he still alive?” Alwin asked.

“Yes, just barely.” Jaron said, signaling for a few of his men to hoist the man onto the table. “Right, who isn’t squeamish about blood?”

Chapter 63- Dalia

The Cave of Echoes

Dalia had reservations about Raijin's plan, but she had convinced him to get her the answers she sought before their dangerous venture into Wild One's territory. They were headed to a cave that the druids claimed to possess some sort of power. Raijin spoke of the cave as if it were all knowing.

“You will go in alone to commune with the wind elements that reside within.”

“Wind elements?”

“Each element has a physical manifestation hidden in a sanctum somewhere in the world. This is the only location known to any men. It is a druid secret, much like the communing with the spirit of nature, the Great White Deer.”

“Why have you trusted me with so much? You hardly know me.”

“My father trusts you. That is enough for me.”

“Does he know of your plan to over-come the Dark Totem?”

“I suspect he knows I have something planned, but no... I have not told him. I do not know if he would understand.”

Dalia nodded and acknowledgment and they trudged on through the woods. After some time, the seer got the same sense she had when the Wood Sprites manipulated the forest around her. She looked back at Raijin and he answered with a knowing glance. They walked on and after only a few more minutes, they came to the mouth of a cave. It

came so suddenly and Dalia was sure it had not been there moments before. The cave was made of an off white porous stone speckled with sparkling clear gems. The scene would be peaceful if it weren't for the violent howling of the torrent of wind blasting out of the entrance.

Without even a glance back, Dalia strode into the cavern. She was surprised to find that while the wind did not cease, the turbulent air did not push against her, enabling her to walk as if it were absent all together. Soon the entrance disappeared from view, but the cave did not lose any light. Even in the depths of the cavern, she felt like she was in the light of day.

“Seer, you come seeking answers of your past,” a collection of whispers on the wind echoed.

“I do.”

“We shall tell you what we can, but know that much of your past is obscured even to us.”

“Do you know who I am?”

“We do. The wind is everywhere and knows many things.”

“Who am I? Where do I come from?”

“You are one of the two seers of an ancient tribe. Worshipped by your people, you and your sister ruled until the War of the Tribes forced you into hiding.”

“Where is my tribe now?”

“Gone.”

“My sister?”

“Much like you, she has not been seen by our winds for hundreds of years.”

“Hundreds of years...”

“Yes, you possess the power to reincarnate yourself, but at the loss of most of your memories and power. We suspect you have developed methods to reobtain what is lost in the process.”

“But you don’t know what it is or how I go about doing it?”

“No. The winds have no confirmation of such methods.”

“Any idea where I may have stored artifacts of my past lives?”

“No. You have been absent for quite some time. We know nothing more to aid you. It is time we address the young druids concerns.”

Dalia turned to see that Raijin had followed her in the form of a wolf. He shifted back into human form, looking guilty.

“I wanted to know who you are as much as you.”

“I doubt that... But I assume the winds would not have allowed you in if your intentions were not pure.”

“You assume correct,” the winds whispered.

“You know what we plan?” Raijin asked.

“We do.”

“And?”

“Be cautious in your approach. Though your path is correct, your methods are brash.”

“We have no other choice.”

“There is always another choice.”

“Perhaps we should council with your father,” Dalia interjected.

“I need to know I can do this without him.”

“A true leader knows when to ask for help. Your father knows this,” the Winds said.

“It would be wise to use any resources we have available to us.”

“No... We will do this alone.”

“Foolish, young druid. You come here under the guise of seeking advice, but in truth you want nothing but confirmation that you are correct in your ways.”

“I know my path to be true.”

“And we know otherwise.”

“Trust in the elements, Raijin,” Dalia implored.

“My decision is final. I will expose myself to the madness of the Dark Totem. I hope you will be there to recover me from the nightmare if I cannot resist on my own.”

Chapter 64- Lucius

Deliberation

After the arrest of Geremon's guards, everything went quiet. The council designated a date for the Forth Trial, but had given no other details. Connor had recovered some encrypted documents which he managed to make copies of during the confrontation with Birch, but he had yet to decipher them.

“We have to acknowledge that this corruption may go deeper than we anticipated. I'm not sure we can do this alone,” Grace stated plainly to the group.

“Once one of us is in the highest leadership in the country I doubt we will be short on resources,” Lucius said.

“Only if they don't have control over those resources as well. When you become king, you may very well become like a prisoner,” Auriel said.

“Ha! I think I am on to something,” Connor said, not looking up from the encrypted documents.

Everyone turned their attention to the young scholar. He did not seem to notice that he had interrupted them. Without ceasing he continued to scribble notes on various pieces of parchment.

“No...” Connor muttered, furrowing his brow.

“Anyways...” Auriel said. “I have been in contact with my sister. It seems likely to her that many old family ‘friends’ have a connection to the Shadow Council. So we

most likely have to go against the most powerful people in Aarden Hall, but also those with the deepest pockets –many with much deeper than my own, unfortunately.”

“But we will have the common people are our side,” Lucius interjected.

“And what good are they? Their money pooled together doesn’t even make a fraction of— ”

“You’re missing the point, Auriel,” Grace said.

“Oh? And what is the point? We can win with the power of the love from the common folk? Our cause being noble does not automatically grant us the right to win.”

“Hopefully, finding a way to bring the Shadow Council out of hiding and into the light of day will be sufficient enough to turn the tides,” Lucius said.

“Oh shit...” Connor said, looking up from his papers.

They all turned their attention to him in unison. There was legitimate fear in his eyes. There was no doubt in Lucius’s mind that Connor had decoded the papers and had not liked what he found.

“So... I copied several documents onto as little paper as I could. I... Well, I found two lists. One does seem to be some kind of book keeping of members of the Shadow Council.”

“That’s great, Connor. Who are they?” Auriel said.

“Well, the other list is a bit more pressing. The document seemed to be a yet to be sent list of assassination commands on all of us. From what I can tell, they don’t plan on any of us making it out of the next trial alive.”

They all absorbed the news. Lucius supposed he expected something like this. When he was alone he had been the only target, but bringing others in had put a price on their heads.

“I suppose we all knew something like this was coming,” Auriel said.

“Of course, what’s done is done. Besides, perhaps we can use it to our advantage,” Grace said.

“We all knew there would be danger when we signed on for this. Even without a Shadow Council, it’s not like being a leader is a safe occupation,” Connor said.

Lucius smiled. With those few words, they had said all he needed to hear. He no longer felt guilty for getting them involved. Plus, Grace was right, they could use it to their advantage, and Lucius knew exactly how they would do it.

Chapter 65- Aeacus

The High Priest of the Demon

Not long after their meeting, Deimos revealed himself publicly. He confessed to the murder of Sacio and proclaimed it was a necessary evil for the advancement of the Worshippers of the Demon. Many seemed to believe him. In fact, after Deimos's emergence, the Worshipper number increased. Quickly, the Undying Kingdom fell into turmoil. The Worshippers began placing propaganda on every street corner, sometimes resorting to violence with those who protested.

“You should have killed him when you had the chance,” Lady Grey said fiercely to her fiancé.

“And what example would that have set?” he responded flatly.

“What example does this set? We have lost control of the city in a matter of days.”

“I refuse to believe that they only way to restore order is to enact violence against my own people.”

“When will you stop seeing those fanatics as your people?”

“Never,” Aeacus stated firmly.

Lady Grey paced, contemplating her options. Aeacus fell into a nearby seat, placing his face in his hands. Fenrik eyed the Lady suspiciously, as if he expected her to initiate a political coup.

“Will you tell your man to stop eyeing me like that? The last thing I need right now is one of your own to attack me.”

“He will not attack without provocation.”

“Are you suggesting a possibility that I could ever insight reason for attack?”

“No... I am sorry. We are both on edge given the recent events. Now is not the time to let our allegiance fall apart. More than ever, we need to come together.”

Screams echoed through the streets outside. The clanging of swords soon followed. A clash, a crash, a scream. The Undying leader’s blood turned cold.

“What’s going on out there?” he said, standing to his feet and drawing his sword.

Fenrik sprung to action and cautiously investigated the streets from the window, his sword at the ready. He gestured for Aeacus to his side. Seeing just how chaotic his city had become in a matter of minutes filled the Undying leader with shock. It appeared as if all-out war had spawned in the plagued lands. Aeacus’s heart ached as he watched helplessly. He could not risk going out there without proper escort, yet it pained him deeply to standby and do nothing. Soon Fenrik was pushing his friend out of the line of sight of the window, clearly not wishing him to be spotted.

“If Deimos wants me dead, it is likely he already knows my location.”

“You give him too much credit. We hold far more power than he does,” Lady Grey responded.

“I’m not so sure. Look how fast he started an uprising.”

“Uprising... ridiculous. You are playing right into his hands. It’s a power play, nothing more. This is most likely an isolated incident meant to scare you.”

Aeacus knew she was right, deep down he always knew it was the more likely scenario. Yet, he let his emotions get the best of him. The Undying leader took a deep breath and exhaled slowly, calming his nerves. Fenrik turned his attention away from the window towards the door. For a brief moment, Aeacus stood on edge. He relaxed when Braun entered with a dozen of his men in tow.

“We need to get you two out of here, now.”

They all followed wordlessly into the chaos in the streets. A fire raged, unabated by anyone. All the Undying forces were focused on calming the people. Aeacus stepped in a puddle, horror filled him when he glanced down to discover a pool of blood.

“All hail the demon! Down with the heretics who squander his gifts!” a voiced echoed through the streets.

A few mutineers ran by them amidst the chaos, but none seemed to notice them. Their actions were aimless. Once the leaders and their escort made it through the block, it became clear how limited a space the event had occurred. Aeacus’s men formed a secure perimeter around the area of chaos. The citizens outside of the perimeter looked on curiously, trying to catch a glimpse of whatever was happening. The Undying leader was relieved at the confirmation that order still existed in his city. Instinctively, he decided to address the crowd.

“Good people, today we get a glimpse of what fanaticism creates. I do not wish to inspire hate towards any one group and would urge you all to consider that the violence happening inside that perimeter is perpetrated by only a few. All people within the walls of the Nox’Oros have the right to live the way they wish as long as it abides by our laws. The Worshippers of the Demon are not our enemies. Please do not see them as such. You may not agree with their views, but many of them are regular, law abiding citizens just like any of us. It is only the select few fanatics we must be on the lookout for. I plan to schedule a public meeting with the High Priest of the Demon. There we will publicly discuss these incidents and methods to alleviate tensions. Please come with questions at the ready, but also keep in mind that those that do not remain civil will be escorted off the premises. Once the preparations for this meeting are made, we will make a formal announcement about where and when it will take place.”

Chapter 66- Raijin

The Nightmare Wood

Cautiously, they made their way into the domain of the Wild Ones. Neither had spoken since they departed the Cave of Echoes. Dalia reluctantly went along with Raijin's plan. He knew she was not content with what they were doing, but all he needed was her loyalty, not her friendship. He knew that his was the right course of action. Scouting the surrounding area, they found a water fall with an alcove nearby. The plan was to expose Raijin to the corrupting aura and get him to the relative safety of the falls quickly. In theory, the falls would muffle any sound he might make during a possible rage induced delirium. The risk was necessary. If they did not solve the corruption of the Dark Totem before their assault then they would surely be lost.

Ravenous sounds could now be heard, echoing off the trees. They were nearing the Wild Ones' camp. Raijin could feel the totem already. He wondered if each exposure increased its effects. They came to the ridge that he, Siv, and the others had looked over when they first encountered the Dark Totem. The scene was much the same as it had been the previous time. The Wild Ones lived in horrifying ferocity towards each other. Raijin glanced over at Dalia to find her looking on blankly. He was surprised to see such a minute reaction from her. She caught his glance and they nodded to each other.

Raijin focused on the Dark Totem below, feeling its energy and soaking it in. At first, he felt no different, more alert perhaps but not wild. Then, a swelling, burning in his chest rose. He needed to get the sensation out and he felt the only way would be to scream. Raijin resisted this desire, knowing it would mean the end of their endeavor. He motioned for Dalia to follow as he quickly made his way to a preselected safe spot for

them to conquer the madness. He held on to his sanity as best he could as they made their way to the waterfall. Raijin's hope was that if he screamed, the roar of the falls would mask it. His desire to scream physically hurt him, he wanted to transform and be rid of his weak human flesh.

Raijin stumbled and Dalia caught him. He shot her a fierce look, but she did not waiver. She aided him the rest of the way to the falls and they came to a stop in an alcove tucked behind the roaring water. As soon as they arrived, Raijin fell to his knees and let out a cry. His cry echoed on the alcove walls and the world around him faded to darkness as he succumbed to the madness of the Dark Totem.

The young druid found himself in a dark crystalline wood. The sky burned fiercely and the air choked his lungs. Raijin was struck by the strange familiarity of the place, but he could not uncover its source. Looking around, he tried to gain his bearings, but the forest seemed endless and there was no noticeable difference in any direction. A deep, angry roar echoed throughout the tree line. It was at that moment that Raijin recognized the world around him. It was the same wood in which he met his spirit animal during his druid ceremony. This was a dark and twisted version of that very same place.

Heavy footfalls sounded nearby. The air was still and all was silent. Raijin awaited the enraged bear. He did not know what to expect from the great beast, but he knew this time would be much different than their first encounter. If it were to attack should he fight back? Or would that simply feed its bloodlust? Raijin suddenly felt very foolish for subjecting himself to this. He realized, too late, that he had no idea what must

be done to overcome this madness. He had been so certain that when the time came it would become clear, but more than ever the young druid's thoughts scattered.

Raijin's heart stopped as the massive spirit bear bound out of the tree line in front of him. It did not hesitate to stride towards him. Foam spilled from its mouth. Fire burned in its eyes. The druid decided he would not fight, but he could not justify letting the beast trample over him. He deftly dodged to one side as the bear's charge neared. The bear recovered from the alteration with surprising agility. Raijin rolled back in surprise, wishing to put more distance between him and the enraged spirit. His back made contact with one of the black crystal trees, sending a shock through his body. Raijin recovered just in time to dodge the bear's swiping arm. The massive claw shattered the dark crystal, revealing bark underneath. The bear seemed momentarily dazed. It was the same forest, Raijin now knew what he must do—he needed to find a way to purify the Spirit Woods.

Chapter 67- Dalia

Behind the Roaring Falls

An hour passed since Raijin lost consciousness. He had been under longer than Dalia was comfortable with, but he showed no sign of succumbing to the madness like Siv did.

Raijin remained in human form, seemingly dreaming as he occasionally contorted his face in response to unseen forces.

At last, Dalia had a moment to reflect on what the Winds told her of her past. She had a sister out there somewhere. The seer wished desperately she knew where to begin her search for her lost sibling. There was no way to confirm she was even alive. Dalia knew that searching for her sister could not be the first priority. Her best bet to recover her memory would be to travel back to where she had been seen last, unfortunately she could not remember where that was. Something inside her made her certain that this “king” she searched for would know something about her past and hopefully be able to guide her to more answers. Surely, if she had truly lived as many lives as the Winds suggested, she would have a process to recover her lost memories. It was just a matter of finding the right trail to follow.

Though Dalia could not hear anything over the roar of the falls, she suddenly sensed that they were not alone. The seer stood, waiting for someone or something to come bounding into the alcove. Quickly, Dalia unsheathed a dagger Raijin kept strapped to his leg. Every single nerve in her body seared her insides as adrenaline coursed through her veins. She tried to convince herself that she could do this and that it would be just like the time with the wargs except with a pack of wild druids. Then, a familiar face

cautiously broke the water of the falls. Geirolf immediately bound towards Dalia when he spotted her. Happily, he licked her hand as she relaxed and sat back on the cave floor.

“You scared the shit out of me,” the seer said, petting the warg’s head.

He whimpered in response. Then, looking from Dalia to Raijin, the tamed beast made his way to the mouth of the alcove, apparently determined to stand guard. She smiled at his loyalty. She wondered what her bond with the warg had to do with who she was in the past. What power could a seer have that tamed wild creatures? The more Dalia contemplated her forgotten past, the more questions she had. She decided to try and put it out of her mind and focus on other things. The seer found this difficult since the life she knew was so brief and chaotic.

Dalia closed her eyes in breathed slow, even breathes. She listened only to the roar of the falls and cleared her mind of everything. She imagined a hand, old and gnarled. The hand enclosed around a small object. The hand opened revealing a small stone in the shape of a beetle. Slowly, cracks etched across the object until a live, glowing insect broke free. The luminescent creature lit up the world around it. This image brought comfort to Dalia, though she did not know why.

Raijin began to mutter. Occasionally, he made low growling sounds. Dalia readied herself to calm the young druid if he became feral. Another growl echoed through the alcove. Geirolf’s ears were pricked up, his tail down, and teeth bared. He sensed something beyond the water fall, and now she did too.

Chapter 68- Alwin

Awakening

The man's blood had been purified as much as could safely be managed. Water was administered to him in miniscule amounts with a sponge. There was no visible improvement in the comatose man, but at least he was still alive. Jaron's men had departed, insisting they would return at a moment's summons.

“We have to consider our next move if he does not wake,” Jaron stated tiredly.

“What more do we have to track?” Alwin said.

“Maybe there are other people who procured ingredients for him,” Prue suggested.

“True, but how do we go about finding them?” Alwin said.

“Maybe we can contact Lucius. Surely, he knows other hunters,” Prue said, standing to keep herself awake.

“If you two are good to treat our patient on your own, I can start that line of inquiry,” Jaron said.

Alwin yawned. “Yeah... not much left we can do but wait for him to wake or die.”

Jaron nodded and left without another word. The remaining two contemplated their situation in silence for quite some time.

“What do we do if he dies?” Prue said. “We can’t exactly keep a dead body lying around in my home.” She was pacing.

“I’m sure Jaron’s men will have methods to dispose of him.”

“Dispose... no... We can’t just throw him away. That would make us like the Gnarled Man. We should find his family and let them have a proper funeral.”

“Sounds good in theory, but how do we even begin to find them? What if he doesn’t have any family? If the Gnarled Man has any brains he would have found someone that would not be missed to perform his sick experiments on.”

Prue grew quiet. Alwin knew she understood the logic of what he said, but he also knew that could not prevent her from feeling hurt by the idea. After all, the prospect of burying the man in an unmarked grave undoubtedly reminded her of Bard. The knight was roused from his thoughts by sudden mumbling. Waking groggily, the man’s eyes darted around the room. He seemed unable to move the rest of his body, but the stranger clearly entered a state of panic.

Prue noticed and immediately went to his side. “Shh... It’s okay. You’re safe. We got you away from that horrid man. You’ll never see him again.”

The man’s eyes stopped scanning the room and firmly rested on the source of the soothing voice. It was faint, but he seemed to try and speak. Fear filled his eyes once again, his own frailty surprised him. Alwin wondered how long ago he had been conscious enough to understand his situation. He watched as Prue gave the man more

water and nursed his wounds. The care she used was as if she treated a loved one. This made Alwin's heart ache. He could only imagine what was going on in his friend's mind.

"No point..." the stranger managed to murmur.

Prue stopped her treatment, looking the man in the eyes. "Don't be silly, you're doing much better. We can save you..."

"I don't want to live. Not after what I've seen," the hoarse voice responded.

Tears welled up in Prue's eyes and she turned away from the man, pretending to refresh the water basin with clean water. Alwin walked over to the man, locking eyes with him.

"Do you have any information on the man that did this to you? If you do not wish to be saved, we can at least bring him to justice."

"Zosimus Soloman," the stranger muttered, falling back into a deep sleep.

Chapter 69- Lucius

The Fourth Trial- The Beginning of the End

Anxiously, they awaited Kamon to call them to their last trial. Everything would be determined by the end of this test, not only who would lead, but also their fight against the Shadow Council. The door opened, and they all involuntarily held their breath. A guard entered into the room and wordlessly walked over to Lucius. Handing the hunter a letter, the guard nodded and left the room.

“What was that about?” Connor said.

“It’s from Jaron,” Lucius said as he opened the letter and glanced at the closing, quickly jumping back to read the opening lines.

Lucius,

Our pursuit of the Gnarled Man has proven difficult. We recovered a victim of his experiments, but he is very weak and the likelihood he survives is very slim. That being said, it could be of very great use if you could provide us with the names of hunters who might also work for such a man. Perhaps there were other listings for strange and dangerous ingredients that you did not take but know who did. Anything would be of use. Good luck on the fourth trial (we all know you’ll win).

Your friend,

Jaron

“Connor, do you have parchment I can use?” Lucius said.

“Of course,” the academic stated, rummaging through his trunk full of papers and books.

Eventually, Connor found a clean piece of paper and handed it to Lucius. He examined the hunter’s face closely, seemingly hoping to extract some indication of what was going on. Lucius did not notice. The hunter racked his brains, attempting to think of every possible associate that could have worked for the Gnarled Man. Jotting down as many names as he could, Lucius sealed the letter and opened the door of the quarters to search for the guard. He found that the man awaited his response outside and that the guards assigned to guard duty were gone. Lucius handed the man his letter and watched as he hastened away with it. When the guard passed the first cross-corridor the door guards rounded the corner and recovered their post.

“Well?” Auriel said when Lucius came back into the room.

“He needed information from me for a job he’s doing,” Lucius said dismissively.

The young hunter did not mean to be rude, but he was engrossed in thoughts about the Gnarled Man once again and the loss of Bard. He wished with everything in him that he could be out on the streets with his friends. He needed to know that justice had been done. Lucius knew he needed to shift his attention to the problems at hand, but struggled more than ever. The stress of everything going on was beginning to get to him. He felt the weight of everything. So many lives were on the line, and they all were counting on his leadership.

Kamon entered the room. He looked pale and tired. Lucius assumed both he and Gerreon lost sleep over recent events. The hunter wondered if the counselor and scribe were in danger as well.

“You are all to come with me. The final trial is about to begin.”

“Tell Gerreon I am sorry what happened to his men...” Lucius spoke plainly.

Kamon looked shocked momentarily. “I suppose any pretenses are pointless now. Gerreon does not blame you for what happened.”

“Do you?”

“I understand his reasoning, but I find it difficult to be a noble as he is.”

“I appreciate your honesty.”

“It’s best not to keep the crowd waiting.”

The group followed the scribe, all attempting to conceal their anxiety. As they neared their destination, the roar of the crowd grew louder. To Lucius, the audience seemed louder than ever before, perhaps they were greater in number. The very walls shook with the echo of the cheers. They stopped at a pair of double doors.

“Are you required to be here after you escort us?” Lucius asked the scribe.

“No, all scribes have been given permission to watch the ceremony with the general public.”

“I don’t know if you should. Go somewhere safe. Everything is about to change very quickly and it could be dangerous, for both you and Counselor Gerreon.”

Kamon nodded. “Gerreon’s remaining sources suggest the trial is to be tampered with. They may try to kill you during the event.”

Lucius nodded and shook Kamon’s hand. The scribe then opened the doors revealing a giant stone wall maze before them. In front of the entrance stood a platform, Lucius assumed they were meant to stand there as they listened to instructions and other formalities.

“Good luck,” Kamon said, motioning them to the platform.

Silently, they all walked forward, stepping up onto the raised area before them. The cheers grew louder. From the platform, they could now see the raised platform the council resided on. Unlike the crowd, they would be able to see everything going on in the maze without the assistance of any magical viewing device. Birch stood and motioned for the crowd to quiet down.

“Contenders for the crown, this is it, the final deciding moment in your long and demanding journey. The one of you that walks out of here as the ruler of Aarden Hall will have many more difficult tasks ahead, but, having proven yourself worthy of the crown, your people will stand behind you, believing in you, trusting in you, and admiring you. The task at hand is no ordinary maze. The final trial consists of several smaller trials meant to test all the qualities a leader must possess. Be warned, however, that unlike the other trials there is a possibility for mortal harm. We do not expect death, but such as in life, you must all accept it as a possibility.”

Birch paused. The counselor's eyes drifted to Lucius. The hunter met the foul man's gaze and for a brief moment there was nothing else. Lucius wanted to shout, he wanted everyone watching to know what kind of monster Birch was, but he had no proof.

"The first to reach the center of the maze will be declared the winner. For those in the audience who cannot see all parts of the maze from their seats, there will be viewers available. Now, let us begin. Contenders, you may proceed into the maze at the sound of the third horn." Birch finished his speech.

"Are we staying together?" Connor whispered.

"I think we should," Grace said.

"No point in making ourselves easier targets," Auriel said.

Lucius nodded. "We stay together. We don't need to prove anything."

One horn sounded. The cheers of the crowd grew. The second horn sounded. Lucius could feel Birch glaring at him. The third horn boomed and they were off without hesitation. Moving as one, they bound into the maze. Lucius was amazed at how much darker it had become, even though the ceiling was open. Then, he realized there was a chance that some of the mysterious dark metal had been scattered about to impair their judgment. The hunter began to wonder just how much of dark iron Aarden Hall had in its possession. His thoughts could not linger on that for long, however, as the dangers of the maze began to reveal themselves.

Auriel stopped Lucius from walking straight into a tripwire. The contraption was attached to a series of crossbows. He felt foolish for allowing his mind to wander. The crowd booed at their display of team work.

“Thanks...” he muttered, trying to ignore the crowd.

Carefully, they circumvented the trap one by one. The ground suddenly felt different to Lucius. He glanced down, everything appeared the same. They continued walking cautiously, each examining every corner of the maze corridor ahead. The hunter heard the familiar sound of the suction of mud. Each step he took was more strained. Again, when he looked down there was the same stone path.

“I’m starting to think there are illusions in here,” he said.

“I think you’re right,” Grace agreed.

They trudged on, each step growing harder than the last. Then, in the distance a bubble popped on the surface of the unseen muck.

“If I had some of my books, I could probably dispel the illusion,” Connor said.

“I’d appreciate if you tried anyways,” Auriel said.

They all stopped as Connor stooped down, muttering to himself, apparently trying to remember what he had read.

“All that reading and you can’t remember?” Auriel said.

Grace shot her a disapproving glance. “You can do it, Connor.”

Connor did not seem to hear either of them—he was transfixed by his thoughts. His brow furrowed as he forced himself to recover the knowledge he had studied. Another bubble burst in the mud, closer this time.

“Hey, Connor... No pressure buddy but I think there may be something in here with us.” Lucius said.

The hunter went through the list of what it could possibly be. Under the muck limited it to things that don't breathe. A banshee would simply float above it and lure them in with a song. That left only a few options, the most likely of which was a bog ghoul. It would be easy enough to catch, even for an untrained hunter, but would still present a formidable foe to an unarmed group making their way through an illusion.

“Most likely a bog ghoul. I've only heard one set of bubbles so it shouldn't be too bad...”

A second set of bubbles sounded from the other direction, followed by a third. The group began to look around wildly, backing up into a circle.

“Make that three,” the hunter said.

“How's the illusion breaking going, Connor?” Grace said, her statement shorter than usual.

“Almost got it. I think...” the academic replied. “There we go.”

The illusion faded, revealing a startlingly massive swamp before them. It turned out the walls of the maze were further than they appeared and their road ahead was long.

“How?” Auriel said with wide eyes.

Lucius spotted movement in the mud around them. It was definitely bog ghouls—he could see the ridge of their spines breaking the surface. Their murky gray skin blended in with the environment, but the hunter’s eyes were trained. Lucius searched the now visible swamp for anything that would make a useful weapon. The Shadow Council could not have been solely responsible for the maze’s design, surely a degree of fairness involved from the non-corrupt members.

“Interesting... I just realized we can’t hear the crowd from in here,” Connor observed.

“Yeah, fascinating, but not really the time.” Auriel responded.

“Okay, so my plan as of now is run,” Lucius said. “But stay together, bog ghouls will direct their attention to anyone who gets separated.”

They began to move as a group as quickly as the muck covered ground would allow. Suddenly, the reality of their situation dawned on the hunter. There was no way for the council’s illusion to expand the area of the maze. They could obscure what was in an area, but it would take a truly powerful illusionist to create such an area. Therefore, the images before them now must be the illusion.

“I have good news and bad news,” Lucius said.

“What?” the rest said unanimously.

“Connor, it turns out you don’t remember how to disenchant an illusion, because we are seeing one now.”

As Lucius words sunk in, the swamp around them faded and they found themselves back in the stone corridor of the maze. They made their way down the hall and on into the first turn.

“Fascinating...” Connor said.

“Alright, now we have an idea of what’s in store for us in here. We can assume at some point there will be a fork. We should discuss how to approach that obstacle now so we can save time when we come to it.”

“Split up into groups?” Auriel suggested.

“It makes sense, but it does present obvious problems,” Grace said.

They rounded the next corner, more of the same stone corridor.

“Groups obviously could save time, but only for the group that gets the right hallway. And who knows how long we are intended to be in here,” Lucius said.

“Hey yeah, how big is this thing? I’d rather not starve to death trying to navigate a labyrinth,” Auriel said.

They came to the first crossroads. There were hooded figures standing in the center.

“Uhh... are those illusions as well?” Connor asked nervously.

Lucius recognized the figures, clad in the same garb as his would be assassin wore in the Black Cell.

“No, and I don’t think they are part of the trial. They’re here for the bounty.”

Chapter 70- Aeacus

Last Chance Diplomacy

Accumulating masses of Undying huddled outside of the chosen negotiation site. Quiet anticipation sat heavily in the air. Deimos had yet to arrive. The High Priest agreed on the time and location. Aeacus knew that his advisory tardiness had a purpose.

“He is making us look like fools...” Lady Grey said.

“Better a fool than the leader of a war-torn country,” the Undying leader responded.

“Sir, we have to consider that there has not been a real chance for peace since Deimos took charge,” Braun said.

Fenrik nodded, his hand rested on his sword hilt.

“I know that, but I cannot justify not trying one last time.”

The even pattern of marching boots sounded through the busy streets outside. Deimos arrived with him an army of Worshippers in tow. The High Priest entered the building ceremoniously. Many faces in the crowd contorted in disgust, but none spoke out against him. Finally, Deimos entered the building to begin negotiations.

“High Priest, good of you to join us. Please, have a seat,” Aeacus said, gesturing for Deimos to take a seat.

The Priest smirked and sat down on the far end of the table. He eyed everyone in the room closely, probably assessing the degree of threat they posed to him.

“Your presence here, I hope, means you are prepared to negotiate a peaceful agreement,” Aeacus said.

Deimos’ eyes locked onto the Undying leader. “Only if that ‘agreement’ involves you stepping down and handing over the leadership of the Undying over to me.”

“You sang a different tune when we first met.”

“Yes, well... that was before you refused to see reason. That was before I witnessed the awe-inspiring devotion of the Worshipers of the Demon. It was astoundingly easy to convince them to take up arms against you.”

“You are not here in the name of peace.”

Braun and Fenrik stood. Lady Grey pulled out a concealed dagger under the table, her cordial expression did not falter. Deimos began laughing.

“The name of peace? My dear, naïve ‘Lord’. I am here to see to your death.”

Screams filled the plaza where the public gathered. The clashing of swords accentuated the terror. Braun and Fenrik drew their swords and bound towards Deimos. Just as quickly, armed fanatics encircled the High Priest. Deimos could not contain his exuberance.

“Take them,” the Priest commanded.

Faster than anyone could respond, Lady Grey leapt to her feet, dashing from one weapon-wielding Worshiper to another, stabbing and slashing with her knife. She slew three before having to double back in order to not be overtaken. Aeacus drew his sword.

“As you can see. It won’t be that easy, Deimos. Just because I wish to avoid combat does not mean I cannot achieve victory in it,” Aeacus said proudly.

The High Priest’s remaining men encircled their leader. There were five Worshippers remaining in the building. Once again, the Lady moved with unpredictable speed as she hurled her knife through the Undying blockade and into the shoulder of the High Priest. Deimos smile had long since faded as he stumbled back from the impact. He had not foreseen this.

“I misjudged you all... No matter, this is merely the beginning. The streets will run red until the Demon is worshipped by all and I stand as the representative for all Undying.” With a gesture, the High Priest was evacuated from the facility by his men.

Braun soon gathered Loyalist forces together. Pulling the civilians he could off the streets and into protective custody. Aeacus soon found himself surrounded by ever-vigilant guards.

“We need to get you both to a more secure location,” the head of the guard said to Aeacus and Lady Grey.

The Undying leader nodded solemnly and followed his escorts into the chaos outside. As soon as the outside air brushed against their skin, they were met with a hail of arrows. Most of the barrage of blocked with their wall of shields, however, one arrow nearly made it through and struck Aeacus. A soldier, who the leader was ashamed to realize he did not recognize, dove in front of his Lord and fell dead.

“Down with the Lord and Lady! The Worshipers of the Demon shall rise!”
voices shouted from seemingly every direction.

It pained Aeacus to ignore so many people in need, but he had to be realistic. He could not save them all, and he would likely die if he tried. As they transported their leader across the city they witnessed arson, robbery, and murder. They turned a blind eye because they had to think to the future, peace could not return with stable leadership. The Undying leader was able to persevere through all of this, knowing what the future might hold if he were to be slain now.

Chapter 71- Raijin

Purification

Raijin had long since lost the ravenous bear, but he could still hear it stomping through the crystalline woods, searching. The young druid did not know what he searched for. He knew there must be some way to purify this dream world. He did not know how long he searched, time moved different inside the vision.

A faint but distinct sound reached him through the hellish growls of the bear and the crackling roar of the fiery sky. Trickling water spilled over the parched earth somewhere close. Raijin's eyes darted to all the possible sources, the river beds were dried up. There was no source of water, but there had to be a spring nearby. The young druid bent down, feeling the earth with his hands. He closed his eyes, waiting for something, anything, to happen. Inhaling deeply, Raijin searched for any indication of which direction to go.

The crashing stomps of the bear grew nearer. Raijin did not falter, he drowned out the sounds of the nightmare landscape and focused only on the soft bubbling of the water. Instinctively, Raijin stood to his feet and began walking due east. Something deep inside of him propelled him forward, though he had not picked up any physical clues to the water's location.

He travelled for quite some time, the furious bear on his trail the entire time. The young druid's heart sank when his journey brought him to a dead end. Raijin found himself in a small ravine with steep, rounded walls. The bear was closing in. Perhaps he could slip out of the death trap if he were quick. No... Why had his instincts brought him

to this place? He looked around, and found what he searched for on the far end of the ravine. A small trickle of water seeped out of the stone wall. That was when Raijin noticed the seams: the ravine consisted of three solid stone slabs, forming a semi-circle to damn up the river. How did this come to pass? Raijin did not know how this world worked. It could be that the dam appeared on its own as a symbolic gesture. However, he feared the possibility that there could be a shadowy entity in this dream world, corrupting and destroying everything.

Heavy breathing from behind withdrew Raijin from his thoughts. He turned, the bear managed to catch up. Out of breath, the beast was more furious than ever. Employing the same tactic he used with the trees, the druid backed up towards the source of the water.

“We are not enemies, spirit. We were once one. Do you remember?” Raijin said, hoping to prolong the bear’s charge.

The creature did not pause. His words meant nothing through its fury. The bear’s breathing steadied. Raijin braced himself for the attack. He felt cool water pool around his feet. Charging forward, the bear let out a booming roar. As before, Raijin rolled out of the way. Slamming into the stone wall, the bear lost its footing and fell head first into the shallow pool of clear water. The beast was only momentarily stunned. Raijin readied himself for another attack. The bear stood to its feet. Turning slowly, the presence of the great spirit seemed different. Raijin’s hopes were confirmed when the beast looked him in the eyes. The fury faded. The water, with just the slightest touch, had washed away the corruption.

“Feeling better?” Raijin said.

The bear grunted in acknowledgement.

“Good. Now, we just need to figure out how to break this dam down to purify the rest of the forest.”

The bear turned toward the wall, eyeing the gap where the water escaped. Raijin instinctively walked next to his spirit animal and placed his hand on its back. The bear faintly glowed a brilliant, light blue. It raised its massive head and began to roar like Raijin never heard it roar before. The walls around them began to crack and all at once, the cool purifying waters of the river washed over them.

Chapter 72- Dalia

Standoff

Knife in hand, the seer stared into the falling water before her. Dalia stood at Geirolf's side as he snarled at the unseen foe. Nothing moved but the falls. Steadily and powerfully the water fell, until a quick moving figure broke the pattern in the cascading liquid. A wolf jumped into the alcove. Two others followed. Then a man stepped through the falls. There was no doubt he was a Wild One, the ferocity that resided in the eyes of the wolves could also be found in his. The man looked from Dalia to the unconscious Raijin and smiled.

“A convert and a meal. What a bountiful hunt,” he said in a low, gruff voice.

“Poor little Wild One, you're in over your head and you don't even know it,” the seer responded.

The Wild Ones all bound towards them at once. Geirolf immediately pinned one to the ground, tearing it its throat. Dalia side stepped another's frantic leap. The slain Wild One turned back into his human form. A wolf caught the seer's ankle in its maw. Losing her balance, Dalia began to fall. She watched as her warg wrestled her assailant off her leg, but briskly was kicked down by the pack leader. Her collision with the ground knocked the wind out of her and sent the knife in her hand spinning across the wet ground. Within seconds, the human Wild One was on her, gripping his hands around her throat. Geirolf whimpered, struggling to get up.

The malicious smile returned to the Wild One's face. “What was that you were saying about being in over my head?”

In a flash, his smile faded and blood tricked down from the top of his head. Raijin stood over the Wild One, knife thrust through its skull. The dead man's grip loosened and air returned to Dalia's lungs. The fight was not over yet. One of the two remaining wolves jumped on to the injured warg. The other, leapt at Raijin. The druid spun around, slashing the wolf in the face. Dalia crawled frantically over to the distracted wolf attacking Geirolf. Wrapping her arms around the beast's throat, she pulled the Wild One backwards. Holding on tightly she choked the life out of the wolf until it transformed back into a man. The last Wild One rebounded from its injury quickly, yelping it retreated through the water fall. Howling, the enemy signaled for reinforcements. A chill ran up Dalia's spine as dozens of howls returned the injured wolf's cry.

“We have to go, now! Put the warg on my back and hop on!” Raijin said, transforming into a bear.

The seer did as commanded, within seconds they were bounding through the forest at high speeds. The trees were a blur, but Dalia strained her eyes in search of their pursuers. One after another, wolves appeared all around them. Every attempt the Wild Ones made to halt their progress resulted in their injury. Raijin deftly dodged and counter attacked even in his lumbering form. The bear did not lose speed, but the pack did with every failed attack. Geirolf whimpered at every hard step Raijin took—the kick from the Wild One must have broken his ribs. More wolves came out of the blur of trees—they were not as tired as their brothers. The newcomers kept pace with the massive bear. They did not attack. They were waiting for him to tire before they struck.

Dalia felt helpless, the wolves were out of reach for her to attack, but she felt compelled to do something. Focusing all her energy on the closest Wild One, the seer attempted to enter its mind without physical contact. The wolf faltered, it must have sensed her somehow. Dalia wished she knew the full extent of her powers, she did not know what hidden abilities she might have that would prove useful in this moment. She pushed harder, wanting nothing but to enter the mind of the Wild One, if only to prove she could. Brief flashes of chaos filled her mind. The visions were much like that she had seen in Siv's mind, but the Wild Ones had given into the chaos. There would be no recovering them from their madness with her current abilities.

Dalia reawakened to the physical world to find that the wolf whose mind she tampered with had fallen behind. The seer was disheartened to realize it would be impossible for her to stop them all. She sensed she was more powerful. She knew she was more powerful. If only she could harness what lay in wait within. Shouts came from the trees above. A hail of arrows rained down upon the pursuing pack of wolves. They made it back to the safety of the Druid Woods.

Chapter 73- Alwin

The Man Behind the Monster

The man they recovered from the Gnarled Man's lab was dead. Prue did all she could, but the man had simply given up on life. They were fortunate that he lasted long enough to give them such a vital clue. Jaron's men managed to sneak the body out of the city and promised to keep it hidden until they could hold a proper burial ceremony the following night. They never discovered the man's name, it seemed likely he had been plucked from the streets and had no family to speak of.

Alwin had no choice but to return to his regular shift of guard duty. He already pushed his commander's limits with his veiled excuses. The knight knew that it was probably only the possibility that his friend could soon be king that his guard commander did not protest his absence at a time when they needed every man available to help keep order. Jaron had been informed of the locations Alwin would be stationed so he could find him if anything were to come up.

It was strange to the knight to return to his normal routine. He could almost forget recent events as he surrounded himself in his old world. The roar of the crowd at the final trial constantly brought him back to the present. He tried to get duty somewhere he could view the trial, but the positions were promised long ago while he was on leave.

About halfway through his shift, Alwin was surprised to see someone walking down the lonely road. Even those who could not get in to see the trial were camped out as close as they could get. Out of the corner of his eye the knight saw movement in one of the alley ways. The knight stiffened. As the man on the road neared, Alwin greeted him

cordially while trying to eye the alley without seeming like something was wrong. It was, he thought, probably nothing after all. It was most likely just a stray scrounging for food. Then, a figure darted out of the alley and ran head-long into the man in the street.

“Thief!” the man shouted, checking his pockets.

Alwin immediately jumped to action, but the thief started with a lead and was not encumbered by heavy armor. Briefly, the knight considered stripping off some of the more limiting pieces of plate he wore, but soon thought better of it. There may very well, after all, have been more thieves lurking around in search of loot while everyone was away. When they rounded a corner, the thief slowed. Alwin caught up, confused. Was there an ambush waiting? The knight stopped in his tracks, placing his hand on his sword.

“Jaron discovered who Zosimus Soloman is,” the man said, turning to face Alwin.

“Why didn’t he come himself? And what’s with the theatrics?”

“It’s worse than we thought. I needed to make sure you weren’t being watched.”

Jaron stepped out of a nearby intersecting alley.

Alwin began to laugh. “He can’t possibly warrant all this. He is just one man.”

“No, my friend, he isn’t a man. He is something far worse.”

Alwin’s smile faded.

Jaron motioned for him to enter a nearby house. “Come on, we should get out of the open.”

Wordlessly, they entered the building. It was a small but inviting home. They sat down at a handcrafted wooden table in the middle of the room. The pretend thief followed close behind them.

“A safe house of yours?” Alwin said.

“Edward’s home. He very graciously invited us to use it today,” Jaron said gesturing towards the other man.

“This makes us square on the whole stables incident,” Edward responded.

“One debt down, only a dozen more to go,” Jaron laughed.

“You found something out about the Gnarled Man?” Alwin interrupted a bit impatiently.

Jaron became serious once again. “Yes, well... We discovered a lot but it is hard to determine what is truth and what is myth.”

Alwin motioned for him to continue. Their precautions and foreboding had kept his attention, but he still worried about leaving his post. The knight wondered why this could not have waited. Likely, it could have but Jaron did not seem to be one that understood a steady and reliable job.

“There is one thing we know for sure, Zosimus Soloman has discovered a way to prolong his life. The only record of that name dates back several generations.”

“That’s impossible. It’s more likely he uses the name as a cover to make it appear he has lived that long.”

“That’s what we thought too and I wish it were the case. Soloman once ran the Stoneshore Asylum. It is said that on that island, he performed perverse experiments on his patients all in the search for immortality. He is the reason they shut the place down. The king placed a ransom on his head, preferred dead over alive.”

“Sure, it sounds like our guy, but like I said it’s impossible. He must be a copycat of some sort.”

Jaron motioned to Edward, who swiftly brought out a covered painting from a nearby room. “We broke in to the place with just as much doubt as you.”

Edward uncovered the painting. It was doubtlessly old, the paint cracked and the colors were dull, but the image remained clear. A younger, more human alchemist gazed intensely out of the painting. Underneath it the plaque read Zosimus Soloman.

“I hate to say it, but it gets far worse than that,” Jaron said solemnly.

Chapter 74- Aeacus

War in the Undying Lands

Deimos must be killed. Reports came in by the hour of new atrocities the Worshippers performed in his name or under his command. Homes were ransacked and whole families were ritualistically sacrificed to Aerico.

“Surely, we out number them,” Aeacus said to Braun, looking for reassurance.

“We do, my Lord, but they hide amongst your people and strike selectively.”

“If the limbs are difficult to strike, then we go for the heart. Any progress in finding Deimos?” Lady Grey asked.

“Not yet, my Lady, but I have assigned my best men to the reconnaissance.”

As they spoke, two soldiers set up a war table. A clear and defined map of the Undying city of Nox’ Orus sprawled across a table and were placing various symbols across it. They rummaged through various smaller maps and reconnaissance letters to form the image to present to the leaders.

“Is there any decipherable pattern to their attacks?” Aeacus said, observing the partially finished war table.

“There are two areas they are avoiding: the Imperial Quarter and the Rot-hide Dens.”

Fenrik rubbed his now scarring face at the mention of rot-hides. Aeacus took notice, but said nothing. He continued, “Likely, Deimos does not wish his fanatics to get

near the Dens. The first attack on Worshippers by the Demon was seen by few. He undoubtedly wishes to avoid a second attack.”

Striking all at once, inspiration came to the Undying leader. Simultaneously it brought him joy and fear. He knew how to break apart the Worshippers of the Demon, but it would require tactics that repulsed the leader to his core. It may very well be the only way, however.

“What is it?” Lady Grey said, noticing the look on the Undying Lords face.

“We will find Deimos, trap him, and force him to confront the Demon himself.”

“If we slaughter the Worshippers, we will be viewed as no better than they are. You could lose your people’s support,” Braun interjected.

Aeacus remained silent, eyeing the war table diligently and refusing to look anyone in the eye. He could feel Fenrik’s gaze.

“He does not mean to kill sacrifice any but Deimos,” the Lady said cautiously. “We need to formulate a plan to separate him, disorient him, and push him back into the Dens.”

“We should kill as few as we can, but it must seem to Deimos that extreme measures have been taken against him,” Aeacus added.

“In theory, it sounds great, but the execution will not be so simple,” Braun said. “We do not even know where he is.”

“I have a theory on that as well.” Aeacus said. “If I wanted to rally Undying in the name of Aerico, I would go to where the attacks began so long ago.”

“You believe he is in the old cathedral? It’s possible, but that place is a labyrinth. It is likely they will ambush us well before we discover their location,” Braun said.

Aeacus nodded in agreement. “We must draw them out somehow. One as cunning as Deimos will not so easily be fooled, either.”

“What do you suggest, my Lord?”

“I do not think you will like it, Braun, but it may just be our best shot at ending this conflict quickly.

Chapter 75- Lucius

The Fourth Trial- Coordination

The assassins drew nearer. Lucius was surprised that their numbers matched the contenders. Perhaps, the assailants lived by a code of honor, or they could simply be concealing their true numbers. Regardless, it appeared to be four on four. The only problem was that the contenders for the crown were unarmed and, as far as Lucius knew, he was the only one that had ever been in a fight. The young hunter now wished he had not hid the dagger used on him in the Black Cell, though he doubted it would have gone unnoticed if he brought a weapon to the trial.

Lucius was sure he could disarm one of them, but that still left three more to deal with. He doubted he could take down three assassins by himself while defending his three friends. He had caught his assailant off guard during the first attempt at his life, he would not have that luxury here.

“Sooo... Plan?” Connor said.

“I can perhaps charm one over to our side, but I would need him alone. That is assuming they aren’t trained to resist such spells,” Grace said.

“I am trained in both sword and knife fighting,” Auriel said.

Lucius looked at her in surprise.

“What? What else is a ridiculously rich girl to do?” Auriel said wryly.

“Okay so, we disarm two. Charm one and use him to take down the other,” Lucius said.

“I guess that just leaves me to distract the last one until the charmed assassin can take him down,” Connor said, his voice shaking.

The assassins were now close enough to hear them. The time for discussion was over. It dawned on Lucius that their advisories were moving slowly toward them for a reason. Again, it struck the hunter that it could simply be an honorable attempt to give them time to formulate a plan or they simply could be luring them into a trap. Lucius felt a swell of fear. Surely there were more of them lurking in the shadows, perhaps behind another illusion wall nearby.

“I don’t like this... We need to retreat and fight on our own terms,” Lucius said.

The group backed up, and as they did four more assassins appeared from behind an illusionary wall. The hunter felt validated, but more fearful than ever. The contenders broke into a sprint once they rounded the corner and were briefly out of sight of the assassins.

“Connor, I assume you have gone hunting,” Lucius said.

“Yes, but I never cared for it,” Connor said.

“Not the point, are you a decent shot?” the hunter asked.

Connor nodded.

“Well then we know where to head first.”

They were almost to the crossbow trap when it became clear their assailants were no longer moving patiently. The eight were closing in swiftly.

“Wouldn’t happen to be able to reactivate that illusion, would you?” Lucius said to Connor.

“It wouldn’t do any good if they know it’s an illusion. We have to assume they know everything that is in this place.”

They were at the crossbows. “We could really use something to slow them down. This rig is not going to be easy to dismantle,” Lucius said, tugging on one of the bows.

“Connor, do you think you can conceal me with some sort of illusion?” Grace said.

“Possibly, but I really don’t have much practical application experience.”

Lucius knew what his friend was planning. “If they see through the illusion, you are done for.”

“If I don’t try then we all are.”

“At least let me distract them,” Auriel said, bounding forward. “Do try and keep me alive, yeah?”

And with that, they were thrust into action. Connor began reciting incantations under his breath. Grace slowly made her way into the fray, waiting for the illusion to kick in. Lucius observed the trap, hoping to find a way to free at least one of the crossbows without a tool. Auriel made it to the assassin’s. A few lunged towards her, but she dodged them deftly and managed to slip through to the other side of their ranks. She caught yet another’s attention. Grace disappeared. The remaining four continued on their path towards Lucius and Connor. The hunter spotted a missing screw. He tried to bend the rig

at the weak spot, it would not budge. Glancing around for a loose stone on the path, Lucius briefly saw three assassins closing in on Auriel. The hunter found what he was looking for. Jamming the rock under the loose rig, Lucius managed to free a crossbow. He had one shot. Two of the three assassins that were closing in on Auriel turned and stood at her side against their brothers. Auriel disarmed the disoriented third and thrust the blade through his heart. The remaining warriors took notice and in the brief window, Lucius let loose a bolt that found its home in the neck of one of the attackers. Connor was no longer casting the illusion. Grace was visible, but safely behind the mind controlled men. Connor began to try and loosen yet another crossbow. The controlled assassins clashed with the remaining assailants. One controlled down, one assassin. Connor freed a bow, took aim and hit his mark in the back. The assassin did not fall, but stumbled, leaving Auriel open to finish the job. Lucius ran forward, jumping on the last remaining assassin. Knocking the blade out of the man's hand, he stabbed the knife through the assassin's eye. Grace whispered to the final controlled and he slit his throat, falling to the ground in a pool of blood.

Chapter 76- Raijin

The Shadow of the Totem

The druid leader had never looked more upset with his son than upon his return from the Dark Totem. Their welcome consisted of a mixture of silent avoiding glances and short cordial greetings. Everyone held the same look of fear and awe in their expression.

Clearly, they knew what Raijin set out to do and were impressed he returned, but he had gone without his father's blessing and that was something that could not be abided. He endangered the entire tribe with his actions.

Geirolf was awake. He could sense the tension in the air and whimpered. Dalia carried the injured warg, trying to sooth him while supporting his weight. Raijin, now in human form, seemed unaware of the seer's plight. Kajah greeted them solemnly as they approached where she and Borghildr stood. The druid matriarch helped Dalia support the weight of her warg and they took him inside their family tent, leaving Raijin to face the leader alone.

“Father I...” Raijin began but was cut short with the motion of Borghildr hand.

“What you did was reckless and dishonored our entire family.”

“I did what had to be done.”

“I understand that. I truly do. But you plunged head first into a darkness you do not understand without thinking of the consequences it could have on our people.”

“If I did nothing, then we would have no way to counter the darkness of the totem. I did what I did to understand it better. I know how to counter the effects it has on our people.”

Gasps sounded from the crowd that silently gathered to listen in on their public debate. Raijin saw fear in his father’s eyes for the first time. He understood now that the great leader of the druids was at a loss. He did not want to go to war with his own sister, but grew ever more aware of its necessity. Raijin now knew the true impact his actions made, his parents believed they had lost their son. They very well could have lost him if his plan failed. The two druids seemed to both understand this and no longer knew what to say. Raijin bound forward and hugged his father.

“I am sorry. I did not know what else to do to save our people,” the son said.

His father embraced him. “I feared we lost you and did not think of what it could mean if you succeeded.”

They let go and stepped away from each other. “We should go in and discuss what I discovered with mother and Dalia.”

Borghildr nodded in agreement and they entered the warmly lit hut. The two women were knelt over Geirolf, tending to his wounds. Kajah looked over her shoulder at them, brow furrowed. Her expression softened when she saw her husband’s demeanor.

“The warg will heal, the Wild One’s kick cracked a few ribs, but he is strong,” Kajah said, standing to her feet and hugging her son. “You are lucky it was not you who came home injured.”

“The risk was not for nothing, mother,” Raijin said.

“I expected to need to retrieve you from the dream. I was just about to when the Wild Ones attacked,” the seer said, stroking the resting warg.

Raijin told them all what happened in the dream world and how to corruption manifested itself. Dalia confirmed his visions of this manifestation with her own experience in Siv’s mind.

“There are two things that trouble me though...” the young druid said. “I was able to purify my mind, but not able to prevent the corruption. Even so, the purification was not an easy task and it left me vulnerable for quite some time.”

“Perhaps if we can enter your mind when it is uncorrupted we can fortify it somehow,” Dalia said.

“Yes, but it will not be that simple.”

“What do you mean, son?” Kajah asked.

“When I was in the dream, even after the corruption faded, I felt like I was being watched. Something had to create the dam that walled off the purifying spring, and I believe that something still resides within. There is one more remaining shadow of the Dark Totem that we must vanquish.”

Chapter 77- Alwin

Tracks

Every horrific detail had been explained to Alwin. The Alchemist possessed a mythical reputation swimming in rumors—there was no way they could all possibly be true, at least the knight hoped not. He managed to return to his post without anyone noticing he left, that was one benefit of missing the final trial.

Jaron and Edward departed with him with the promise that they would find a lead that would point them in the Gnarled Man's direction. Though Alwin did not doubt Jaron's resourcefulness and dedication, he doubted they would ever find a trace of Solomon ever again. If he managed to elude capture and death when the king placed a bounty on him, it was likely he could evade them as well.

The sun set and the knight's shift ended. He was relieved of duty by his replacement. They exchanged greetings and Alwin went on his way, going home for the first time in what seemed like an eternity. Sleeping very little since Bard's death, he wanted nothing more than to crawl into his bed until the morning. Earlier in the day, he had only desired to catch the end of the Fourth Trial, but exhaustion had finally caught up with him. Groggily, Alwin shuffled to his home.

Unlocking the door, the knight practically fell into his modest house. The entire structure was one room with bedroom, kitchen, living, and dining all mashed together in a cluttered but organized manner. Unstrapping his armor, Alwin uncharacteristically let it fall to the floor. Slipping into bed without another thought, the knight swiftly drifted into a deep sleep.

“Alwin, wake up,” Bard said.

Alwin opened his eyes to the brightness of the mid-day sun. He was huddled in the shade of a tree, attempting to escape the summer heat. Bard stood over him smiling.

“Get your ass up. We need to meet Lucius.”

“Alright... alright,” Alwin muttered, hoisting up his hunting supplies.

“What is a monster hunt like?”

Alwin shrugged. “Better than guard duty. Not as fun as you might think.”

Bard hit Alwin’s shoulder. “You’re grumpy when you wake up.”

Alwin cupped his hand and poured water from his canteen into it. He splashed his face, letting the cool breeze dry him, he felt more awake. They walked for some time until they came to the edge of the King’s Wood. Lucius was already waiting for them.

“Alright, who’s ready to make some money?” Lucius clapped. “Today we will be hunting...” he rummaged through his bag and pulled out a frayed parchment. “Gryphon!”

The other two young men could not help but smile as Lucius brandished the poster with a sketch of the gryphon and the reward scrawled across the bottom.

“This one should be easy. Normally, gryphons are difficult, but some farmer did us the favor of shooting one of its wings as it stole one of his sheep. So, it can’t fly. This is a huge advantage for us. All we need to do is pick up its trail and kill the bastard in whatever hole he crawled into.”

“That easy eh?” said the young Bard.

“Well... don’t get me wrong. The beast still has talons sharp enough to gut you in one swipe and a beak to match, but it is easier than it could be.”

“Easier? My lad, how wrong you are.” An aged voice said from behind them. Lucius’ mentor had been listening and shook his head at their eagerness. “Beasts you see... they don’t like being injured. In fact, they hate it. This gryphon of yours will be mighty pissed off and is likely to take it out on anything that gets near its nest.”

“I was getting to that, Guiscard.” Lucius said, tauntingly.

“Were ya now? Well, I’ll be off then.” The old hunter began to leave. “And if you use that name again, I will smack that smirk off your face, boy.”

“Guis, you’re not coming?” Lucius said, less assuredly.

“Coming? I never planned on it,” Guis said, stopping and turning to face his apprentice. “You’ll be fine on your own as long as you keep your head.”

Lucius nodded in humble acknowledgement.

“Oh and, burn some mulberry. It messes with their senses,” Guis said walking away towards the nearest town, and likely the nearest pub.

“Well then... I guess we better find some mulberry on the way to the nest,” Lucius said, picking up his gear and leading his friends into the woods.

Alwin and Bard followed excitedly. The young knight accompanied Lucius on a few before, but most of them had also been with Guis and he took the lead. This hunt was

less certain and it was the first-time Bard accompanied them. They soon found the gryphon's tracks, which were messy and uneven, this clearly was not a creature used to walking on the ground. Alwin was surprised to see that there was very little blood on its trail. If the gryphon was injured enough to not fly, he expected a bit more blood. Bard snatched up some mulberry excitedly and they continued on.

A screech halted them in their tracks. They were close to the gryphon's nest and the scent of blood lingered in the air. Alwin pulled out his sword. Lucius notched an arrow on his bow. Bard readied to light the mulberry, his axe still tethered to his side. They crept forward. A wind picked up, making their journey more cumbersome. Peeking over a series of bushes they saw that the source of the wind was from the beating of the gryphon's giant wings. Bard gasped and Lucius pushed him down below their cover just as the gryphon's head jerked in the direction of the sound. Tilting its head back and forth, the gryphon listened. The ten-foot wing span momentarily stopped flapping as the gryphon craned its neck.

Thinking quickly, Lucius took some of the mulberry and tied it to his notched arrow. Lighting the mulberry, the young hunter let lose his first shot. The arrow sunk into the beast's shoulder, not wounding it severely but it was enough to disorient it with the mulberry. The group sprang to action. Bard lit the rest of the mulberry. Placing it on the ground, the bundle burned a deep grey smoke. The gryphon screeched. Lucius notched another arrow. Alwin made his way around the back of the gigantic creature. Bard pulled out his axe clumsily. The gryphon charged at him. Lucius let lose another arrow, hitting it squarely in the side. The gryphon did not falter. Bard dove towards the burning mulberry, burning his arm but also managing to disorient the gryphon. Alwin jumped off a small

ridge onto the beast's back. The gryphon bucked wildly. Alwin drove his sword into its back and was simultaneously thrown into the air. Lucius landed another arrow into the gryphon's neck. Bard charged with his axe. Alwin hit the ground hard, falling into unconsciousness.

Alwin woke up in his bed. Reality sunk in as he remembered his dream and how long ago that had been. Now, Bard was dead and Lucius was to be king. The knight sat up. He noticed something on his dining table he had not seen when he came home, a letter. He was sure it had not been there, but he had been so exhausted it was hard to determine. Alwin stood, feeling the heaviness of sleep still. He scanned the room. Nothing had changed. He could see the door was locked. The knight picked up his sword, and walked carefully over to the table. Opening the letter, he read: *The alchemist must be ended. Follow the trail.* There was a map inside, with an area circled deep in the King's Wood.

Chapter 78- Dalia

The Wraith in the Dream

Serenity enveloped the world of the dream. Dalia and Raijin stood together observing this world, watching and listening for the shadow that hid amongst the peaceful landscape. Soon, they were greeted by Raijin's spirit bear, which immediately went to druid and nuzzled him lovingly.

“What if we can somehow make the purifying waters rain over the forest momentarily? At least long enough to resist the effects of the totem?” Dalia said.

Raijin nodded. “It is possible, the rules of this world work differently than our own. Perhaps the druid can take control of his own mind and induce the rain to fall. First, however, we must find this remaining corruption.”

“Wouldn't the rain destroy it like it does the dark crystal?”

“This... shadow is different. It has a mind of its own. It is clever. It may find a way to avoid the rain.”

Dalia assumed the druid was right. If the shadow was clever enough to damn up the spring without succumbing to his purification then it may very well avoid the purifying rains. Even then she could feel it watching them, but no sign of its presence remained. Everything was calm and serene, but the seer knew all too well that it lurked nearby. The two exchanged knowing and grave expressions. Wordlessly, they scanned the trees. The spirit bear sensed their uneasiness. It began to sniff the air in search for what troubled them.

“We have to draw it out somehow. We clearly will not find it this way,” Dalia said.

Raijin nodded and gestured for the seer to follow him. They walked for some time through the forest—all the while they felt the eyes of the shadow upon them. Finally, they came to the source of the purifying water. The clear, cool liquid flowed freely. The young druid bent over and drank. He breathed in deep.

“I know where it will go when the rain comes,” he muttered.

A strange screech echoed through the woods. The shadow came to stop the rain from falling. Dalia bent down and drank from the pool. A calming sensation washed over her entire body. The two stood together, waiting for the shadow’s arrival. The spirit bear was on edge, it was familiar with this enemy. It feared the shadow. Rushing towards them, they saw a ball of black smoke leaving corruption in its wake. It closed in: twenty feet, fifteen, ten, five... then the rain came and the shadow screeched. The creature immediately turned and bolted in the direction of a nearby cave system. The corruption it had left behind faded.

“Alright... now how do we kill it?” Dalia said.

Raijin pulled several stones from the purifying waters and began sharpening them. Dalia, following the druid’s lead, found some sticks sturdy enough to serve as spear hilts and plant fiber flexible enough to bind the weapon together. When their spears were complete they made their way to the cave where the shadow dwelled. The rain poured down, soaking them to the core. They were not weighed down by the rain, they were

invigorated by it. The bear followed the two hunters closely—it too became energized by the rain.

Echoing wails were unending as they neared the entrance. Raijin motioned for the spirit bear to stay at the mouth of the cave. The spirit did as it instructed. Without hesitation, the two made their way towards the weakened shadow creature. They found it, in corporeal form, at the back of the cavern. It was human-like in shape at the torso, it had a human like head with indistinguishable features, its five fingered hands formed at the ends into sharp claws, its legs faded into a single smoke trail, and its eyes glowed a deep and angry purple.

“What are you?” Dalia asked the wraith.

Its gaze shifted to her, but it did not respond.

“It is clear to us that you understand. You refuse to communicate?” Raijin said.

Again, the shadow’s gaze shifted silently.

“Well then, you have brought corruption into this serene dream and must be punished for your actions,” Raijin said, raising his spear.

Dalia followed suit and the wraith screeched once again. It charged forward, in a final attempt to defend itself, but the two hunters were too fast and they dodged to either side, spearing the wraith simultaneously. A new, more panicked sound came from the shadows. Then, the entity faded into nothing.

Breathing heavy, Dalia and Raijin returned to the waking world. They expected to be greeted with happiness, but were instead met with the wailing of loss. Siv's mother stood outside the hut, on her knees and cradling her son's lifeless body.

“The boy fell to the darkness once more. Without method to restrain him or to purify him, his family was forced to kill him or be killed themselves,” the druid leader reported.

Chapter 79- Aeacus

Sacrifice

Looming overhead, the entrance of the cathedral cast a shadow over the Undying leader. He knelt on the hard ground, hands bound. Braun stood over him with his sword drawn and pointed at Aeacus's neck.

“The Lady Grey has agreed to your terms of a share in power. She wishes you to accept her apology for the Lord's behavior. She hopes this token of good will can convince you to end this conflict and be inclined to reconsider your original proposal,” Braun shouted into the structure.

For some time, they waiting in silence, the putrid air of the Undying lands spiraling around them. Slowly, Worshippers of the Demon emerged around them, now clad in matching white robes and wielding curved knives. None of the new comers spoke, the just encircled Braun and Aeacus, staring at them with hollow, sunken eyes. After quite some time, Deimos emerged from the entrance. He tried to conceal the fact that his shoulder was wounded, but Aeacus could see he held it differently than the other.

“Why should I trust in the Lady when she had so recently pledged her loyalty to Lord Aeacus. She even promised him her hand in marriage,” the High Priest snarled.

“The Lady is more... practical than the Lord. He is blinded by idealism, while she is not. She wishes to serve as political leader while you serve as religious leader. It is the only way she can foresee peace,” Braun responded.

The High Priest of the Demon laughed, his congregation followed suit. Deimos scanned Braun's face assessing the truth of his statements. Aeacus kept his eyes cast down on the ground.

"Please, we just want to conflict to stop. No more innocent deaths," Braun pleaded.

"Innocent? They are heretics. They do not follow our Lord Aerico."

"Heretics," the congregation hissed.

"You said Worshippers and Non-Worshippers could live together."

"The Demon will not allow it."

"You have communed with him?" Braun's voice wavered with fear.

Deimos grinned, taking a step closer to Braun and Aeacus. "I have."

"Liar," Aeacus said, raising his head.

The Undying leader knew that Deimos was not falling for their ploy. The question now was, what would the High Priest do next? With every fiber in him, Aeacus wanted to panic and call in the nearby soldiers, but he knew it was safer to hold off and wait for Deimos' next move.

"You dare question the integrity of the High Priest?" Deimos said, subdued anger swelling momentarily in his voice.

"Heretic," the congregation hissed.

“I have seen the Demon. Your Lord Aerico has no interest in conversing with us. He wants only to bring suffering and death.”

“I think you confuse him with yourself, my ‘Lord’ Aeacus.”

Seemingly gliding forward, Deimos was before Aeacus almost instantly. A sharp sting followed by warm, wet pressure radiated in Aeacus’s stomach. Looking down, the Undying leader saw the crimson soaked blade that had been thrust into him. He did not need to issue any order, within moments his soldiers were surrounding the Worshippers. Braun drew his sword and lunged towards the High Priest in a rage. Soon, Fenrik knelt at his friend’s side, applying pressure to the wound with one hand and wielding his sword in the other. The leader attempted to stand, but Fenrik held him down, giving him a stern look.

“Do not kill your brethren!” Aeacus managed to shout, wincing immediately afterwards.

The soldiers did as they were told, the Worshippers were either disarmed and subdued or scattered. Aeacus was happy to see Deimos retreat in the direction they wanted. The Undying leader pulled out a small vial of a light blue chemical he concocted himself. He suspected injury as a possibility. Feeling light headed from loss of blood, Aeacus shakily handed Fenrik the vial to uncork. His bodyguard looked at him confused. Aeacus pointed to the wound and Fenrik poured the contents without hesitation. A burning cold filled the area that inflicted more pain than the wound itself did, but the bleeding slowed. Fenrik helped Aeacus wrap his wound and stand to his feet. The Undying leader smiled when he saw the astounded look in Fenrik’s eyes. What his friend did not realize is that he did not wish to stand wounded, but he needed to for his people.

With Fenrik supporting his weight, the Undying leader followed Deimos' retreat. Seeing their leader moving forward injured, soldiers formed a perimeter around Aeacus to hold off any remaining Worshippers. Finally, they came to the edge of the rot-hide dens. The Undying leader felt Fenrik tense up.

“You do not have to follow past this point, my friend,” Aeacus said.

Fenrik shook his head in disagreement, looking forward confidently.

Deimos, realizing where he was, showed true fear for the first time since his rise to power. Aeacus could not help but smile at the High Priest's fear.

“What's wrong Deimos? You have met with your Lord before, have you not?”

Worshippers sporadically showed up around the perimeter. The Undying guard did not stop them. Their fighting was over for now. Everyone watched the High Priest.

Deimos contorted his face to look more confident. “I have.”

“Then show us all that he is a powerful, but just Lord.”

Rot-hides emerged from their dens snarling. Deimos looked behind him, his plaster expression cracking. His mouth twitched as he forced it to remain in a confident smirk, but the effort twisted his look into a sneer.

“Behold, dear Worshippers, the magnificent beasts of our Lord Aerico. These are the deliverers of our gifts!”

“And the murderers of our families,” Aeacus added.

Deimos sputtered. “The Demon showed us loss to better appreciate his gifts.”

The pale terror of the Dens arose out of the darkness. Aerico suddenly loomed over his self-proclaimed High Priest. The lanky, lumbering beast towered over Deimos with a sharp, toothy grin. The Demon mockingly raised a clawed, blood stained hand and stroked the High Priest’s face. Visibly trembling, Deimos attempted to regain his composure. The Worshippers gasped and watched on in awe as their Lord and their Priest interacted. The Demon’s eyes set on Aeacus, his amused gaze chilled the Undying leader’s very core.

Panic filled Aeacus. Was it possible that the Demon would allow the High Priest to live out of spite? Surely, Aerico was at least partially aware of what was occurring. Perhaps, he disliked the idea of being used as a pawn in their politics. For the first time in their entire history with the Demon he spoke.

“My Undying... how you have grown. I have watched you for quite some time,” he began in a raspy voice. “I am disappointed it took you this long to worship me as your god. After all... I provided you with such a wonderful gift. You have squandered your immortality. You allowed yourselves to be walled off from the outside world instead of spreading my will to the masses. But, at last... Behold! Your High Priest has come to set things right!”

Aeacus felt sick. Every nerve in his body screamed. He could not move. He could not breathe. Fenrik felt his friend’s panic and tried his best to stand strong and support him if he were to fall.

“That is... I presume what you want to hear me say. I do not, however, need nor want your worship. I desire only your suffering,” Aerico laughed.

Placing a wide hand all around Deimos' head, the Demon lifted him from the ground. The frightened Undying man flailed wildly, no longer putting on an act for his followers. Lifting one, long sharp claw Aerico ripped the adorned robes off of the High Priest and began slowly peeling away his skin. Deimos screamed as an even scream of flesh and blood fell in clumps to the ground below him. The Undying all watched in terror, unable to move or speak. Aeacus feared for what would happen to the rest of them once the Demon was done with his victim. The skinning process dragged on for quite some time. The Demon meticulously cut into Deimos with malicious joy in his pale eyes. When his task was finally done, Aerico dropped the heaping mass of exposed muscle to the ground. The rot-hides leapt forward to devour their prize. The Demon watched his pets and smiled. Then, raising his head once more, the Demon locked eyes with Aeacus.

“Go now, and wallow in your misery as you were meant to. Know you are all my slaves and the day will come when I command you to spread my plague, but today is not that day. Leave my presence now or be consumed by my hounds like your loved ones were so many years ago.”

Chapter 80- Lucius

The Fourth Trial- Fire and Ice

Bloodstained and exhausted, the contenders stood over the bodies of the fallen assassins. No one spoke. No one moved. Collecting their thoughts and catching their breath, the group remained still for quite some time. Lucius recovered first.

“We should get moving. We do have a labyrinth to get through.”

They all began to move at once, trance like. Instinctively, they undoubtedly knew they needed to be on alert, but the recent conflict had thrown them off. The entire group, excluding Lucius, had never seen live combat—they had never killed before. They trudged on, slowly becoming more aware of their surroundings. The maze wound on without much danger for quite some time, allowing them to wallow in the shock and guilt of taking a life. However, the winding corridors soon began to grow noticeably hot. The group individually searched for the source of the heat without saying a word. Exchanging nervous glances, they readied themselves for whatever came next.

Lucius wondered if their next challenge was a trap or a creature. He had never really dealt with a beast that created such heat and he did not want to experience whatever creature might be able to. He supposed it could be magic, again, if it were he was certainly ill-equipped to deal with it himself.

“Any... any clues to where the heat is coming from?” Connor said.

Everyone shook their heads no in silent response.

The heat grew unbearable. Even the heat on his three-day trip with Guis to the nest of a phoenix in the middle of the summer did not compare to the heat of the labyrinth. Suddenly, their path converged with three others, creating a significantly wider corridor. The path ahead jutted forward, disappearing into the horizon. In the distance, a faint orange glow radiated from the top of what seemed to be a small pyramid. Lucius was sure that whatever rested at the top of the structure was the source of the heat. Suddenly, the light shifted into an incandescent blue and the cold hit them all at once. A chilling wall of wind and snow battered their exposed skin, depleting what energy they had left from their trek through the maze.

“We need to get a better look at whatever is causing the weather,” Lucius shouted over the sudden freezing wind.

“Is there a creature that can cause this?” Auriel said, shielding her eyes.

“Not that I know of,” Lucius shook his head. “Still, if it is, we don’t want to draw any unwanted attention.”

“There isn’t exactly anywhere to go but forward,” Grace responded, uncharacteristically short.

“I believe I may know what it is, just to be sure we should be careful though,” Connor said.

“What is-” Auriel began so say, but was cut off by a sudden shift at her feet.

The stone slabs below them grinded and contorted into new forms. Soon they were no longer standing in a straight corridor, but one with twists and hills. The square

stones themselves remained intact, but had somehow been manipulated to form towering structures that obscured their view of the pyramid.

“Well, at least it blocked the damned wind,” Auriel said.

“Now, as I was saying...” Connor began to answer, but once again their conversation was interrupted by shifting platforms.

“Tell us on the way!” Lucius shouted over the renewed howling gale.

The group set off against the wind, dodging rapidly jutting stones and jumping over newly opened gaps. They soon found themselves separated by a gigantic stone wall: Lucius and Grace on one side, Connor and Auriel on the other. Wordlessly, they searched for an end to the wall, but it seemed endless. The cold switched to burning heat. Tiny embers and flecks of ash fell from the sky.

“There has to be a way to get to this thing before the floor shifts again,” Grace said.

“Does there? The Shadow Council doesn’t exactly want us out alive.”

Sweat dripped off her forehead and fear showed in Grace’s normally composed face. She nodded in acknowledgment and occupied herself with examining a nearby wall. It was clear to Lucius she would rather look for an undiscoverable clue than look him in the eyes at the moment. Lucius sighed. He wanted to be the leader his friends needed, but could not separate himself from his frustration. Every time the hunter began to formulate a plan to get to the pyramid, the suspicion of purposefully unfair improbability took over.

“What if there is a pattern to the changes in the room?” Grace said, bringing Lucius out of his thoughts.

He shrugged. “It would take a while to decipher if there is. But if we can’t find a way out, it’s worth a shot.”

The walls and floors shifted once more, this time closing in tighter and forming a short ceiling just above their heads. Inside the tight corridor the heat raged on, reverberating off the walls and swelling against the contenders’ flesh.

“Well, this is cozy,” Lucius said.

A faint smirk twitched in the corner of Grace’s mouth.

Only one path lay ahead of them. It loomed before them: winding, dark and cramped. The only source of light was the faint glow of embers that seeped through the cracks in the walls and ceiling. They began to walk, not knowing what else to do.

“I can’t help but feel we are walking into a trap...” Grace muttered.

“We walked into a trap the moment we agreed to enter this trial.”

An unfamiliar roar echoed down the corridor. The small space made it difficult to determine the proximity of their new hunter. Grace looked to Lucius for answers, but he had none. Though blind to what lay ahead, he feigned confidence as best he could. They came to a four-way intersection in the narrow path. Suddenly, the feeling of eyes on them overwhelmed the two contenders.

“There you are!” Connor exclaimed, coming from the left path. “Did you hear the roar?” he sounded excited, but he was shaking and fear was apparent in his face.

Lucius and Grace nodded.

“Maybe be a little quieter while we are being hunted, yeah?” Auriel said to Connor.

“Sorry, I talk a lot when I’m nervous,” he responded in a whisper.

Two options remained, the forward corridor and the right. Without much deliberation, they decided on moving straight ahead. Before long, there were a few one stone wide gaps in the walls to let in more light and as if on que, the weather changed from hot to cold.

“So, what do you think this thing is, Connor?” Grace said shivering.

“Oh yeah, I forgot I never got to tell you two. I’m pretty sure it’s an elemental crystal. It would have to be a pretty sizable one, like the size of a person. I found a small one when I was little. Froze our pond solid for a week. Dad was not happy.”

Grace smirked. “I see.”

“You are doing that talking a lot thing again, Connor,” Auriel said.

“Right. Sorry.”

“So how do we stop it?” Lucius asked.

“They are surprisingly easy to break. Good for conducting elemental magic.”

“Simple enough.”

Another roar echoed from behind them, stopping their conversation. The creature was getting closer. They could hear its claws scrapping across the stone floor. The group picked up the pace, not wanting to panic and break into an all-out run until they necessary.

“Stay together. I don’t know what it is, but most creatures try and isolate prey,” Lucius murmured.

Everyone nodded in acknowledgement. The scratching stopped. Lucius held his breathe, straining his ears for any sound. The hunter could sense the beast’s presence.

“Do we have any crossbow bolt left?” the hunter whispered to Connor who still had to bow slung over his shoulder.

“A couple,” Connor said, handing the weapon over.

“I am going to turn around and hopefully slow it down with a bolt. When I turn, I need you to sprint ahead as fast as you can for as far as you can,” Lucius commanded the group.

They all nodded in agreement. Auriel looked like she had something to say, but she held her tongue. The hunter heard the beast’s steps draw close.

“Now!” he shouted, spinning around with his crossbow at the ready.

The rest of the group’s footsteps fell heavy as they ran as fast as they could. A violent roar drown out the sounds of their escape. Lucius saw the beast for the first time,

and it set every nerve in his body on in. The massive feline-like beast stood at six feet on all fours. Its claws were sharp and curved, but not jagged like most beast claws—these claws were smooth and even and they shone metallic. Plated by stone-like scales, the creature's body was massive. Through the gaps in the scales, a cold mist seeped out. Its sharp teeth looked like icicles. With every step, the beast froze the ground beneath it. Lucius let lose the notched bolt. Careening forward, the arrow whistled. The hunter hit his mark, but the bolt splintered and fell to the ground.

Turning to run, Lucius felt a cold, tearing pain in his right shoulder. The creature pounced with unbelievable agility. Luckily, the beast merely managed to swipe his shoulder rather than sink its claws into him and pin him down for a follow up attack. Lucius stumbled forward. His mind raced, searching for escape. He heard a brief hesitation in the monster's footsteps and ducked. The beast flew over-head, slamming face first into a nearby wall. Lucius sprinted with everything he had in him. His shoulder ached strangely cold, an unusual and incomparable sensation. The sweat from his exertion seemed to make the cold worse. It felt as if the very droplets froze to the area around his wound.

Lucius rounded the corner. A sprawling field of stone lay before him, and he could see the pyramid. Sitting at the top of the structure sat a slowly rotating crystal with perfectly smooth sides with sharp, defined edges. The stone glowed vibrant blue, but suddenly switched to a deep red. The world was once again aflame. The rest of the contenders were halfway up the pyramid, they stopped in search for their friend. He did not like the looks of terror on their faces when they spotted him. Lucius could hear heavy footsteps gaining. He knew he could not outrun the beast. He could only hope he had

enough time to get up the pyramid and that's its base was high enough to thwart his pursuer.

The world began to shift once again. Terror filled Lucius as thoughts of being separated from the group once again and stuck with the beast raced through his mind. The space around the pyramid and the structure itself were not moving, if he could just make it there before a wall rose up in front of him. The beast let out a roar. Every nerve in Lucius' body screamed. He could hear nothing, but the pounding of his own heart and the thud of the predator. The stones directly between him and the wall began to rise. The hunter jumped, catching his foot on the wall and falling safely at the foot of the pyramid. He looked up to see his friend's relieved faces. Auriel extended her hand to help him up.

"Your shoulder!" Grace squeaked in shock.

For the first time since his injury, Lucius examined the wound. There were three deep gash marks, but no blood because the wound itself was filled with solid ice.

"Fascinating," Connor said, drawing closer. "What's it feel like?"

"Cold."

Catching Lucius' expression, Connor immediately sated his curiosity. "Right."

They proceeded up the pyramid, once they were high enough to see over the newly formed wall Lucius turned to get a good look at the beast. Its stone like scales now emitted heat. What looked like molten lava dripped from its carnivorous teeth. The creature paced back and forth where it had lost its prey. The hunter wondered how long it

would wait. He experienced insatiable monsters before. Starved beasts would tirelessly pursue a meal for days.

“It isn’t going to stop. We will have to find a way to kill it,” Lucius told them.

“We can just shoot it from here. We still have a bolt left,” Connor suggested.

Lucius shook his head. “The bolt split in two when I shot it last. I don’t think it can penetrate its flesh.”

They all watched the cat as it prowled the maze below. No one had any further suggestions. They knew the creature’s swiftness surpassed any of their own. Eventually, they proceeded up the rest of the pyramid. There, the elemental crystal sat, rotating and unimposing.

“It’s hard to believe such a simple thing can cause so much chaos,” Grace said, the glow of the gem reflecting in her eyes.

“How do we destroy it?” Auriel turned to Connor.

He shrugged. “You can hit it with just about anything, they shatter pretty easily.”

“It won’t explode, will it?” Lucius asked, raising the butt of the crossbow.

“I haven’t seen one this large before, but I don’t think so.”

Lucius chuckled. “Here goes nothing.”

The impact of the stock immediately shattered the elemental crystal. The weather ceased. The glow of the shards did not fade. The young hunter bent down to pick up one of the pieces. Each fragment was itself a whole, they were not broken.

“Can these be manipulated to change their active element?” Lucius asked, turning back to Connor.

“They respond to the temperature around them. See, there are vents under the platform gusting out different temperatures,” Connor responded, pointing out his observation.

Lucius blew lightly on the gem, holding it lightly between two fingers. The glow inside became blue. The hunter smiled and looked down at the beast prowling below. The ravenous feline, still ablaze, furiously awaited its prey. Lucius ripped a thin strip from his shirt and used it to tie the blue crystal to the last remaining crossbow bolt. Loading the bolt, the hunter took aim. He took slow and steady breathes, watching as the beast paced back and forth. Unleashing the bolt, Lucius watched as he hit his mark. The crystal shattered, spreading ice and smaller fragments across the ground. The beast roared in surprise as steam rose around it. Lucius’ heart sank when the fog cleared revealing the beast was unscathed.

“Impossible...” Auriel said under her breath.

“We have plenty more to throw. Maybe more will work,” Connor said.

“They wouldn’t make it impossible... not in front of all these people,” Grace said.

A passage opened down below, allowing the beast to make its way to the other side of the pyramid. For the first time, Lucius saw what awaited them, after another half of a maze there was a far stretching lake. On the distant shore side, Lucius could just make out a tall stone door.

“The crystal is for something ahead... but not for the creature. We are meant to sacrifice one of our number,” Lucius thought out loud.

“They wouldn’t...”

“We are supposed to be competing.”

“It’s not that... they want to discredit whoever wins. They assume I will send one of you, since I am the presumed leader,” Lucius said.

“I’ll go,” Auriel said, too quickly.

“I didn’t say I would do that. We can’t play their game by their rules. I’ll distract the cat.”

Grace gasped. Connor began to argue.

“Don’t worry, I have a plan,” The hunter lied.

The plan he outlined to them involved disorienting the creature with a few handfuls of elemental crystals and Lucius leading it the wrong way, to a path that looped around. He claimed he knew how to kill it or at least slow it, assuring them that all he needed was a few of the newly acquired crystals. No one asked any questions, but Grace

looked at him with a knowing gaze. Tears welled in her eyes. He appreciated that she didn't say anything.

“Ready?” the hunter looked to his friends for confirmation.

They all nodded, grasping a handful of crystals each and peering down at their foe.

“Go!” he shouted.

All around the beast, exploding, fiery crystals fell. It roared in anger and was momentarily stunned by the sudden attack. Lucius made sure to get its attention as the others ran down the path out they had plotted from above. He had just enough time to see the others make it around the corner when the beast regained its composure and bound towards him.

He dodged the first attack and sprinted towards the dead end. The fiery beast was close behind him. He knew he could not escape his pursuer for long, but he needed to buy the others time. He dropped a blue crystal behind him, hearing the creature slip on the ice. It did not lose its footing. He heard the metallic claws dig into the newly formed ice. And then it pounced. He turned to face it. He did not want to die running. He would fight. He managed to catch the beast under the chin with his right forearm, stopping its jaws a foot from his face. Over the shoulder of the beast he saw the other contenders returning to help. His mind raced, he had to stop the beast by any means. They could not all be lost and allow the Shadow Council to win. Without a second thought, he took the handful of elemental crystals still grasped in his left hand and shoved them down the creature's

throat. The beast clamped its jaws down on his arm as he shattered the crystals in his hand. There was a roar, an explosion, and searing pain. Then all went black.

Chapter 81- Raijin

The Battle for the Druid Wood- The Calm

All preparations had been made. They managed to expose a core group of druid warriors to the madness of the Dark Totem and help them overcome it. This group, led by Raijin, was to sneak into the Wild Ones camp after the group, led by Borghildr, created a diversion a safe distance away from the camp. It was not possible to create immunity for all of the druids that were to go to battle with the Exiles, the risk was too severe.

However, they were able to build up fortifications to help each warrior resist its dark magic. For the first time, since awaking from his own newly purified dream, Raijin have the time to mourn the loss of his friend. The grief fell upon his heart swiftly. He blamed himself for not being there to help Siv. Everyone left him alone, save for required relaying of information on the upcoming battle. All except Dalia, that is. She gave him knowing looks, but also made a habit of eating with him every evening. She sat there quietly, as if waiting for him to speak.

“Why can’t you just leave me in my grief?” Raijin finally said, the night before the battle.

“We cannot afford for you to be distracted. Your family knows this, yet, they cannot help but be kind to you.”

Raijin sneered. “I will be ready when the battle comes.”

“Will you? You’ve been walking around like a ghost since we returned from the dream.”

“What would you have me do? Shrug my lifelong friend’s death off like it was nothing?”

“No, I would ask you to move forward. You must learn to deal with loss, it will not be your last and your people need you to be strong.”

“How can you come here and act like you know our ways? Act like you know what my people want or need. Who are you to decide these things?”

“You know very well I do not know the answer to that. Assuming the Winds are correct, I was around when the druids were formed. So maybe I know more than you give me credit for. Since I came here with you, I have been constantly questioned even though time and time again I have proven to be an indispensable resource.”

A change happened in Raijin’s eyes, but he did not speak. He knew she was right. Because she was an outsider he found it easy to vent his anger in her direction, but she had done nothing to earn such malice. Without her their fight against the Wild Ones and their Dark Totem would be hopeless.

“I apologize... You have been nothing but helpful since your arrival. I have not done admirably handling the pressure of my duties,” Raijin finally said, casting his eyes in any direction but towards the seer.

“You’re young. You cannot be expected to be a fully formed leader quite yet. But, you’re on the right path,” Dalia smiled.

A druid ran up to them, fear flooding his face. “Scouts report the Wild Ones are creating a perimeter around their camp. They know we’re coming.”

They had to move, Raijin knew this, but his legs locked in place. He felt numb. The young druid had believed they would have the element of surprise on their side. The part that disturbed Raijin more than the Wild Ones awaiting their attack was that they clearly had a spy in their village. Without thought, the young druid let out a deafening roar. All activity in the druid community stopped. All heads turned to Raijin.

He stood tall and said what he had to say. "We have a traitor amongst us!"

There were gasps, but no one spoke. They all stared intently, waiting for Raijin's next words.

"We must march on the Exiled soon. They know we are coming. All I have to say to their spy is... we will allow you to leave and stand with your kind. I will not try and stop you. But know this, once the battle has begun, you will die just like the rest of them."

No one moved. Anticipation hung heavy in the air. Dalia moved forward to break the silence.

"We would ask you to rally with your assigned regiment and make your final preparations for battle."

All the druids stared at the seer. None were about to unquestioningly obey their non-druid guest.

"Do as she says," Borghildr said, emerging from his home. "The seer has done nothing but prove her worth to us. The Winds say she has lived since the beginning of our people. She has met with the great Matriarch of our wood. She tamed the wilds with

nothing but her fierce will. And, she has proven to be indispensable in the fight against the Wild Ones.”

The village moved immediately after their leader spoke. The hulking druid nodded to Dalia and wordlessly moved to continue his preparations. Raijin had not moved since the seer interrupted his bout of despair. He scanned the crowd, watching for anyone who might look like they were attempting to leave the camp prematurely.

“Are you okay?” Dalia asked.

“I’ll be fine. Thank you.” Raijin responded without removing his eyes from the moving crowd. There was silence between them for some time. “No one is leaving.” The young druid said.

“You expected the traitor to out themselves and rely on your word that they won’t be harmed?” the seer asked.

“One way or another, they will be found out and punished.”

“Then you cannot blame them for prolonging that. I am sure they truly believe that if they switch sides during the battle, they will be on the winning side and escape harm.”

Raijin laughed.

“One thing you must understand in war, young druid, is that every side believes themselves to be right and every side believes it will win. Otherwise, why fight?” with that, Dalia walked away to tend to her duties.

Raijin sat in contemplation the entire time preparations were underway. No one disturbed his meditation until they were ready to march on the Exiles. The winds were favorable, comforting some. They spoke of the elements being on their side and how victory was assured. No one refuted them, even if they were not so sure themselves. They did not mask their footsteps as the enemy already expected them. They walked in quick, even steps—moving fast but conserving energy. As they neared the camp, the ritualistic roars of the Wild Ones echoed through the trees. Each of the savage voices came together as a collective boom that shattered many of the druids' confidence in victory.

Their march halted and they broke into their regiments to execute their individual plans. Raijin's group awaited his father's signal. The battle began and it pained the young druid to remain behind, but he knew what must be done.

Chapter 82- Borghildr

The Battle for the Druid Wood- Battle Cry

The druid leader bound forward. Ahead, the fierce eyes of on guard Wild Ones changed into the eyes of crazed beasts. Borghildr and his regiment followed suit. The two groups of animals clashed in a flurry of claws and teeth. Several wolves made the mistake of targeting the hulking bear form of the druid leader. He swiped the mutts down like they were nothing. Even in the heat of battle there was calm in Borghildr's eyes and composure in his movements. The regiment of druids, helmed by their leader, pushed forward in search for the Wild One's leader. They needed to push through and create a formidable threat to draw the attention of the enemy, all the while they had to be wary of getting too close to the aura of the Dark Totem.

The first of the druids fell to the incisors of a prowling, muscular jungle cat. The feline was soon dispensed with and the druid's death confirmed. The sympathetic action proved to be an error, as the Wild Ones took the opportunity to regroup and surround the druids. Kajah swooped in from above and quickly shifted into her human form, standing next to her husband.

"We cannot afford sympathy in war, dear husband," she said plainly. "I shall bring in reinforcements to break their line. Hold position." She changed and took flight once more.

Borghildr and his regiment formed a tight circle, looking out in all directions. The Wild Ones pushed forward, but could not break the druid's formation. They prodded the group, over and over, searching for a weak link. It was clear to them that any effort to

assault the druid leader was hopeless. The Exiles shifted their strength to be at Borghildr's back. This proved to be a fatal error. Within a matter of seconds, the strongest in the Wild Ones' ranks were ambushed from behind by Kajah's reinforcements, leaving the weakest of the group open to be rushed by the druid leader and his men. The Wild Ones circle dispersed and the druids could push forward once again. Soon, the Dark Totem was within sight. Borghildr was forced to alter his path, he could not lead his men any closer to the maddening aura than they already were. They began to circle around the camp, keeping their distance while trying to remain viable and unignorably threatening.

The Wild Ones' attention slowly dwindled, forcing Borghildr regiment to push towards the Dark Totem. The druid leader knew that something dramatic soon to pull the attention Raijin and his group would need to get close to the corrupting idle of the Exiles.

"Keep circling the camp. I will return shortly," the druid leader instructed as he briefly was in human form, directly after he turned into an eagle and took flight.

Surveying the battle below, Borghildr spotted his son's regiment fighting off a group of Wild Ones that pushed through the druid frontline. His wife fought a ways away from Raijin and closer to the Dark Totem than her husband wished to see her. Like him, Kajah had serenity in her face and showed no sign of being compromised by battle or by the corrupting aura. Borghildr attention was ripped away from the battlefield as a murder of crows darted towards him. The druid leader pulled his wings close to his sides, diving down towards the ground. The crows did not follow. They did not care to attack him.

Rather, they simply were there to prevent recon. Borghildr perched on the upper branch of a nearby tree. He needed a clear vantage point to formulate a plan.

Flying in the direction he last saw Kajah, the druid leader searched desperately for his wife. They needed to gain control of the skies and most of the druids with bird forms were fighting on the ground as men. After searching for longer than he hoped, he finally spotted her. Landing as a man at her side, Borghildr scanned their surroundings before speaking.

“The Wild Ones control the skies. We cannot afford them the advantage.”

At the very moment, he took his eyes off the battlefield to address his wife, an Exile charged. The crazed man was very close before they noticed. The two hastily readied their defenses. An arrow struck the Wild One and he was quickly finished off by a snarling Geirolf. Borghildr turned to see Dalia wielding a bow. She smirked at the leader and called her companion back to her side and they vanished back into the fog of war. The druid leader and his wife turned back to each other and nodded in acknowledgment. He took flight knowing Kajah would soon follow with reinforcements to retake the sky.

As Borghildr neared the height the Wild Ones patrolled, he spotted Siv’s mother in wolf form, rampaging through the ranks of their foes. His heart ached for her. Part of him wanted to go to her side and either calm her anger or remove her from the battle for her own good. However, tactically he knew her fierce attacks were just what they needed to distract the Exiles from noticing his son’s regiment.

Just as the murder of crows spotted Borghildr and rushed towards him, he was joined by his wife and a handful of other druids with bird forms. A furious clash of talons, beaks, and wings ensued, each side losing many of their ranks. One by one the Wild Ones plummeted to the ground and, at last, the druids owned the skies. Once he had the vantage point he needed, it did not take long for Borghildr to find what he searched for. His sister fought furiously amidst the chaos below. There was hatred in her very movement. Fortunately, the distance between her and the corrupting aura of the Dark Totem was fair and the druid leader judged it safe. He had not spoken his plans aloud to anyone, but he hoped to capture Nasrin and retrieve the sister he once knew from the madness that dwelled within her.

Borghildr landed and signaled his men to his side. They advanced on the Wild One's leader. Brother and sister locked eyes. He saw no remnant of love in her gaze. Doubt filled the druid leader, but he had to try. The two sides sprinted forward, gaining the attention of nearby regiments on both sides. The epicenter of the battle converged onto them as their armies rallied behind their leaders. One druid group took advantage of this shift and disappeared from the sight of the Wild Ones and into the center of their abandoned camp.

Chapter 83- Raijin

The Battle for the Druid Wood- The Dark Totem

Darkness clouded their minds even with their resistance training. Anger swelled in Raijin's chest. He suppressed his emotions and pushed forward. Victory was within reach. The young druid's expression was unwavering. His men looked uncertain and he could not afford to show he felt the same. He had to be a beacon of hope for them as they plunged into the dark aura.

Finally, they came to the totem. It stood roughly at five feet and was at least three feet wide. Raijin touched the sinister obelisk. It was metallic. A new wave of doubt washed over the druid. The Dark Totem would prove just as hard to move as it would be to destroy. Knowing it would be in vain, Raijin stabbed at the totem with his knife to demonstrate its fortitude. The knife blade clanged against the metal and snapped. Looking over his shoulder and past the disheartened faces of the other druids, Raijin looked towards the battle. They had yet to be noticed.

"Listen to me." Raijin turned back to his men. "I see only one way we can possibly have the strength to move the totem... but I will not command you to do it. I need each one of you to agree to this on your own accord." He paused and scanned the faces of his men as they gradually grew paler in fear. "Resist as much as possible, but we must give into the aura briefly. We need the strength the darkness imbues."

"There must be another way."

"We haven't even tried to move it."

“Fine, try to move it. I won’t waste my strength on a fruitless act,” Raijin responded.

The men tried desperately to move the Dark Totem. Their faces reddened with exertion and shame. One even turned into an elk and attempted to head-butt the structure on its side. Raijin glanced at the battle behind them once more, it continued to rage on.

“I will turn into a bear. You stay as an elk and push the totem as the rest lift it in human form. We can place it on my back. Do not let go once it is on. Even as a bear utilizing the aura I fear I will be crushed without help.”

The men did not speak up in objection this time. They simply nodded in acknowledgment. They all knew they would not get a second attempt to capture the totem. Suddenly, Dalia ran to their side.

“What’s going on? The battle will only stall the Wild Ones for so long.”

“It cannot be moved without succumbing to the dark aura,” Raijin responded shortly.

“I can try and hold back the corruption as best I can, but I cannot guarantee anything. I should have foreseen this as a possibility.”

Raijin nodded to the seer and set forth with his men to begin transporting the Dark Totem. Breathing deeply, the young druid allowed the dark aura to pass through his defenses. Rage swelled from deep within him. The regiment got into position to move the totem, but a bright light stopped them in their tracks. The glow caught the attention of the

rival armies. Both sides ceased combat to look in the direction of the light. The Great White Deer stood majestically on a nearby ledge. Raijin caught the glance of his ancestor.

I have stood by for too long while darkness consumes my people.

Calm washed over Raijin and his regiment. They all could hear the voice in their heads and they all understood. They knew what was to come next and that they could not nor should not try and stop it. The light the Great White Deer emitted brightened, obscuring the druid's view of the Dark Totem. All affects caused by the aura dispersed. The light faded and the Great White Deer with it. The Totem now sat pale and unimposing. It was nothing more than a metal structure. Strength drained from the Wild Ones and they were over-taken. They refused surrender and most forced their own murders upon the druids. They did manage one capture, the leader of the Wild Ones. Borghdir managed to capture his sister.

Chapter 84- Alwin

The Shadow of the King's Wood

Alwin's mind raced. He needed to assemble a team quickly to follow the map and put an end to the Gnarled Man. He prepared supplies at a steady, eager pace. Nearing the door, the knight decided to locate Jaron as soon as possible. A sudden knock caught him off-guard. Alwin froze with his hand extended to turn the knob.

“Alwin, it's me. Open up,” Jaron's voice sounded from the other side of the wall.

The knight did as he was told. He met with an unusually pale Jaron. Something was wrong, but Alwin could not speak to ask what it was. The two stood wordlessly for longer than either intended.

“Where are you going? Have you heard?” Jaron said, looking at Alwin's pack.

“I got a lead on the Gnarled Man... Heard what?”

Jaron was sweating. Alwin could see the aristocrat swallow with difficulty. “It's Lucius... He was injured in the last trial.”

“Injured how?” the knight responded numbly.

“The Shadow Council managed to get a nearly unstoppable creature into the Final Trial. Lucius found a way to stop it, but at the cost of his hand.”

“Where is he?” Alwin's mind kept creeping back to the pursuit of the Gnarled Man.

“Still at Aarden. He is unconscious, but all his allies want to meet about what to do next. There is always the chance the Shadow Council sends assassins to finish him off.”

“I assume you have guards on him.”

“Of course. Do you want to go now? I can get you in the castle.”

“No... actually, do you have any men to spare? I have a lead on the Gnarled Man that I cannot pass up. I have to close in on him before he gets wind of my coming.”

Jaron was taken aback. “I have a few men I could spare, I suppose...”

Alwin hastily pulled out the marked map. “Great. Now, the Gnarled Man is supposedly here,” the knight pointed. “Tell your men to rally with me here, as soon as they can.” Alwin indicated to the edge of the King’s Wood parallel with the hideout in the woods. “I have to see how many Aarden guards I can recruit before heading there. I don’t know what to expect from the madman.”

“I will explain your absence when Lucius awakens, though I am not sure he’ll understand.”

“He will understand. Bard was his friend too.”

Jaron nodded and left without another word. Alwin thought it seemed the aristocrat fought back a sneer just as he left. Anger swelled uncontrollably within the knight. Who was Jaron to judge him? He worried for Lucius, but his friend was alive and this could be his only chance to avenge the friend he lost.

Rushing through town, Alwin managed to recruit three Aarden guards he knew to accompany him. They all swore they would make an arrest if possible and not speak out if their mission resulted in murder. Within another half hour they rallied at the edge of the woods and were accompanied by two of Jaron's men. Alwin outlined the plan: they would surround the structure, with two on each side. He explained the type of man they were up against and what they had found in his abandoned lab.

“Honestly, I don't know what to expect from him. He has always been one step ahead and his depravity knows no bounds.”

They set off in a straight line and in file like soldiers. They moved as silently as they could with their gear without losing pace. A tension plagued the group. Alwin could not help but wonder if it was simply pre-battle stress or if it was directed at him. He felt as if people's empathy for his situation only went so far. They went along with his plan, but they did not understand its necessity. As they neared the spotted circled on the mysterious map, the environment of the wood changed around them. While they had passed through regular, vibrant green woods they now seemed to find themselves in a more twisted and dark part of the forest. There were scorch marks on several trees and the ground mostly consisted of dark mud. The only life that survived this part of the forest was twisted and thorny weeds.

“Fresh blood,” one of the soldiers whispered and pointed to flecks of crimson nearby.

Alwin bent down and examined the trail. The wound had been inflicted from behind, something or someone escaped from the Gnarled Man's lair. It seemed he tried to

stop it, but there was not enough blood to prove he succeeded. There was a chance one of his experiments escaped.

The knight signaled for his men to continue forward. The structure was almost within sight. The stench met them before they could see their destination: it was that of decay and chemicals. Alwin felt as their journey progressed the men with him were beginning to understand the foulness of the enemy before them. They drew their weapons: three swords, two bows, and an axe. The knight had to remind himself to breathe as they proceeded forward. The group spread out to surround the structure. Much like the shack Alwin had encountered before, this building was gnarled and decrepit. The walls were rotting and the roof looked as if it could cave in at any moment. Alwin came to the door. He turned the rusted knob. It was unlocked. The door creaked open. The only source of light inside were faint, flickering flames beneath bubbling concoctions. There was no sign of the Gnarled Man, but, unlike the lab in town, this place looked lived in. There was a cot in the far-left corner. It sat underneath the only window of the structure. It seemed the Gnarled Man was not wholly immune to the foulness of his work.

Stepping inside the building, Alwin and Jaron's man covered their faces with clothes they had on hand. The cover did little to obscure the smells of the room, but it did cut the burning the chemicals caused in their throats. Alwin spotted a light from underneath the floorboards. They could not avoid the screeching of the old planks as they made their way to the light. Alwin pried the boards up with his free hand. The wood was moist and splintered. A rough and muddy tunnel sat underneath the floorboards. The passage was lit by a few grimy lanterns. Alwin peered down the makeshift corridor. It went on for quite a ways.

“Take two men and head due east. This tunnel may come out somewhere. Look for anything out of the ordinary.”

“We’ll just follow the stench.”

The two men nodded and Alwin was left alone in the shadowy lab. Standing up, the knight scanned the room as best he could. There nothing in the room that pointed to the Gnarled Man’s whereabouts, but there was more blood to be found. Alwin followed the flecks of crimson to a barbed whip resting on a nail that rested in a nearby wall. The knight grimaced, thinking of what the Gnarled Man’s subjects must endure before their untimely and unnatural demise.

An unnatural grinding sound echoed from the tunnel below, drawing Alwin towards it. He could not distinguish what the sound was, but it provided all the proof he needed to jump down into the dark below. The air in the tunnel was even more suffocating than the building. The walls were thick, dark clay and had been scooped away by hand. Strange and ominous puddles scattered across the tunnel floor. Alwin crept slowly down the corridor. In part for stealth purposes, but also because the stifling air made quick progression nearly impossible. At last there was a room at the end of the tunnel. Alwin quickened his pace as much as he could. The chemical stench sickened his stomach as he heaved in frantic gasps of air.

“So, you have finally found m,” a calm, muffled voice echoed down the soggy corridor.

“We have the place surrounded. You have nowhere to run this time, Soloman,” Alwin coughed.

The alchemist laughed. “You went rummaging around the asylum I see. I trust you found some discovered many intriguing and horrific things about me. However, I wouldn’t be so sure about you having the upper hand. I suppose I will not try to escape this time. I do not have the need for it. Not anymore.”

Alwin entered the room and saw the gnarled man sitting in a high-back chair. He wore a crudely stitched, beaked mask. The leather the mask was made of was strange and cracked and the goggles that protected his eyes from chemicals were scratched and foggy. There was something looming in the dark corner of the room, just out of Alwin’s line of sight. The knight wanted to look, but he refused to take his eyes off of his adversary. There was a short, clay staircase leading up to a wooden hatch. A banging at the hatch reassured Alwin that back-up was on its way.

“I do hope they hurry with that hatch. I don’t dare to remove this mask until they do. The air in here is quite dangerous, but I’m sure you can feel that... That burning in your lungs. The nauseating feeling in the pit of your stomach.”

“I wouldn’t be so smug. Once that door is down, we will be out of here with you in shackles.”

“Oh, is that the plan? I thought you were here to kill me.”

“Only if you make it necessary.”

The Alchemist laughed. “I thought I already had... You never will find your friend’s body you know and you will never get me to talk.”

“We’ll see about that.”

“If you think you are the first person I have wronged think again. You are not the first to seek bringing me to justice and you will not be the last.”

The hatched gave way, casting light into the dim room. Three of Alwin’s men ran inside the room. All at once they caught sight of the giant figure in the corner. The light they let in illuminated the construct clearly. It was a lumbering human-like figure made out of clay. The figure stood well over six feet and four feet wide.

“What the hell is that thing?” one of the men blurted.

The alchemist removed his mask, revealing a grinning face. “Oh that... that, my friends, is a gollum. A welcome gift I prepared for you.”

The gollum sprang to life. Making its way towards the shocked men with surprising swiftness, the creature attacked. With a single swing of one of its massive arms, the construct broke the neck of the nearest man. The two remaining men, turned their full attention to the gollum, taking defensive positions as they backed away. Alwin, on the other hand, bound forward towards the Gnarled Man who remained sitting calmly in his chair.

“Call it off,” Alwin said, holding his blade to the gnarled man’s neck.

“If you kill me you will never know what came of your friend.”

“Death by Gollum probably will stop me from knowing as well.”

“I will not call it off, so I guess you will just have to kill me,” the Gnarled Man laughed.

The gollum swung another massive strike at the frightened men. The creature's movements shook the caverns around them. Another strike splintered a table like it was nothing. The madman continued to laugh. Alwin noticed the Gnarled Man's eyes darted back and forth. Rotating his sword, the knight struck his enemy with his hilt. As soon as the Gnarled Man fell unconscious, the gollum lost all signs of life.

Alwin breathed a sigh of relief. "I'm glad that worked. I didn't have any other ideas."

The two remaining men chuckled warily. One picked up their fallen comrade while the other shackled the Gnarled Man as securely as possible. They stepped into the fresh outside air, a light breeze cooling the sweat on their foreheads. The men stationed outside had circled around to the back to see what all the commotion was about.

"We need to return this man's remains to his family and get the Gnarled Man in a cell quickly. I need two to stay behind and destroy the contents of the lab, especially that damned gollum."

Chapter 85- Dalia

Forging Onward

The seer did not want to leave the druids behind, but something compelled her onward. She felt confident they could fare on their own now that the source of the corruption dissipated. She taught Borghdir all she could about how the druids dream worked and how to purify it. She hoped her teachings would be enough to recover those they lost to the madness of the Dark Totem. Faithful warg close by her side, Dalia once again set out through the forest. This time she had a direction. They told her of Aarden Hall and how the throne sat empty for the time being. They tried to encourage her to stay, but she knew Aarden was where she would find the king she sought.

The closer her journey took her to Aarden, the more frequently she got flashes of memories. She saw two blurry faces and heard two names: Lucius and Alwin. Those two were who she sought. She wished the vision revealed more. Geirolf whimpered beside her. She turned to reassure him that everything was okay, but before she could speak the world went black.

A series of visions transpired. The one thing Dalia could piece together was that they were from different points in her timeline. She could not be certain how far in her past or into her future she saw. The first she witnessed was her gnarled old hand giving a young hand a bug shaped stone. This faded into her hand being young and childlike. She looked up into the face of a familiar old man.

You have a great destiny. The man from the past said. You will live many lives and know many things, but know this: there will always be good and there will always be evil. Nothing you do can stop this. Your task is only to keep the balance.

The man faded with his final words. Dalia was then met with the stare of hollow eye sockets. Only blackness lingered within them, as if they had been hollowed out and replaced with pure darkness. She was certain the eyes could see, though logic demanded they could not. The gaze left her feeling empty and alone. Suddenly, she returned to the waking world. She had fallen to the ground and her warg stood over her diligently.

“I’m okay, Geirolf,” the seer said, sluggishly hoisted herself up.

The image of the hollow eyes stuck with Dalia for the remainder of her journey. The warg could sense something was wrong and remained on guard. Filled with unease, the seer’s mind raced between the mysteries of her past and the dangers of her future. Guilt ate away at her heart for leaving the druid’s in the wake of a culturally redefining battle. Logically, she knew it was best the druids made progress on their own in battling the wildness within themselves, but she could not help but feel responsible for them. In fact, Dalia woke from her most recent vision plagued by the idea that she was responsible for not just the druids, but the entire world. She knew she had a role to play, but she could not see what lay ahead and that frightened her.

Chapter 86- Lucius

Broken

Light streamed in through sheer white curtains. The room glowed with warmth. Lucius lay motionless on a bed in the center of the sparse yet luxurious room. A red glow flooding across his closed eyelids brought the young hunter and future king to consciousness. Lucius opened his eyes. He tried to orient himself to his unknown environment. The first thing he saw was Grace asleep in a nearby armchair. He moved his stiff limbs, wondering how long he had been asleep. Realization filled him with a cold emptiness: his hand and part of his arm was gone. Lifting what remained, the hunter examined the cleaning bandaged stub where his arm had been. He tried to speak, but his voice had gone unused for some time and only rough grunts managed to escape his mouth.

Grace awoke. Her eyes met his and she smiled. “You’re finally awake. We were worried.”

Lucius cleared his throat. “What happened? How long have I been out?” he said hoarsely.

“Hush now. You need to rest. I will summon everyone else and we can catch you up on everything,” Grace said. She stood and left the room immediately after.

Lucius did not want to be alone to dwell on his injury, on his failure. He assumed the council removed him for the running for the crown. That left only three possible choices. He was sure the Shadow Council would vie for the one they believed they could most easily manipulate. He wanted to believe the three remaining would be stalwart in

their resistance, but fear gnawed in the back of his mind that some unforeseen circumstances could alter perceptions. Pain in his hand snapped Lucius out of his thoughts. He reached for his hand, but there found nothing. The hunter grabbed at air, feeling foolish. He threw his arms to his sides as he heard the door opening.

A precession of people streamed into the room: Jaron, Grace, Connor, Auriel, and Alistair. Lucius expected Alwin, but he did not come. The hunter's concern must have showed, because Jaron spoke up.

“Alwin got a lead on the Gnarled Man he could not pass up.”

Lucius nodded in acknowledgment.

“But, in other news, you are to be king. So there's that.” Jaron smiled.

Lucius began to speak, but Grace held up her hand to silence him.

“It was not without its difficulties, however, once the public rallied behind your heroic sacrifice there was little the Shadow Council could do to stop your rise to power,” she explained.

“You just might be the first ruler to come to power while not even conscious,” Jaron added.

“I have been working with Gerreon to set up your coronation. It will be ready whenever you are ready to be back on your feet,” Auriel said.

Lucius mind swirled. How long had he been out? So much had taken place. Suddenly the feeling he had at the beginning of the trials came rushing back. He was not

fit to lead. He knew very little about the politics of Aarden. He had spent most his life out in the surrounding world hunting monsters.

“Why would they want a crippled king?” Lucius blurted, renewed strength in his voice.

The group was taken aback. Their faces grew collectively pale. He saw they did not expect to hear him sound defeated. They had expected him to remain strong and rebound from his injuries like they were nothing, but a missing arm was not nothing. He was mangled and broken. He needed time to adjust to one situation before he could even begin to consider another.

“I crafted something for you. After you see it, you will see that you will not be a crippled king,” Alistair said, stepping forward.

Jaron knocked on the door and two of his men burst in with a large, wooden chest. They set the container at the foot of the bed. Alistair smiled. He unlocked and unlatched the chest carefully.

“I hope you like them,” the smith said, opening the chest.

Lucius was speechless. The contents of the chest invigorated his body and mind. The young hunter wanted desperately to leave his bed and examine what the smith presented to him.

Chapter 87- Alwin

Crossroads

The knight and his band approached the town of Veikryss which served as a hub for all trade in Aarden. All major roads converged at this point and the town was formed out of business necessity. Heads turned as the group walked through with their prisoner. Alwin was glad to have his fellow guards with him to substantiate the legitimacy of their activities. The entirety for the town was uneasy about something, though the knight was certain it was not their presence that caused the disruption. People moved about a bit more quickly than usual and paid no mind to the Gnarled Man they had in chains. Scanning the area, Alwin searched for the source of tension. He drew his sword at the sight of a warg up the road. His arm relaxed at his side when he spotted the woman next to the beast. She seemed to have command over the warg. She was young but battle worn and wore clothing made only of contents from the woods.

Puzzled, Alwin approached the woman. She silently watched his approach. There was something familiar about her, but he was sure he had never seen her before. She smiled. The light in her eyes was that of a friend.

“You and your warg seem to be upsetting the locals. That’s pretty difficult to accomplish, a lot of weird shit passes through here.”

“I came straight from a battle in the Druid Wood. I’ve hardly had time to adjust to my new surroundings, Alwin.”

The knight’s nerves lit up at the mention of his name. “You know me?”

“No, but your name is in my memory.”

“What the hell does that mean?”

“It is just as it sounds. I know your name, though I hardly know why.”

Alwin looked back at the men with him. “Go ahead and transport the prisoner to his cell. I will be there as soon as I can.” The men nodded and continued their journey, giving the woman curious glances as they passed.

“I am certain we have never met, yet you are familiar,” the knight said.

“You have something of mine.”

“What?”

“I am Dalia,” she said, holding out an open palm.

The lumi-stone in Alwin’s pocket transformed into its beetle form and flew into the seer’s outstretched hand. The two stared at each other for some time. The busy crowds of the street parted around them for no one wanted to be too near the strange scene involving a warg.

“How?” is all the knight managed to mutter.

“I do not know, my memory is sparse. All I know is that I need to find your friend, the king. Something dark is coming.”

“You are too late, I fear. He was attacked... he lost his hand. He is recovering now.”

Dalia's eyes darted back and forth as she absorbed what she had heard and searched her limited memory. "No... Unfortunately, I do not believe that is the danger I have come to prevent. The man with hollow eyes will be here soon. I must be present to prepare Lucius for the oncoming darkness that threatens his kingdom."

Dread seeped through Alwin's entire body. Who was the man with hollow eyes? How could it be the seer in the swamp was here now in a new and younger form? Nerves on fire, the knight quickly led the seer toward that towering structure of Aarden.

Chapter 88- Lucius

Whole

Armor like he had never seen rested within the chest before Lucius. The chest piece consisted of the scales and pelt of the lion-like creature they encountered in the final trial. The gauntlet was made of the finest metal and was fitted with a contraption that housed the beast's claws.

“How did you manage this?” Lucius asked Alistair.

“It proved a challenge for sure... Connor researched the Tarasque, turns out that's the beast's name, and discovered only its own claws were able to cut through its flesh. I call the armor Taras-Heart and the gauntlet Taras-Bane,” the smith proclaimed proudly.

Lucius nodded in acknowledgement, unable to take his eyes from the armor. “Can someone help me?” he stammered.

Jaron came to the hunter's side, helping to support his weight. Alistair took out the gauntlet. As the artificial hand was placed over his injury, Lucius felt a rush of confidence. Not only would this obscure his deformity, but it would allow him to project to the people just what he wanted to be: a crusader king. He would not sit ideally in his castle and spout laws disconnected from the realities of what the public needed. He would be a king of the people. He would be a warrior king. Alistair fastened the gauntlet around his torso. Lucius had full mobility of his arm. He bent his elbow up and down, acclimating to the weight of his new limb.

“How do I use the claws?”

“There are mechanisms inside that should respond to a tensing of your upper arm muscles. That unlocks the blades, but we don’t want them just shooting out at any given time. So, you’ll then have to swing your arm outward.”

Lucius followed the smith’s instruction. The blades sprang out smoothly, locking in places just over the fingers of the gauntlet. He carefully swung his weaponized arm, the blades remained in place. He then repeated the action and retracted his claws. Alistair brought out the chest piece, smiling.

“The beast’s hide and claws retained their elemental abilities. All we need is to provide you with some of the crystals they used in the trial.”

“Will it harm me? I would rather not catch myself on fire.”

“I tested it myself. The elemental infusion never goes past the scales. I made sure to leave space for your arms to hang freely on your sides without danger of getting burned or frozen.”

“Alistair... this means more than you will ever know.”

The smith nodded and smiled. “Do you want to try the chest plate on? Do you have the strength?”

“I do now. In fact, I wish to start preparations for the crowning ceremony. We have a lot of work to do.”

Chapter 89- Aeacus

Division

Standing over a crowd of Undying, Aeacus scanned the faces of his people. Uncertainty resoundingly rested in the expressions of the populous. The leader longed to instill hope in their hearts, but his first priority had to be the prevention of another Worshipper of the Demon rising up and creating another oppositional faction. Aeacus turned his attention to his men as they placed the final stones in the wall they constructed. The wall created a division between Undying Lands and the Plague Lands of the Demon. No longer would they be part of Aerico's domain. They were their own people and could not continue to live in his shadow.

“We stand here today as one people. Worship of the demon Aerico has proven to be a danger to our society and will not be tolerated. Any who still wish to religiously follow the creator of our curse are welcome to, but not as one of the Undying. Any who choose to worship Aerico may form their own society on the other side of this wall.”

Aeacus paused, pointing at the newly constructed barrier.

Scattered murmurs from the crowd collected into a low roar. Heads pivoted around, searching for any who might step forward to cross the wall. None came forward. Fear of the Demon now outweighed the Worshippers ideology of him.

“Since no one has stepped forward to proclaim continued worship of Aerico, we all must accept the religion as officially abolished. Any found still following this path will be banished to the plague lands.” He paused again, until the second rise of murmurs subsided. “I realize that these proclamations may seem extremist in nature, however, in

light of recent events I and other community leaders find we have no choice but to take appropriate action. There may come a time, when a new leader will resurface in the name of the Worshipers of the Demon who is willing to undergo peaceful negotiations. Perhaps one day, someone can succeed where the previous Worshiper leadership failed.”

Aecus stepped down from his platform and walked through the muttering crowd, guards parting the mass of Undying. He hoped desperately that the shock of his proclamation would be lessened once preparations for the wedding were underway. The Undying people needed something new to focus their attention. The shouted questions around him had been nothing but a mass of sound, now, they returned loud and clear. None took direct action against him, they feared the consequences. Aecus wanted his people to have freedom, but the terms of their freedom needed to be reevaluated.

“What will you take from us next?”

“What is our safety worth if we live in fear of our own leadership?”

“Which of your people will you abandon next?”

“What gives you the right?”

The sounds of the crowd faded as Aecus closed the door to the meeting hall. He was met by a new, more silent crowd. The Undying leadership sat around a dark wooden table, collectively peering in his direction.

“How did they take the news?” Lady Grey asked the moment Aecus took his place at the table.

“As well as can be expected. Though I am not comfortable with the fear I sensed from them. My own people see me how we see Aerico.”

“Give them time. Masses are forgetful.”

“Individuals are not.”

“You cannot appease everyone, my Lord,” Braun said.

Fenrik nodded in agreement.

Aeacus smiled. “Well... on to the next order of business. How are the plans for the wedding shaping up?”

“We’re nearly there. We have the venue set and have it planned for a week from today.”

The leader nodded. “Good, the sooner this union happens, the sooner the Undying can move on from recent events and look to the future.”

Ch.90- Borghdir

The Lost

The air in the makeshift shelter lingered heavily. Tension radiated from the inhabitant, even as she sat silently shackled to the stone pillar in the center. She gazed downward, causing her hair to obscure her face. She would not look at the druid leader. He knelt next to her, and examined her thoughtfully.

“Is the rage of the Dark Totem subsiding, sister?” Borghdir asked.

Her torso heaved as her breathing deepened. “No... But you have certainly torn something from me, dear brother. I feel a hole deep within me. Gaping! Gnawing! Screaming! My wildness remains, brother, but you have blinded the beast. Soon I will know nothing but death and destruction. I beg you. Kill me before I am lost entirely.”

The druid leader’s chest ached. His nerves burned hot. His mind recoiled, unable to process the predicament that lay before him. They sat in silence for some time. Nasrin’s breathing quickened and her hair became visibly soaked in sweat.

“Have you been to the dream?” the druid asked his sister.

“I have seen the woods... yes. But mine has not been a dream for some time now. It is twisted in shadow and can be called nothing but a nightmare.”

“I have been taught to enter other’s minds. Allow me to enter your dream, we can purify the corruption.”

“It’s too late.”

“Forgive me, but I must try.”

Borghdir did as Dalia had instructed him to. The resistance to his entrance caused a stabbing pain in the druid leader’s head. He pushed harder against the opposition. He had to believe she was not lost. He had to believe her mind could be purified. In an instant, her defenses gave way and Borghdir found himself in the remnants of a druid wood. Pieces of earth, wood, water, and stone floated directionless through a void of pure darkness. He stood on one of the only islands of forest that remained intact. The shadows curled around the edges of the floating biome like tendrils. A scream rose in the distance, it grew louder and louder. The scream was Nasrin. The druid strained his eyes, peering into the darkness. The scream grew deafening.

Borghdir’s eyes opened to the waking world and the scream continued. Nasrin was huddle over in pain, wailing. Agony consumed her. She was lost. The druid’s sister was nothing but a shell now—he knew that, he could sense it. Her head jerked upwards. Fiery hate seeped from her eyes. She lunged at her brother. Swiping madly, she growled and grunted, hoping to inflict any harm she could, even if it were to herself. The restraints around her dug into her flesh, but the pain only fueled more rage. Borghdir stood without taking his eyes off Nasrin. He thought of their childhood together. She had been happy once, so full of light. The Nasrin he once knew and loved was already dead. His sister had hung on to a fragment of herself to keep the beast in check, but he destroyed it when he entered her dream. He cut the fraying tether that held her from sinking into darkness.

“I’m sorry, sister,” the druid leader said.

He knew what had to be done. He would do it himself. The beast the consumed his sister had to be killed. He pulled out his knife and thrust it into her heart.

Ch.91- Dalia

The Kingdom of Aarden

“I would love to take you with me wherever I go, but you can’t just wander around Aarden,” Dalia said, petting Geirolf gingerly.

Though he did not understand her words, the warg understood what was happening. She was leaving him at the dog kennels. Dalia hoped that he would retain his well-mannered loyalty even in her absence. It had been made clear to her that he would be caged alone if he could not cooperate. The seer did not want to condemn her companion to such a fate. Placing her head to his, Dalia did as best she could to communicate to Geirolf how vital his corporation was. Their minds linked as they had in the forest. Tears flooded Dalia’s eyes. He felt the same sense of loss he had conveyed before.

“This is not forever, my loyal companion,” she whispered.

Geirolf whimpered but nuzzled her lovingly, showing he understood.

The seer stood, gazing down at the warg. She silently guided him into his designated pen. The other dogs eyed him suspiciously, but none seemed hostile. They all stood on edge for a period. Slowly, the dogs’ attention waned or they warmed up to Geirolf. The warg lay down, next to a new friendly companion. He relaxed, and now so could Dalia.

“I will return as soon as possible to release you from this place,” she declared as she left the kennels.

Looking down at her clothing, Dalia knew it was now time to cast off what remained of her time in the wilderness. Her battle worn garments constructed by the Wood Sprites needed to be replaced with clothing more acceptable to civilized society. Alwin waited for her just outside of the kennels.

“Everything alright?” he asked.

“They seemed to except Geirolf. There should not be any problems.”

“I meant how are you doing? You two seemed to have a close bond.”

Dalia smiled. “It will take time to adjust, but I understand the need society has to cage wild things. Speaking of which, is there anywhere I can acquire more appropriate clothing?”

Alwin nodded. “We can stop by a friend of mine’s home. She should have something to lend you until you can get settled. Then we will head to the king’s coronation.”

Cheering wildly, the large crowd stared toward the castle door. Many loosely held neatly trimmed white roses, at the ready to toss them to their new king. At last the giant wooden doors opened. Lucius stepped out, surrounded by his friends. All watched in awe at the king’s acceptance and love for those he previous had competed with. Dalia stood within the masses with Alwin. She tugged at her clothes in an attempt to adjust their fit. It would take time to get used to the clothes and customs of Aarden. Both stood speechless. They did not cheer, but they both smiled with their gaze locked on Lucius. Memories of their previous encounter rushed back to the seer. The man that stood before them now

was much changed. Not just in physicality, with his impressive armor forged from mythical hide, but also in the aura of his presence.

It was blatantly clear to all that Lucius was a leader. His gleaming armor exuberated strength. His gaze projected confidence. His walk was certain as he approached the raised platform in the center of his subjects. Flowers gently rained down on the leader. Applause and declarations of admiration filled the air.

Lucius climbed up the stairs to the elegant platform. Half of the Council stood waiting for him. Members of Aarden's counsel were markedly absent. Gerreon smiled at his new king. The dark gleaming crown sat on a red pillow atop a white marble pedestal. Lucius knelt. Ceremonial proclamations were confidently stated. The very muttering of these words silenced the crowd that listened eagerly. The standing counselor gently placed the crown on his head. The crowd roared in celebration.

Dalia, for the first time since she had seen the menacing eyes felt a sense of comfort. If anyone could hold back the darkness, it was Lucius the newly crowned king of Aarden Hall. She watched as the elegant yet humble ruler make his way down the platform and back up the path he entered on. He was confident, yet endearingly uncomfortable with his new societal position. Eventually, he made his way back to the castle and disappeared behind the heavy, wooden doors. The cheering did not die down for quite some time. The horn sounded seven times.

Chapter 92- Lucius

Battle Lines

The newly appointed king of Aarden Hall breathed deeply, trying to calm his nerves. There was no time to revel in his leap of social stature. Lucius had to take measures to push back the Shadow Council. They knew something was coming, they would be prepared, so he had to hit them hard and fast. The first order of business was to appoint those he trusted into positions of power. He headed straight for the Iron Chamber and had instructed his friends to do the same. Guards followed close behind him, he did not know nor trust them.

“You can wait outside,” Lucius told them as he opened to door to the Iron Chamber.

The guards stationed themselves on either side of the door wordlessly. The king walked into the empty, echoing room. Making his way to his seat at the far end of the table, he thought of his first time in the historic room. It astounded him how different the room seemed now.

Alwin entered first with a familiar looking woman. King Lucius had very little question in his mind about the identity of the woman accompanying Alwin. He was not sure what convinced him so swiftly, but he was certain the woman was Dalia, the seer from the swamp.

“We have met once before, have we not?” the king said.

“I believe we have. Though I do not recall the occurrence.”

“Reports are that you showed up in Veikryss battle worn and accompanied by a warg.”

“The reports are true.”

“A story I look forward to hearing when we have time.”

Dalia nodded.

“I recall you doubting this moment would come. Something about not wanting to enter your blood papers,” Alwin chuckled, clearly elated by his friend’s election.

Lucius smiled. “Yet another thing to discuss. But for now, the kingdom is in jeopardy and I need your help. Please, take a seat.”

Almost immediately after they were seated, Jaron burst in.

“Oooh, you sat on that end of the table when you met with the council! Well, no wonder I failed.”

Lucius chuckled. “If I recall correctly, you did not fail, you were doing me a great personal service.”

“Yeah, well... I’m just glad to be remembered now that you’re king.”

Lucius smile faded. “You know me better than that.”

“I know you’re smart. Who knows what you have planned. You wouldn’t be the first ruler to abandon those who helped you rise.”

“I am a hunter of monsters and a friend much before I would call myself a king.”

Jaron laughed. “Forgive me. I told myself I would not be jealous, yet here I am.”

Grace, Auriel, Connor, Gwen and Alistair filed in last. They exchanged pleasantries, all treated Lucius differently than before. A lump grew in his throat. He had not foreseen this shift, though perhaps he should have. To the king’s relief, his old friend acted the same as always. There was still a distant gaze lingering in his eyes that had entered the day Bard died. Dalia’s gaze seemed to pierce straight into Lucius’ soul. He felt certain that the seer knew him, possibly even more than any other. Once everyone was seated, Lucius began.

“Now that I am king, I have the privilege of appointing those I see fit to positions of power and influence. All of you have proven yourselves time and time again. I trust every single one of you, and with the Shadow Council still lurking about trust is more important than ever.” Lucius paused, examining each person’s face, all eagerly hung on his words. “Grace, I would like you to be my social and political advisor. This role will grant you the resources create public service projects. In my absence, it would be you who spoke my wishes to the public. Do you accept?”

Grace smiled. “Of course, my Lord. Thank you.”

Her tone and reference to him as ‘Lord’ brought a creeping unease into Lucius heart. These were his friends—he did not want them to see him as anything but himself. He continued his appointments, ignoring the gnawing pain.

“Auriel, you have proven to be more versatile than anyone expected. You are a formidable fighter, and quick witted tactician. It is, however, your familiarity with the upper class that can best be utilized. Though the common people support me, I doubt the

aristocrats see me as much more than I boy from lower Aarden. I need you to be my bridge to the more privileged of our society. Though I doubt I will spend much time at balls and other such niceties, I am not blind to the fact that there will be times when the owners of a large portion of the city will be imperative to progress. This position will provide you the resources to host events. This will include festivals and holidays. In other words, I wish you to be my cultural advisor. Do you accept?"

"Yes, king," she nodded.

"Connor, your desire for knowledge knows no bounds. It only makes since to appoint you Head Maester. You will have the royal library at your disposal and may appoint as many assistance as you require. You may conduct any research you see fit, but may also be called upon to research topics pertinent to the crown. Do you accept?"

"Yes. Lord Lucius," Connor said, nodding.

"Gwen, you are hereby ordained a knight of Aarden. Your bravery and strength in the face of danger has been proven time and time again. As such, I wish to place you in command of Aarden's military campaigns outside of the city walls. This will primarily involve diminishing bandit threats to Aarden trade routes, but will increase in scale significantly if we find ourselves in the midst of war. Do you accept?"

"Yes, sir."

"Alistair, your craftsmanship is unparalleled. I would be honored if you would accept Aarden's army contract. You would craft all needed weapons and armor for the knights of the crown. Of course, any needed renovations to your forge can be made. You

can choose to stay where you are, but you are more than welcome to move your forge into the walls of the castle. Additionally, you may hire as many apprentices as needed. Do you accept?"

"Yes," the smith said, bowing humbly in his seat.

"Jaron, your sacrifice at your chance for the crown to do a personal favor for me is inexplicably describable. You could very well be in my position had you not voluntarily dropped out."

"It was yours from the beginning. We were all just going through the motions."

Lucius nodded in acknowledgement and continued. "Your resources throughout the city are impressive. Therefore, it seems you are optimal to serve as Spy Master. While I do not condone the spying on the citizens of Aarden at the cost of liberty, I do acknowledge the necessity of covert observation for the safety of the realm. You seem to have a plentiful amount of personal assets, but any additional needs you find will of course be met. Do you accept?"

"Continue gallivanting around and sticking my nose where it doesn't belong, but this time under the veil of legality? Of course I do, my king," Jaron grinned.

"Now, most of you are not familiar with the final two people in the room. Alwin is a lifelong friend and I will personally vouch for his valor. My friend, I wish you to be close by my side as the head of the Royal Guard. Do you accept?"

"It would be my great honor, Lucius."

“Lastly, as hard as it may be to believe, we are in the presence of one of the fabled Great Seers. She is called Dalia.” Lucius gestured. “I would like you to also remain close by my side. You will be proclaimed as nothing other than what you are. You shall be the first Seer of Aarden, Do you accept?”

“I have traveled a long way to find you, great king. I accept your offer.”

“Wonderful. Now, on to the next order of business. The Shadow Council must be exposed and neutralized. Where are we on that front?”

“I have decoded most of the communication we recovered between known members. There are some cryptic and suspicious statements, but nothing incriminating. The only thing I cannot make sense of is this reoccurring symbol,” Connor said, handing Lucius a piece of paper with a rough sketch on it.

Lucius heart leapt. They finally had something on the Shadow Council. He had seen the symbol found in their letters before, on the dagger of the assassin that tried to kill him in the Black Cell.

“Jaron, I assume you have one of your men nearby?” Lucius said.

“Yes. Why?”

“Bring him in. I need to send a trusted person to fetch something.”

Jaron obeyed without another word. The table watched as the king whispered to Jaron’s man. The man grinned, nodded and headed out the room. Everyone’s attention turned back to Lucius.

“The assassin that tried to kill me in the Black Cell had a dagger baring this insignia on it. Between the recovered correspondence, witness accounts, and this symbol’s connection to my assault we have all the proof we need to push the Shadow Council out of Aarden.”

Chapter 93- Aeacus

Unity

The Undying gathered. Anxious murmurs buzzed as the crowd waited for the wedding to begin. Braun and Fenrik stood tall and proud next to Aeacus at the end of the aisle. Stark white chairs and pillars rested on either side of the deep blue carpet path down the center of the room. The torches that lit the room were manipulated by alchemy—the fire shimmered like gems but danced like flame. Flowers were sparsely found in the Undying Wood, but all that could be gathered were. Much like the flames of the torches, the flowers were altered and displayed a vibrant array of color.

Lady Grey appeared at the foot of the aisle surrounded by armed guards. Her stride was militant as she made her way towards Aeacus. For a brief moment, the Undying leader thought she may decide to betray him after-all and take command for herself. This concern subsided as she took her place by his side and smiled. The priest stepped up to the podium and nodded to his assistant that stood nearby with a small box. The assistant opened the box, revealing an extravagant white ribbon. Aeacus and the Lady each took up the ribbon. Wrapping opposing sides to their hands, they held the binding together and looked into each other's eyes as was custom. Aeacus realized this was the first real eye contact the two had made. Their trust had always walked a tightrope, but now for the first time he felt he could truly trust her.

“We stand here today to witness the union of our Lord Aeacus to this fair Lady Grey,” the minister began. “This marriage signifies a new beginning for the Undying. We will no longer be divided over factionalist idealism, but stand united as one people. I would now ask the couple to recite their vows.”

Both hesitated, waiting for the other to begin. Aeacus chuckled and cleared his throat. He had written, re-written, and rehearsed his vows, but the words seemed to stick in his throat.

“It was not long ago that I believed myself able to govern the Undying populace alone. I was wrong. There are intricacies to our people that I will never fully understand. Though I hope to be thought of as a man of the people, it has been too long that I have been able to love amongst the people and to be seen as one of you. Lady Grey has accomplished what I could not. She has proven herself a strong and decisive leader and I stand before you today to pledge myself to her through the bond of marriage. No longer will I stand alone. No longer will I rule alone. I take you, Lady Grey, into my heart and embrace your strengths, accept your short-comings, and declare that I will stand by your side as long as we both shall live.” His final words lingered in his mind, Undying conceivably lived forever and the thought haunted him.

The minister nodded and gestured for Lady Grey to begin her vows. “The Undying people will be forever grateful for your service, as will I,” she began. “Now that the burden has grown too great for one man, I look forward to taking on the responsibility with you. Together we are stronger. Together we can move towards the future. Though what lies ahead is uncertain, you have proven yourself time and time again that you can adapt. This instills great confidence in me that we can overcome whatever challenges await us. We met as strangers. We fought together as friends. And now we unite as husband and wife. I take you, Lord Aeacus, into my heart and embrace your strengths, accept your shortcomings, and declare that I will stand by your side as long as we both shall live.”

“I proclaim this union official and its legitimacy is confirmed by all those present.

May your lives together be fruitful.”

Chapter 94- Raijin

Meditation

Once again, the druid leader took to his perch upon the cliff that overlooked the village. Raijin did not look up in earnest this time. He did not expect his father to come down any time soon. Even one as strong as Borghdir could not be expected to recover quickly from the loss of a sibling, especially when her life was taken at his hands. The young druid understood why his father did what he did, even without words exchanged between them. The loss was not what troubled Raijin, but what was to come. Their future was more uncertain than ever with the Great White Deer gone. Maybe they would finally know peace in the absence of the Dark Totem, maybe not. Raijin did not know, and that scared him.

“I know your fear the unknown, my son, what lies ahead is not visible to us, and that can be frightening,” Kajah said as she approached.

Raijin did not notice her until she spoke. “We have won the day, but at great cost. And we still have no knowledge of how things came to be as they were. What was the Dark Totem? How did the Wild Ones obtain it?”

Kajah nodded. “Some things in life are never known. Pursuit of knowledge is a noble pursuit, but only if the information you seek can be obtained.”

“How can you tell the difference?”

“That is certainly the difficult part. Sometimes it is unclear, but we can trust in those wiser than us. We shall commune with the elements. Perhaps, in time, they will respond.”

“Will father be okay?”

Kajah paused. “His soul is torn. I can feel it. But it is repairing. He needs time. The tribe will look to us until he is ready to return.”

“What if they ask me what we are to do next? How can I answer that which I do not know myself?”

“Few know how events are to unfold. You cannot attempt and control the entire future of our people, but you can guide them with the next step. What do you think we should do?”

“We have a friend amongst the people of Aarden Hall. Perhaps it is time our people co-operated once more.”

Kajah smiled. “That is a wise move. Peace with Aarden could bring new prosperity to our woods.”

They stood together, watching Borghdir meditate for quite some time. Raijin uncertainty of the future lingered, but at least he had a direction to head. He trusted his mother would be beside him the whole way. The young druid turned and looked at his village. It still looked quite militarized. Tall, spiked wooded walls encircled the area. Buildings were damaged. Everyone habitually wielded a weapon. Raijin knew this had to change. He would tear the walls down and show his people they no longer needed to fear

the woods around them. They could lay down their arms without it being seen as weakness.

“We should return to our peaceful ways. The war with the Wild Ones is over. We will rebuild, stronger than before.”

Chapter 95- Lucius

Pushing Back the Shadows

The new king publicly denounced the Shadow Council and presented proof of its nefarious deeds. By the time Lucius did this, all known members of the group had disappeared. Those that surrounded him seemed to think the Shadow Council's retreat was cause for celebration, but it chilled the king to his core. They had known their time was short. They no doubt carefully constructed plans and all outing them to the public did was accelerate their actions.

“Send men to release those that Birch imprisoned.” Lucius commanded thinking of the soldiers loyal or Gerreon who had been captured.

The guard he spoke to nodded and left the room with haste.

“Any word from your men on the street?” Lucius said, turning to Jaron.

“No, my Lord, but if the Shadow Council is still in the city, they will find them.”

“They are still within Aarden's walls. They have not simply cut their loses like they would make it seem. Mark me. They still have plans in action.”

“The search will continue until we are certain no threat remains,” Jaron nodded.

Lucius took a deep breath. He felt like he was speaking differently. Perhaps it was simply a response to everyone treating him as an authority. He did not wish to change, but he had no time to worry about such trivialities. Lucius jarred out of his thoughts by a searing pain in his arm, or where is arm used to be. The concoctions brewed by the alchemists of Aarden worked wonderfully to the point where the king often forgot about

his lost appendage, but occasionally pain seeped in and caught him off guard. He wondered if he visibly winced.

“Your highness, I have been going through every document I could find on abandoned or forgotten structures in the city. There are a few I discovered that are likely places for the Shadow Council to have fled to.” Connor said as he bound into the room, arms overflowing with scrolls and loose papers.

Lucius scanned the documents Connor handed him: abandoned warehouse at the docks, a temple that closed after part of the roof caved in, and old catacombs that had not been used in over a century. “How far do these catacombs stretch?”

“Miles. It was the central place of burial in Aarden for decades. It’s a mystery why they were walled off. Theories range anywhere from tunnel collapse from the weight of the bodies to evil spirits.”

“Get word to your men, Jaron. I want those catacombs investigated,” Lucius said, handing him a map from the pile of documents.

Jaron was on his way out, map in hand, when a soldier burst through the door. “My Lord! The prisoners are gone!”

The shock of the news scurried through his mind. Soon, however, Lucius found his thoughts wondered to another prisoner. “Did you check the other cells? Are all other prisoners accounted for?” he asked thinking of the Gnarled Man.

“We did a sweep of the cells twice, my Lord. All others are accounted for and there is no sign of what became of those who vanished.”

“Very well. It seems we are running out of time. The Shadow Council’s plans are in action. Jaron, go with your men to the crypts. Send word if you find them there.”

Jaron left without hesitation. Lucius wondered if Dalia had managed to induce any visions. She asked for a secluded area where she could focus on her sight. He realized this thought was pointless as she would undoubtedly come to him if anything important were discovered. Lucius trust for the seer bothered him. He hardly knew her. For all he knew she was planted at his side by the Shadow Council, but something within him assured him that was not the case.

Kamon and Gerreon came into the room. “Lord Lucius,” the counselor began. “What would you ask of me in this time of crisis? How can I help?”

“You would do well to carry on the day-to-day activities of Aarden. The city needs stability as we search for our hidden foes. I believe there is no one more fit to keep order while I am preoccupied.”

“Very well, sire. And if I may, there is something I would like to discuss. I will not pull you from your campaign for long.”

Lucius nodded and stepped into a distant, unoccupied corner with Gerreon and Kamon. There was a flare in the old counselor’s eyes. Kamon shuffled through various documents.

“I have, in secret, for many years communicated with the other factions of the area, namely the druids and Undying.”

“How is this possible? The Undying plague is so contagious even to transfer paper back and forth would risk contamination.”

Kamon handed Lucius a sketch with a neatly written inscription beneath it. The sketch was that of an orb, designed long ago.

“With this artifact, I have been able to translocate a part of myself to a distant location and commune with the leaders of our two nearest rival factions. They, of course, are also in possession of such objects.”

“Did previous leadership know of this?”

“Perhaps long ago, but since I have been in possession of the artifact, no. There has not been a ruler that I believed would be accepting of this until now.”

“I am honored your think so great of me. You wish me to enter into communications with these leaders?”

“Yes, very insightful, Lord. I will keep up the day-to-day stability. But, I ask you, allow me to also arrange a meeting time with the other factions. They will be made aware of your preoccupation, of course, but I believe a meeting as soon as possible is pertinent.”

“Very well, make it so.”

Dalia came into the room, looking deeply concerned.

“You must excuse me, Counselor,” the king said.

Lucius rushed to the seer’s side. “What did you see?”

“It is what I could not see that troubles me. Everything within the city walls is shrouded in darkness. I cannot see the future that lies ahead. Something is obstructing my vision.”

“What could possibly be that powerful?” the king asked.

“I know of only one force that powerful, and it is the same shadows that dwells within the crown you wear upon your head.”

“The Dark Iron? They are using it for something, but what?”

“During the time I spent with the druids I witnessed a Dark Totem drive many to madness. They were loyal to only the darkness. Within the dream wood of the druids I saw the darkness manifest itself. I believe it to be some kind of entity. Perhaps the Shadow Council worships this darkness as the Wild Ones did.”

“Send word to Alwin and Gwen to ready their men. We must be ready at a moment’s notice to close in on the Shadow Council’s position.” Lucius commanded to a nearby guard.

The guard left wordlessly. Lucius and Dalia watched as people filed in and out of the room. They listened to reports and conjectures about where the Shadow Council might be and what they might be doing. Finally, Jaron’s man returned with the news that the king expected. The Shadow Council had fled into the forgotten catacombs beneath Aarden. The man brought additional reconnaissance information that chilled Lucius to the bone. Upon entering the dark tomb, the team of three men heard wales of agony from below. The darkness down in the crypts was said to be unnatural and there was a constant

looming presence in the shadows. Only one of the three returned from the scouting party to report this, and he was nearly to crazed to understand.

Chapter 96- Dalia

The Dark Below

Standing before the gaping maw of the catacombs, the king's forces formed a perimeter. The seer knew that most the men guarding the entrance could withstand the shadow's aura. She would hand select each soldier, having no doubt that the force that stormed the catacombs would be significantly smaller.

“How do we go about this?” Lucius said, coming to her side.

“Well, we know you can resist, seeing as you wear Dark Iron around your head.”

“That's it! We can fit each man with the crown and see how he reacts.”

“As romantic of a notion as that is, I would suggest something less grandiose. During my time with the druids I learned how to detect those who were resistant to the dark aura and how to help build up defenses against it.”

“When this is all over, you really must tell me of your adventures in the Druid Wood.”

“I promise that vague notions of what occurred are much more quixotic than the actual events.”

“You don't have a happy bone in your body, do you?”

“I would blame it on old age, but I hardly remember my past. Perhaps, it is because all I have known is war since I returned.”

The king nodded solemnly. “Let us hope that ends today.”

All arrangements for their assault were made within a matter of minutes. Lucius, Alwin, Gwen, Jaron, and herself were to go down into the graves with half a dozen soldiers and flush out the Shadow Council where they would be apprehended by the much larger forces waiting for them on the surface. As the seer stared into the darkness before them, she was reminded of the man with the hollow eyes. She feared that was what waited for them down in the catacombs.

Lucius lead the way, plunging head first into danger. He seemed unmoved by the darkness, he did not fear it. The certainty in his movements motivated the steps of those who followed him. Even when the screams started, the king did not flinch. It was as if he knew for certain their victory was assured. Dalia was not as certain as Lucius seemed to be. However, she did not doubt that this venture was necessary, but it seemed just as likely to her that they would be swallowed whole by the shadows as it would be to vanquish them. She felt a swell of adrenaline as a vision began to overtake her. For the first time since she began to regain her memories she tried to fight it off. The group could not afford for her to be unconscious of the waking world while they were surrounded by nightmares.

She saw a flash of a jagged, black stone mountain. A light sat upon the very top, hovering there as if to defy nature itself. Dalia pulled herself out of the trance, but not before she lost her footing. Alwin caught her as she fell.

“You okay?” he whispered.

She nodded. “A vision of my past, it is of no significance. It won’t happen again.”

“So you don’t control your second sight?” Jaron asked curiously.

“I assume I can once I remember how, but now is not the time.”

They all stopped when the sound of footsteps echoed through the corridor ahead of them. It was crucial moments like this when Dalia was glad Geirolf was safe in the Aarden’s kennels. No doubt, he would break the uneasy silence with a light whimper and give their position away, that is if they had not already done that themselves. No one in the group seemed to breathe for over a minute as they strained their ears, listening for another sign of movement. Dalia became acutely aware of the feeling the maddened soldier reported. It felt as if the darkness itself watched them.

Eventually, they had to trek on. King Lucius lead on once again. Deeper and deeper they plunged into the abyss. The graves were unkempt and many unearthed by grave robbers. Corpses spilled out of their allotments and onto the stone floor. The group tried to move silently, but the scattered bones proved that difficult. The light of the surface had long gone, but at last there was a glimmer of it ahead of them. Chanting echoed from the chamber ahead. They had found the Shadow Council.

Lucius rounded the corner first, with Dalia close behind. The remained low and moved slowly. The rest of the group remained behind, waiting for their king’s signal. The captured soldiers lay unconscious on stone altars. Each altar had been fitted with a small piece of Dark Iron just above where each man’s head rested. The Shadow Council stood in a circle around the altars. They all wore dark hooded robes, but one stood out amongst the others. His robe was more elegant and laced with dark embroidery. He held a sleek, sharp dagger made of

Dark Iron. It looked to the seer to be a sacrificial blade. It was in that moment that true horror of the situation took ahold of Dalia. It was hard to spot in the flickering dim light, but the guards' eye lids sunk into their skulls as if their eyes were gone. The blood had been wiped away from their faces, but pools of it still remained on the floor. A stone basin sat behind the leader of the cult. Dalia did not wish to know what sat within the basin, but she had a good idea what it was already. The chanting stopped. The hooded figures turned to Lucius and Dalia. They threw down their hoods. Lucius recognized many among their number: Birch, as well as many other counselors, high ranking merchants, and even a previous contender for the crown Amon. Birch smiled smugly. Lucius stood and the seer followed sync.

“Welcome, my Lord, to the Hall of Shadows.”

“It's over Birch. You're outnumbered. We have the catacombs surrounded.”

“We knew this day would come. Which is why we have been cooking up a little surprise for you.”

“The men with hollow eyes, what are they?” Dalia blurted.

Birch's eyes shifted to Dalia as if he had not noticed her presence until that moment. “Where did you obtain such knowledge?” he spat.

“She is one of the seers of legend. She has seen what is to come and knows you will fall.” The King lied convincingly.

Birch laughed. “Even if she is a seer, the darkness will have blocked the future from her view.”

“I have seen enough to presume what might happen,” the seer added.

Birch sneered. “Do you know how long we have waited for this moment? For years, we research the darkness in secret. We attempted on several occasions to get one of our own in the running for ruler, but that damned basin cannot be deceived. Gerreon and his supporters did not make things easy for us. We tried to invent a new method of ruler selection but the old fool was shackled to tradition. Eventually, he became suspicious of course. By then there was not much he could do... that is until you came along Lucius. You are a stubborn one. We tried to mislead you, bribe you, extort you, kill you! But you would not sway. Gerreon’s shining beacon in the darkness. Even the brightest of lights can be snuffed by overwhelming shadows.” Birch walked up to two of the nearest alters and placed his hands on the dark stones. “Rise,” he hissed.

The rest of the Shadow Council followed their leader. The captured guards stood to their feet. It soon became obvious that any semblance of the men they once were vanished into the shadows. They opened their eyes and revealed nothing but shadows within. The lids stayed open as if an eye held them up. They were alive, but dead. They were full, but hollow. The abominations stared blankly, yet menacingly. Alwin and the others ran to their king’s side, weapons at the ready.

“Soon you will join our ranks as one of the Hollowed.” Birch laughed. “I think you shall prove much more palatable after that my king.”

The Hollows turned their attention from the armed men to the Shadow Council behind them. They grabbed ahold of the nearest man they could, forcing open their mouths and gouging out their eyes.

“What are you doing? We live to serve of course, but of our own accord! We do not wish to be hollowed!” Birch shouted in alarm. He was the only that remained unchanged by the Hollowed.

The abominations spewed shadow from their mouths and into the faces of the Shadow Council. Their muffled screams were cut short and they stood-up as Hollowed.

“Stop this at once! You need humans to convince others to join our cause!”

The Hollowed grabbed the counselor. He screamed as he broke his jaw open and scooped out his eyes. Their expressions never changed. There was indifference in their attacks, savage and cold. Finally, Birch stood as one of them. The Hollowed surrounded the king and his forces. They were outnumbered. The shadows closed in.

Chapter 97- Gerreon

Stalking Shadows

The old counselor sat alone in his office trying to busy himself with work, but his mind could find no solace. Somewhere underneath Aarden a battle ensued and Gerreon was concerned for the welfare of the new king.

Consuming himself with his work as best he could, the old counselor began to feel a new sense of unease. It was not concern for a battle progress report that now plagued him, but something unfamiliar. The hair on the back of his neck stood on end. He felt as if something were approaching. Nonchalantly he glanced around the room and found nothing.

The door creaked open. Gerreon's heart leapt in his chest. Kamon entered the room with tea. The old counselor relaxed but not before his scribe sensed something was wrong.

“Is something the matter, counselor?” Kamon inquired.

“Nothing to worry about, m'boy. I'm just ready for this conflict to be over. I am not a young man anymore and can't handle all this excitement.” Gerreon patted Kamon's hand reassuringly as the scribe placed the tea down on the desk.

“I will inform you as soon as I hear word from the king's envoy.”

“Thank you, lad.”

“You should get some rest. There will be plenty of work in the coming days. No reason to exhaust yourself in the name of keeping busy.”

“Yes... perhaps you are right. I may feel more comfortable in my quarters at the very least.”

“Do you need me to walk you there?”

“No, no... This is an unusually tame day for my old bones. Besides, the walking might do me some good.”

Kamon smiled and left with a slight bow.

Gerreon sighed and scanned his surroundings once more. The presence he felt earlier was gone. The old counselor began his trek to his quarters. He took each step carefully, but kept a steady pace. The halls of Aarden were emptier than usual. Most of the king's forces were occupied with the attack on the Shadow Council. Gerreon came to a sudden halt when he neared the door of his quarters. Slightly ajar, the door loomed before the old counselor. Light flickered from inside the room. Purposefully, the fireplace confirmed the existence of Gerreon's suspected stalking predator.

Bravely, the old counselor strode into his room. “Do you take pleasure in prolonging this attack? I suspect the Shadow Council simply ordered my death, not my torment.”

The assassin stepped out of the shadows. He did not say a word. Unsheathing a dagger, the hooded figure attacked. Gerreon heard footsteps out in the hall. Kamon no doubt allowed his master to walk on his own, but could not justify not checking up on him before retiring to his own quarters. The final moments before his world went black were all a blur to Gerreon. There was pain, shouting, conflict, and then only darkness.

Chapter 98- Alwin

The Light Within

Alwin's nerves seared with adrenaline. His mind raced as he wondered if the Hollowed could be damaged by conventional means. Something within him warned him they could not be taken down by sword alone. Closer the shadows crept. They were in no hurry. To the Hollowed the conversion was inevitable. The knight wanted to tell his friend he was honored to die by his side and he would prefer no other death, but he did not want to dishearten his men. Lucius appointment of Alwin to a leadership role weighed heavy on the knight's heart. Part of him wished the responsibility away. If his men died, each loss would chip away at his heart.

“Follow my lead!” Lucius shouted.

The king dipped his sword in a nearby oil basin, setting it ablaze. Lucius charged towards the shadows. The Hollowed were unmoved by his actions. All followed the king's example. The two groups met. A single swipe damaged the flesh of the Hollowed, but could not slow them. A soldier was over-run by three shadow warriors. He screamed and fell to the ground. Soon he rose as one of their number. Alwin felt the loss greater than he had anticipated. Not only had the man died under his charge, but his body was made to be a puppet for whatever darkness lingered within. He cried out in anger, thrusting his heated blade through the nearest Hollowed. Their faces nearly met and Alwin saw into the void of its eyes. It left him cold and empty. He felt the emptiness be replaced with rage. He screamed again, yanking his blade from the torso and swinging to lop off the hollow man's head. The body fell motionless. No blood seeped from the wounds.

“One has fallen! They can be killed!” Alwin proclaimed.

The knight’s blade was extinguished by his assault, but it still glowed hot. He ran to the nearest lit basin. The Hollowed rallied to prevent any from relighting their weapons. Nearby, Lucius broke open an elemental crystal onto his gauntlet. The blades of his metal arm were ablaze. The king dashed into the guards, cutting through them with ease and opening the basin to his allies. Alwin relit his sword and charged back into the fight. Jaron brought some elemental gems of his own and tossed them at the advancing army, lighting several ablaze. Alwin sliced through one of the burning hollow men’s necks, taking its head.

Another soldier screamed in horror as one of the Hollowed that had been set on fire, fell onto him. The man set ablaze with the creature, trying desperately to push its weight off him so he could put the fire out. Jaron threw an ice crystal near the man, managing to extinguish the biting flames, but the soldier’s wounds were too severe. Alwin went to the man’s side to check his vitals, pushing the lifeless Hollowed off of him. He was alive, but barely. He had sustained severe burns. The man’s skin sizzled as he choked for breath. Gwen came to Alwin’s side.

“He is lost! Put him out of his misery!”

Alwin shook his head. He could not bring himself to do it. Gwen pushed him aside. She plunged her blade into the dying man’s heart. He gave a sigh of relief as his life left his body. Alwin stood, turning his back on the scene. He plunged back into the fray. As he cut through a Hollowed, one came from behind him. The creature grabbed him with unexpected force. He did not know how he would pull free. He tried to turn to

sink his blade into the hollow man, but could not. Then the grip loosened and Dalia came to his side, decapitating the Hollowed. Lucius joined them and they stood back to back, facing the battle before them. Screams echoed through the catacombs. Everything was a swirl of fire and shadow. Alwin could not gather which side had the greater number. An explosion erupted to his left. An elemental crystal had ignited a basin of oil. Both soldiers and Hollowed were lit ablaze. One of Alwin's men ran to him, looking for his commander to put him out. The soldier's eyes were wide with panic. He was in shock. He grabbed onto Alwin, the fire scorched his arm. The pain was so intense, he acted instinctually and pushed the man to the ground, letting him die alone, at the feet of his commander.

“Are you okay?” Lucius shouted.

Alwin looked down at his arm. His skin was a charred, bleeding mess. “I’ll be fine,” he winced.

The knight had no time to tend to his wound. Another Hollowed bound for him. He opened up its stomach with his blade, but the blade was cold and did little to cease the hollow man's assault. Lucius tossed his blazing weapon to Alwin and charged the assailant with his fiery gauntlet. The battle raged on. Time was absent in the fog of war. Screams, blood, fire and darkness was all they knew for quite some time. Suddenly, the fighting stopped. Alwin staggered, taken aback by the sudden change in pace. The catacombs were still. The Hollowed lay on the stone floor, lifeless. They had won.

“I don't know about you, but I'm not taking any chances. I say we burn this damn place to the ground,” Jaron said, breathing heavily.

They all nodded in agreement, laughing with relief. It was over. The darkness had been defeated. Adrenaline still surged through the knight, so all he felt was elation. He knew the losses that had taken would set in and the fear of the shadows would remain, but for now he could be nothing but happy that they were victorious.

Chapter 99- Kamon

Aftermath

News spread fast that the king secured victory in the catacombs. Yet, to Kamon this victory rang hollow. During the assault on the catacombs, the Shadow Council had other plans in place. An assassin infiltrated Aarden Hall with the mission of killing Counselor Gerreon. The mission had failed, just barely. The old counselor was gravely wounded and the assailant apprehended. The young scribe watched from a high window as the king and his men filed back into the walls of the castle. Just a few rooms away his mentor lay on the brink of death. Kamon had much to report to his king, but could not pull himself away from Gerreon's side. Since news of the victory had reached him, Kamon had been attempting to force himself downstairs. Wiping away one last tear, the scribe hurried to the Great Hall where he assumed the king and his convoy would congregate.

When Kamon arrived, he found a celebration less jovial than he expected. The group was tired, yes, but there was something more, a sadness to them. They all had a distant look in their eyes. Lucius smiled when he saw the scribe approach.

“Ah, Kamon, how is everything on the homefront?”

The scribe fought to maintain his composure. “The streets are peaceful and most revel in your victory. There is a select few that believe your appointment and subsequent destruction of Council Members to be a nefarious coup, but they are a significant minority. However, while you were absent... an assailant broke into Aarden on order of the Shadow Council and assaulted Gerreon.”

The king's false smile faded. “What happened?”

“He survived, but is gravely injured. The assailant killed himself when it became apparent he would be captured.”

“Well no need for me to ask if he divulged anything then...” Lucius said. “Is Gerreon well enough for one visitor?”

Kamon nodded and they quickly left the Great Hall together. Whereas Lucius had shown fatigue before, a new energy revitalized him as they bound up the stairs. Kamon wanted to warn the king about the dire shape his mentor was in and warn him to not be too disheartened if he were to die within the next few hours. He did not have to, however. When they entered the room the old Counselor was sitting up in bed, looking dreamily out the nearby window.

“I have heard of your great victory, my king,” the counselor said hoarsely.

“Not all see it that way,” Lucius said sitting on the old man’s bedside.

Kamon realized for the first time that the king saw Gerreon the same way he saw him, as a mentor. This puzzled the scribe. How could a king idealize an old counselor? Yes, their experience greatly differed, but Lucius had already far exceeded him in position.

“Pah,” the counselor exclaimed weakly, gesturing as if to push aside such silly subjects. “There will always be those who do not approve. As king, all you can do is what you know is right and hope that in time the neigh-sayers will come around. And if they don’t. who cares? You’re king.” The counselor chuckled and grimaced from the pain it caused.

Sensing the other two men tense up, Gerreon smiled. “The healers who treated me said I have a stubborn resistance to death and that they would not be surprised if I am on my feet again in no time.”

“That is great news, Counselor,” Kamon said, putting his hand on his master’s shoulder.

“However, I am weak beyond measure. I fear I shall need a stand-in for my position while I am recovering.”

“I shall begin compiling a list of eligible candidates, sir,” Kamon said.

Gerreon turned and looked his scribe in the eyes. “No need. I wish for you to take over my duties. With the King’s permission, of course.”

“I would have no one else by my side,” Lucius nodded.

“Then it is decided,” the counselor said.

Kamon was speechless. He knew one day he was to succeed his master, but he felt as if his apprenticeship was not nearly complete. Even when his training was complete he had fully intended on election.

“Gerreon I do not think I am prepared,” Kamon stammered.

“It is only for a short time, and I will be with you every step of the way. Think of it as a trial.” Gerreon smiled.

“Okay, but if my temporary term passes the allotted time for temporary replacement then an election will have to be held.”

The old counselor laughed. "Of course, but I hardly expect it will come to that."
He turned back to the king. "Now, I have heard of your victory, but what is the reality of what happened? How many did we lose?"

Lucius grew very grim. "Nearly two dozen between the men captured from the cells and the men killed in the catacombs."

"An unpleasant figure, but battles have ended much worse."

"It's a bit different to read about a king losing hundreds and knowing you are responsible for the death of even one."

Gerreon nodded knowingly. "Yes, but you have to grow to accept the weight of responsibility. But also know that you did not force any of those men down into the catacombs. They were performing a duty for the good of Aarden."

"Still, I would prefer to give the city time to mourn and hold a service in the men's honor."

"I would expect nothing less." Gerreon smiled weakly. "Now there is an important matter I must speak with you about. Preparations have been made for you to converse with the other faction leaders through my orb of translocation."

"When do you wish me to meet with them?"

Gerreon nodded. "As soon as possible. And I would urge you to consider reuniting our cultures. They would remain very much their own, but I believe we can benefit from closer ties."

“I have never met a druid that was not a Wild One and I certainly have never come in contact with the Undying.”

“You have more in common than you may believe.”

“Very well, I will agree to meet. I can promise nothing more.”

“Excellent. Kamon will make the arrangements in my stead. They have met him once before.”

The king nodded to the injured old man and left to tend to other matters. Kamon helped Gerreon lie back down. It seemed the counselor was posturing for the king—he had less strength than he projected. Kamon’s brow furrowed uncontrollably. He did not know what he would do without his mentor. Gerreon patted his ward assuredly. The scribe left the counselor’s side so he could rest. Kamon had a lot of work to do and he would start with contacting the other leaders.

Chapter 100- Dalia

The New Order

A vision came to Dalia. She had seen the near future. How long from now she could not determine, but it was not long. Lucius stood as king, proud and strong. He was fair and just to his people and, most importantly, he was loved by all. The conflict of the past was gone and Aarden was in a new, prosperous era. But the king was not happy. Something plagued him. He was not content to simply rule. He was a man of action that had sat around playing politics for too long. Just as Lucius was about to express his plans to her, the vision faded and the seer awoke sitting in a chair in the room designated to her. It did not feel like her home. It was a nice room, in the royal wing of Aarden, but it was not hers. Dalia straightened her nice, yet uncomfortable clothes and made her way out into the hall.

No matter what time of day it was, it seemed there were always people working in Aarden. Something always needed sorted. Much of it was small and insignificant so it was not brought to the king. But the truly difficult tasks were brought before him and he almost always sought her council. Dalia was glad Lucius trusted her, but she was not used to the constant demand of Aarden. She made her way to the private office of the king. It sat just behind the throne room in case there was any need for a royal ruling on an important matter.

“Enter,” he said when she knocked.

“I have had a vision,” she said, sitting down in a chair across from him.

“Oh? He said putting down the manuscript he had been examining closely.

“It was the near future. Things were going well in Aarden.”

“Excellent. That’s always good to hear.”

“The only problem was, you were not content.”

Lucius sighed. “I rarely am when I am not off on a hunt.”

“Then why remain when there are so many that can take on your duties for you?”

“Because, it would look very strange, the newly appointed king killing half the Council and running off into the woods with a seer,” Lucius smiled weakly.

Dalia paused. She knew he was right but something pulled her towards the swamp that had once been her home. She needed more answers. She needed to know her past and to gain the power to understand the darkness they had faced. Lucius saw the concern in her expression.

“When the time is right, we will go seek answers. That I promise you,” he said.

She smiled and nodded. “Are all the preparations made for the honoring ceremony of the fallen?”

“Yes, yes. Grace and Auriel have handled all that.” He had a distant look in his eyes. “I was just reading over old eulogies kings had given in similar situations. They all seem so... artificial. Don’t get me wrong, they read beautifully, but they feel wrong coming from me.”

“Surely you have written something, with such little time left.”

“Of course, I have. It just didn’t sound very ‘kingly’ to me.” He sighed, handing her a paper with rough handwritten words on it.

She glanced over the speech and smiled. “This will do just fine. This sounds like the young beast hunter cheered for in the trials and not some construct of kingly tradition.”

Lucius laughed. “You hate it as much as I do?”

“Of course. As I said, we are meant to be out in the world. But, of course, only when the time is right,” she said, standing. “I will leave you to rehearse.”

“Dalia, thank you for treating me as a person and not as a king. It is something I value greatly these days.”

The seer smiled, nodded, and left the room. Lucius looked tired. She could tell he meant every word he said. There were no lies between them. They did not withhold information from each other. There was no need. The thought of this made Dalia content, at least for a short while. She decided to walk the streets of Aarden. Many would insist on an armed escort, but she could take care of herself and wanted time alone before the ceremony.

The sun shone gently down on the stone streets. Since the destruction of the darkness in the catacombs, the streets seemed brighter. The seer wondered if the churning shadows beneath the city streets had any effect of citizens. There did seem to be more people out and about, but perhaps that was simply the excitement of a new king. Though,

her only remembered experience in the city was his actual crowning, Dalia was sure she had been within Aarden's walls before. She passed by the stage that was being prepared for the evenings honor ceremony. Grace and Auriel worked diligently on directing people in the construction and other preparations. This was their element. They all idealized Lucius yet could not seem to see how little he fit in.

Dalia walked for hours. She came to a shady area under a tree and decided to rest. She wondered how Geirolf was fairing with the hunting hounds. She had tried on insisting he would be better by her side, but few could justify having a wild warg lose in the city. Resting her head on the trunk of the tree, she wished desperately to finish the vision she had in her room. Breathing deeply, she concentrated on that place and time. Closing her eyes, she relaxed her body and attempted to take control of her power. After several minutes, she felt something. A flickering connection to the future image that she sought. The feeling was soon accompanied by muffled voices until finally she found herself in the fully realized scene.

“I feel trapped,” the future Lucius spoke. “And not just in the sense of the confining traditions and regulations of being ruler. There is something out there I feel must be discovered. I cannot sit ideally as questions permeate my entire being. I will make all the preparations. We leave first light tomorrow.”

Dalia used her abilities to examine the all that had occurred since she had been reborn in the woods. Her past was still unclear and she could not see far into the future, but she now understood all she could about the present. The sun was falling and the crowds had disappeared. Somebody approached from behind her.

“Are you coming to the ceremony or are you just going to sit and day dream all day?” Alwin said, amusement in his voice.

“You very well know it was not day dreaming.” Dalia stood up.

“I got reports of you lying here. Apparently, you had been motionless for hours. Some thought you were dead.”

“Not dead, just not present in my body.”

“What did you see?”

“Too much to cover in the short time we have. Shall we go to the ceremony?”

Alwin nodded and they walked together in relative silence. Dalia felt the weight of responsibility weigh heavy on Alwin just as it did Lucius, but it was different. There was something else that tugged at the knight’s heart, but he was not as open with her as the king was. When they arrived at the ceremony, Lucius was beginning his speech.

“As we competed for the crown, it became very clear that someone was attempting to control the outcome. Fortunately for me the contenders stood united and together we uncovered the Shadow Council and their nefarious plans. In fact, it was through the actions of others and not my own that ridded this city of the darkness that hid within it. This is not my victory. This is a victory of the people of Aarden. Men like the brave soldiers who gave their lives to keep our city safe.” Lucius paused, scanning the audience until he found Alwin and Dalia. “The men that died in the catacombs were chosen because they had proven themselves to be resilient against the darkness. Though I did not know them personally, I have no doubt they were good men. Formalities aside,

their loss weighs heavy on my heart. I am not the king you think I am, but I will strive to be the king you want me to be. I promise, I will do whatever is in my power to usher Aarden into a new era. I will work tirelessly to construct a new order in which the corruption we experienced recently can never happen again. Lastly, I want to announce that we have begun plans to build a memorial over the sight of the old catacombs in honor of those we lost. Once complete, I hope we can all look upon it and remember that peace cannot always be obtained by passive obedience to the way things are. Sometimes you must look within and identify something is amiss. Sometimes you must take a stand against all odds and say enough is enough. This is my city, my country, my life and it is my own. We must look to the light and push back the darkness for our friends, family, city, and our lives.”

Chapter 101- Alwin

New Life

Momentarily, the two old friends set aside the chaos left in the wake of battle. News arrived that Prue had given birth. Accompanied by an unwelcome regiment of guards, the newly appointed king and head of guard made their way across Aarden to meet the child of their late friend. They knocked softly when they arrived to the house. They were eager to meet the new baby, but they did not want to barge in before the room could be made appropriate for guests. The midwife answered the door. They knew who she must be, but it felt bizarre seeing a stranger greet them to their friends' long time home.

“Right on time your majesty. The room is ready for guests. The child is sleeping, but your friend is wide awake. I would ask you to monitor her, however. Once she comes down from all the excitement she will need plenty of rest.”

The two men silently nodded and stepped inside the house as the midwife stepped aside. The woman suspiciously eyed all the guards.

“I do hope they don't all plan on coming in.”

“They will wait outside,” Lucius chuckled.

“Good... I'd feel rather peculiar having so many men in a birthing room.”

Prue was beaming down at her child when they entered. She hardly noticed their entrance into the room.

“Girl or boy?” Alwin asked, getting Prue's attention.

“Boy...” the new mother said dreamily.

“Do you have a name yet?” King Lucius asked.

“Bard and I had discussed names of course. But... I was thinking I would name him after his father.”

Both men smiled and nodded. They came to her bedside to get a closer look at the newborn.

“Who would have thought a year ago that we would be where we are today,” Lucius said.

“So much has changed so fast. My head is still spinning from all of it,” Prue said.

“We are both here for you and baby Bard. You will never have to worry about your child’s future. He will be taken care of.”

“I appreciate the sentiment, but if recent events have proven anything it is that we are all at the mercy of chance and circumstance.”

“You cannot allow yourself to be so hopeless,” Alwin said.

“Hopeless? No. Realistic, yes. This child gives me hope. He is the exemplar of good in the world, but I can no longer ignore that evil is equally as prevalent.”

Lucius nodded. “If you ever want a change and want to take action against the forces that wronged you, I will be there to provide you with what you need.”

“Thank you, King Lucius,” Prue said smiling.

They all looked down at the child and for the rest of the evening they talked no more of the darkness of the world. The joys of the past and hope for the future is all they discussed until finally the new mother and child needed rest.

Chapter 102- Lucius

Congress of the Ancient Tribes

Several days had passed since the ceremony held in honor of the fallen soldiers. Many expected Lucius to rebound from his grief after the formality and immediately begin taking action to usher in the new era he spoke of, but it was not that simple. Lucius was still very much preoccupied with his upcoming meeting that very few knew about. Dalia and Gerreon told them all they could about the two other factions, yet the king felt wholly inadequate to converse with them. He still did not feel like a king and everything he had been told about Borghdir of the Druids and Aeacus of the Undying painted them as experienced and strong leaders. The two men seemed born to lead and had accomplished many victories during their reign. Lucius, until very recently, was simply a man who hunted beasts for gold.

A knock sounded at his office door. He knew who it was and what it meant. It was time to use the orb. He opened the door and smiled at Kamon who wordlessly ushered him to Gerreon's office. Panic consumed him when they opened the door and the orb sat ready on the desk. Gerreon was still resting in bed, his wounds were healing but it would still be some time before he recovered.

“Are you coming with me?” The king asked.

Kamon shook his head. “I will wait here and make sure you are not disturbed.”

Lucius indicated he understood and sat down in front of the orb. “How does this work?”

“I honestly do not know. I don’t think even Gerreon knows. It’s some sort of ancient magic. You simply gaze into the orb and concentrate on who you wish to speak to and it somehow connects your projected selves to a location to speak.”

Lucius took a deep breath. “Well, here goes nothing.”

He did as Kamon said and was surprised at just how quickly the orb’s magic reacted. His world went black. He felt as if he were being pulled to a distant location at astounding speed. Suddenly, the world was still and he found himself in a chamber made entirely of white marble. There were no walls, only ornate pillars holding the ceiling up. The room was open, revealing that it was fastened to the edge of a cliff. The wind seemed to be blowing fiercely outside, yet it did not penetrate through the pillars. The room rested as a silent oasis on the cliffside and he inhabited it alone. As Lucius walked, he noticed his footsteps were silent. He approached the edge of the room and reached his hand out to feel if there was a physical barrier.

“This plain of existence simply does not follow the rules we are accustomed to. There is nothing there to stop your hand,” a voice said from behind the king.

Lucius turned to see what was very clearly an Undying man. He was tall and imposing, yet somehow also frail looking. He was pale and sickly, but his eyes were sharp and observing.

“Lord Aeacus, I presume?”

Aeacus nodded in acknowledgement. “And you are the new ruler of Aarden I have heard so much about. It is rare that Gerreon trusts anyone. How is he, by the way? Has his condition improved?”

Lucius shook his head. “He seems stable, but the healing process is slow. What worries me most is that he is making preparations as if he didn’t expect to survive.”

“A wise man makes plans for the future whether he is present or not. One must be prepared for life and death at all times.”

Two figures suddenly appeared. This seemed to surprise Aeacus as much as Lucius. They expected a man who had been described to Lucius as a hulking, yet graceful man, but were met with a tall slender young man and an older woman with dark hair and fierce eyes.

“Our apologies for our unexpected appearance. I am Kajah, wife of Borghdir and this is our son Raijin.”

“Is everything alright?” Aeacus inquired.

“Yes,” Kajah smiled warmly. “My husband suffered a person loss in our war with the Wild Ones and has been in a state of deep meditation for days.”

“I am sure you speak just as much for your people as Borghdir,” Lucius said with a slight bow.

A marble table and four chair rose from the ground fluidly. They all took a seat.

“It is not so much a luxury in this state of being as we do not have bodies to tire, but more a formality,” Aeacus told Lucius.

The Undying reminded Lucius of Gerreon in some regards. They both seemed to enjoy imparting their wisdom on others. They were natural teachers and philosophers. And though Aeacus did not necessarily look it, Kamon had said the Undying leader was very old.

“The scribe has done much to impart an image of a strong warrior leader.” Raijin spoke for the first time. “Do you believe you can live up to this?” the young druid eyed Lucius with suspicion.

“People say a lot of things about me. And the short answer is no, I do not believe I can live up to the legend that comes with being crowned king. I still very much feel like the beast hunter I was just months ago.”

Raijin seemed content with this answer. “Did you ever kill any Wild Ones?”

“A few that crossed into the King’s Wood, yes. They were formidable.”

“Do you know what drove them to madness?”

“I am told a totem made of the very same metal that I now wear on my head.”

Distrust returned to Raijin’s eyes. Kajah put a hand on her soon to calm him. “Are you not concerned of the effects it will have on you?” the mother spoke.

“He is bound by tradition to wear it,” Aeacus spoke.

“Yes, but I do believe there is more to it. There are many artifacts within Aarden’s walls that have powers of unknown origin that many simply accept as part of tradition. None even question where we got a crown that brings power but causes madness, a basin of fire that peers into men’s souls, or an orb that can communicate across great distances. I do, and I intend to search for those answers. I have been fortunate enough to be sought out by one of the fabled seers. She reincarnated herself and has lost most of her memory, but I am told she can regain it.”

“Then I have something in common with her. I like her already.” Aeacus said, catching Lucius off guard with his humor.

“We have met her. She is an honorable warrior and helped us in our conflict with the Wild Ones,” Kajah replied.

Lucius relaxed a bit. “I propose we reconnect our societies. We each have an understanding of the world that the others can benefit from. There are so many unanswered questions and we may not be able to answer them all but I know that if we stay divided then we are limiting ourselves needlessly.”

“There is the issue of actual physical contact with the Undying,” Aeacus said.

“Of course. I believe myself to be immune with the crown on, so I very well might be able to act as an envoy.”

“Even paper that is exposed is contagious.”

“Is there any way to remedy this contagion?”

“The only remaining speculation is the killing of the demon Aerico.”

“That does not seem like a small task. No, but it is one I believe my people can rally around, especially if we have the support of Aarden. However, even this would take time. The Undying are still fragile over our recent civil dispute. In time though, I believe this is achievable.”

“Nothing I am proposing can be done overnight. I might be new to this who leadership thing, but I know these goals will take time.”

“Yes, we need to ease into things. We cannot simply start trading with Aarden,” Kajah said.

“Many of the druids would not respond well. Out of necessity, we turned more militaristic than our usual ways. Our people are still on their guard. Once the druids know they no longer need to sleep with weapons by their side, they may be more open to relations with Aarden,” Raijin said.

“Progress is progress. I propose we make some sort of time table and plan out our next moves. We do not need to construct this plan now, mind you. I believe heading into the future, it is the next best step.”

“I am behind this idea, though we will have to tread carefully,” Aeacus said.

“We will speak with Borghdir when he awakens from his meditation,” Kajah said.

“That is all I ask of you. I plan to search for answers to the mysteries of our world and need people to of influence to stand by my side. I hope someday soon we can unite our people and stand stronger than ever before.”