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**A KINGDOM DIVIDED**

**By**

**Kalib LaChapelle**

**A Thesis**

Submitted in Partial Fulfillment of the

Requirements for the Degree of

Master of Fine Arts

Major: Creative Writing

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# PROLOGUE

I think, in the end, we all try to become the person that would have saved us the first time nobody did.

The night my mother died I wept with my father. When dawn broke and the Legion Striker pilots opened the bunker he taught me how men hide their tears in public. He was good at it, better than the rest of the widows, until he started looking for her in the bottom of a bottle. But I was better than even him, and definitely better than the rest of the children.

We used to play this game at night when our parents were asleep or pretending to be; at the edge of the Webber farm where the Altan pass winds its way down from the mountains to our valley the night is as dark as it can be. No lights from the House Dornan Barracks could reach the farm, and the Webbers didn't leave lights on for fear of border raids in the night. The children of Dorchester would gather at the edge of the Greatwoods; each of us huddled into our closest friends for a rock to hold onto in the darkness as the last game's winner tried to scare us into flight.

I was never very good at the scaring part and so I almost always ran before the end, holding Wilt in place to keep the other children from teasing him the rest of the week, before pulling away from the game as the last few hopefuls remained in the dark — children's attempts at Hobbold garble echoing through the ancient god trees. The only times I stayed to win were when Zachariah Ment, the Baron's son, was also close to winning.

Wilt used to call me fearless after those games, and for a long time he was partially right. It wasn't that I didn't have fears necessarily, but for a long time a certain fear controlled my every

action. In some ways it starts on this night, the one I don't like to remember, and in other ways it starts ten years and one day after this night. But to get there we must first start here, so I will be brief.

Before we ran to the bunker my father tried to be strong for us. At the front, far enough away for the town to pretend we weren't in any more danger than the rest of the Dornan's holdings but close enough for us to get stories from passing traders or the occasional retiring veteran in the tavern, the Hobbolds used war drums to strike fear into the lines of Alliance soldiers. But during border raids they struck like a whisper in a gale, buildings were set to light before we'd even known the danger we were in.

It was a few weeks after my seventh birthday, decorations for the Festival of Light hung from windows in our home and decorated every inch of the town square, when the raid happened. Paper wrapped lanterns ready to be lit the following night hung from ropes that crisscrossed the gaps between town hall and the various shops around the square. Rosalynd had displayed lantern shaped cookies in the windows of her bakery and next-door father's workshop was draped in striking blue and white banners — displaying the colors of the Legion as opposed to House Dornan's that decorated city hall and the surrounding streets.

After father gave me my first bag of festival candies, delicious balls of chocolate with gooey caramel on the inside that parents gave out to children during the three seasonal celebrations, mother read me the story of Idalta, the goddess of wisdom. She had led the gods that remained in our world against Atlan, her father, in the war that led to the age of mortals and left parts of our world half formed without Atlan's power. The last thing I remember before faraway screams woke me and I saw flames licking at the rooftops out my window was Idalta creating the first striker

suits for the first cohort of the Legion — the Shield Cohort.

We stayed in our house as long as possible, watching the rest of the homes in the outskirts of Dorchester go up in flames one by one. Mother had brought me downstairs to the family room off the kitchen and father stood at the front door, his ancient pistol from before the dwarves had developed rifled barrels in his right hand and our families Idol of Idalta in his left. When the flames from Wilt's house next door leaped to our own and the room started to fill with smoke, father decided to make the dash. Mother carried me behind him as we moved through the narrow, winding paths of the outskirts to the wide cobbled streets of the merchant quarter and into the town square. Behind the workshop, the building we only owned because of the previous Baron's love for grandfather's craftsmanship, sat the entrance to the public bunkers. City hall and the Baron's estate at the edge of town both had a bunker the nobles and wealthy merchants had set aside for their own use, but ultimately, they both worked to protect the people until the Strikers could beat back the Hobbolds.

The square was in a chaos. Hastily constructed barricades lay broken and burned where the arterial cobbled streets emptied into the heart of the city. Bodies of Dornan soldiers and blood-stained festival banners strewn around. And neither of the Dornan strikers anywhere to be seen, even though with their jump jets they could have been in the city minutes after the attack began.

We turned the corner around the workshop, eating up the ten meters, five meters between us and the bunker doors with Wilt's father Jarrick waving us in as he pulled the heavy metal doors nearly closed. A Hobbold, its skin a deep maroon and formed to its body like a suit of armor, crashed through the darkness of the night into the alleyway behind my mother, directly in front of my eyes as I looked backward in her arms. Two and a half meters of muscle woven frame reached

out one of its four arms and plucked the back of my mother's shirt, stopping her in her tracks and sending me careening out of her arms and to the ground where I rolled to a stop at my father's feet.

I expected to see a hero in my father's face, but he was frozen in place. The pistol that he carried with him in the third Hobbold war slipped from his fingers and clattered to the ground next to me as he clutched the idol. I didn't see my mother's death, but I heard her hit the wall, the thunderous steps as the monster walked toward us, and the two other massive thuds as more Hobbolds joined the first. Finally, as I climbed to my feet with my father's pistol in my hand I heard the roar of an engine and saw a final figure crash into the alleyway. A Striker rig, two meters of formed metal wrapped around an intricate web of hydraulics with jump jets on its back that allowed a mere human to stack up to the gargantuan Hobbolds.

Jarrick was pulling us back, pleading with father to move into the bunker, when the blue-painted Striker sprang into action — light lance extending to its full meter and a half-length and intercepting and bisecting a gargantuan club swung by a Hobbold. By the time the bunker door had shut the Legion striker had dispatched two of the Hobbolds and pinned the third to the ground under the hydraulics and metal of his leg. The door closed, and we were plunged into darkness.

# 1.

“Aimon!” My father slurred. “It’s market day, get yourself washed and shaved. I laid out a new shirt for you.”

His voice echoed up the stairs from the family room that was now his bedroom. He’s already tipped back a bottle by the sound of his voice. Through my window the first minutes of sunrise inched their way into the sky, sending iridescent streaks of color in every direction. I wondered which of Jarrick’s flavored whiskeys he was on today as I climbed out of bed and grabbed my nice pants, the ones that never went into the workshop only to the storefront and walked down the stairs.

Father’s hair was tied back to sit at the crown of his head, but his beard was reminiscent of the alley cats in the outskirts — wild and reeking of dirty sweat. It would just be me in the storefront then, he’d be sequestering himself in the workshop for the whole of the busiest day of the season. Three times a year, around a week before each of the seasonal festivals, the large trade caravans owned by the inner cities elite travel to the Hobbold front stopping in the larger outer cities like Dorchester to resupply and trade for more valuables to sell to the army quartermasters and soldiers in the hastily constructed frontier towns that sprang up near major forts. It was a big day for the whole town, but especially for us. The caravan brought primarily luxury to trade for food from the farms in the valley: dyes, sugar, even the incredible coffee from the southern forests closer to the coast. But they also carried machine parts and alloys that we used in the workshop to repair farm vehicles, water pumps, and various other pieces of machinery around the city.

The shirt my father had laid out used to be his. One of the nice shirts with handcrafted buttons made of bone that Annie made and sold in her shop in the outskirts. Just as good as any of the



merchant district shops, half the price. The outskirts looked out for each other, selling their wares in hideaway shops in their houses to avoid paying for licenses and shop space in the merchant district or on market days where anyone could set up a stall.

I shaved the first wisps of a beard from my face and washed off the lather before I dressed and was out the door before he could stop me to eat whatever he had tried to cook. Rosalynd always set up her stall next to mine and would give me a pastry or two if I said I hadn't eaten a few times. The square was still relatively empty by the time I had pulled our collapsible stall out of storage in the workshop and started to assemble it. A few of the wealthier traders, those reselling rifles from dwarven forges or coffee and tea from the coast, that could afford their own guards had pushed ahead of the caravan to get prime positions and were beginning to lay out their inventories. People would have found them wherever they set up, but these kinds of people wanted to be seen in their fancy dyed clothes. That, and in the square they would be trading more with the merchants and nobility of the city center.

We had done good business the last week on repairs and spare parts, and I had been up most the last two nights making new axels and wheels for the caravans' wagons. If they needed spares, they'd come straight to the stall and leave with them. Full on repairs they'd come talk to me for a time slot and I'd go out to where they'd be camping for the next couple of days and take a look at their wagons or machinery. I leaned the half dozen axels I had made against the wall of the workshop behind the stall and laid out spare wheels and our last two hydraulic jacks on top of the table. I didn't even need to play up my hunger to Ros, she showed up with an apple cinnamon pastry still warm from the oven that she promised to me if I helped her set up her stall, which she knew I would have done anyway since I had ever since I took over the stall from my father five years ago.

“The machinist’s boy!” A hearty, jovial voice called from down Main Street. “Looks like I made it just in time for breakfast. Would have been a crime to miss your wonderful treats, Rosalynd.”

“Bertrand!” I called, turning to face the mountain of a man. “I almost thought you had retired and forgot to write!”

Bertrand finished his walk toward us and, after setting a ceramic pot of coffee down on the stall and planting his cane into the ground, pulled me into an embrace before turning to bow slightly to Ros and offer her the pot. The two had known each other far longer than I had known Bertrand, but ever since I spent a night working a new axle for Bertrand’s wagon after we had run out five years ago Bertrand had always brought freshly brewed coffee and sat with us for a bit on market days. He preferred to set up his stand toward the outskirts, selling to break even in Dorchester because he knew he’d make it up at the front.

“Gods, I don’t think a single bakery in all of the three kingdoms can hold a candle to your pastries Rosalynd,” Bertrand said, leaning back in his chair.

“Oh, come off it,” Ros said. “Can’t trust a man who travels as much as you not to say the same thing to every other baker.”

But she’s smiling, the two of them picking up their dance right where they left off last season. The coffee Bertrand had brought was divine, just a hint of honey in there like Rosalynd liked and had taught me to appreciate.

“Second levy coming through I think,” Bertrand said, changing the subject but not before giving Ros a sly smile. “Lots of legionnaires too old to fight but still in uniform traveling the

roads.”

“Recruiters?” I said. “Any of them heading this way with the caravan?”

“I know you think you want that life boy, but I promise you don’t,” Bertrand said. “It’s a nice place here. Could do much worse for yourself.”

I didn’t want the life Bertrand had, infantry on the Hobbold front. That’s where the levies would be going. But if I volunteered I could go to the crystal tower — get my pilots certification.

“They only let the nobles fly nowadays,” Bertrand continued. “Even if you got your cert only the houses are picking up pilots. One in a million to get in a legion rig.”

His eyes went somewhere far away for a moment before draining the last of his coffee and standing. I told him I’d be out to check on a wheel that had been giving him trouble on his wagon and he said the bag of coffee beans he brought me would be waiting there and he was off.

It was a good market day; the caravan had trickled into town during the time we had sat to eat and the town square and Main Street that ran all the way through town were lined with stalls. The caravan had hit bad weather a few days before, and I had to run into the workshop to get my father working on more wheels within an hour. As the sun started to inch its way towards the horizon in the afternoon many of the stalls had been cleared out. I had one wheel and an axel left at the stall, the hydraulic jacks selling for enough silver marks to cover the parts we were going to buy and then some, when a pair of the legionaries Bertrand had mentioned worked their way through the crowd toward my booth. We were haggling between eleven and fourteen marks, either of which

would have been a boon, when a voice from down the street called out.

“My friends, be careful with this stall,” Zachariah Ment said as he strolled up. “The Finch family isn’t exactly known for their consistency if you know what I mean.”

He stuck out his thumb and pinky, mimicking someone taking a pull from a bottle, and I had to bite my cheek to keep from tearing into the snobby prick. The two legion recruiters, interest in the stall lost, turned to Zachariah as he beckoned them to follow him.

“If you’d like my father, the baron, and I have a few extra wheels from the last group of traders in storage we could part with,” Zachariah said. “Free of charge of course, anything for the houses and the legion.”

“There hasn’t been a trader selling wagon parts through here in years!” I said. “They know they don’t do business here.”

“Maybe they just don’t do business with the outskirts,” Zachariah said.

I walked out toward him, fists clenched. He was around my same size, had always been around my same size. We’d gotten in to fights before, though they stopped in general after I broke his nose in public and he told his father I had started the fight. When the baron came to try and get my father to pay a restitution, we had a dozen people that could corroborate the fact that Zachariah had thrown the first insult and punch. I was a few meters away from him when I saw the legionaries reaching toward the swords on their hips and froze.

The Legion, while primarily a military organization tasked with defending the borders of the Allied Kingdoms of Humans, Dwarves, and Elves — the land the three kingdoms held referred to as Amorset by reformers in the Human courts — since the five great human house’s personal

armies couldn't be bothered enough to stop fighting each other, also acted as a police force and had jurisdiction anywhere in the three kingdoms. I'd bloody Zacharias up before they got to me but they'd still take me back to the Tribunal to stand trial for assaulting a baron's son.

"I'm sure that's what it was Zacharias," I said through gritted teeth.

I turned back to my stall before I did something I would regret and let the legionaries and their silver marks walk away. I could have probably saved some sort of sale, taken just enough to break even, but I wasn't about to grovel for a sale in front of Zacharias.

As stalls emptied and the streets quieted, families on their way home to enjoy whatever they had bought on the day and traders on their way back to the wagons or the inn to count their days spoils, I helped Ros pack up her stall and stored it with ours in the workshop. Father was already gone, back home where I'd find him asleep in the chair he used to sit and read in with my mother, so I closed up the shop and made my way out of the city to the old parade grounds where caravans would stay on their way through Dorchester.

Bertrand was stoking a cook-fire outside of his large, Legion blue wagon as I strolled into the circle of wagons owned by people he had been traveling with for a decade. Mostly old Legionaries, there were half a dozen families in the circle sharing food, drinks, and stories. One of the scarred men, Shep I think I remembered him telling me to call him, stood to grab a mug of ale for me but Bertrand was already bringing me a mug of coffee so Shep went back to listening to one of the women tell a story of a Striker holding back a platoon-sized group of Hobbolds during her time at the front.

"I'd seen a lot of pilots, and saw a lot after that," she was saying. "But I've never seen another move like that one did. Seemed every second his light lance was taking a different shape or length.

Big bastards couldn't even touch 'im."

I took a sip out of the warm mug and checked Bertrand and the rest of the groups wagons before I lost too much of the light. Bertrand had a hairline crack in his wheel that I'd have to replace and another had an axel that was a few hundred miles from snapping so I told them I'd bring some replacements out before they left and sat to listen to the old war stories.

It had come out a few weeks after the raid that killed my mother and started the fourth Hobbold war that the Dornan pilots that were supposed to be on duty at their launch tower had been drunk, one of them was the oldest of the Dornan's 7 children. They completely missed the chain of signal fires that started when the garrison at the pass was attacked. They would have made it to Dorchester before the Hobbolds, prevented dozens of deaths and destroyed homes. It was only luck that put a flight of Legion Strikers in the area and close enough to respond, their transport back from the border had been delayed a day and they had been stopped in one of the border forts when they saw the signal fires on the mountains.

The Legion, which was under the control of King Atticus III, was tiny compared to the combined power of the great houses, but it ended up being a fairly even split with the King's two closely allied houses, House Narren and his own House Atticus, bringing the numbers almost equal to the armies of the Dornans, Rommels, and Teks. Even though they had the smallest numbers the Legion was responsible for the defense of the borders of the Kingdom of Man and helped to defend the Dwarven and Elven borders that made up the rest of Amorset. The Houses had to provide soldiers to help at the front, but they sent almost exclusively untrained levies and the weakest of their Strikers.

"Once we saw the pilot turning the tide I rallied the couple of Legionaries left and went back

into the fight,” The woman said. “Bunch of the children the Rommels pretend are soldiers ran the opposite direction but the night broke and we still had our line somehow.”

Just like Bertrand back at the stall her eyes weren't watching the group around the campfire. Some of the others as well, looked like they were thinking about the old days before Bertrand broke the silence.

“Well, I think that calls for a toast and another barrel of ale cracked open what do you all think?” My large friend said.

A chorus of hearty agreements lightened the mood and Bertrand started to tell his favorite story about adopting a fox on the road as he pulled a barrel from his wagon with ease.

## 2.

The Festival of Light, the holiday announcing the end of winter and the start of the planting season, was the busiest time of year in the workshop. The Lunar Festival at the start of winter was for the players, troupes of traveling performers traveling the roads of Amorset to flock to the central, predominantly human lands where the seasonal festivals were the largest. The Harvest Festival as the scorching heat of summer gave way to the cool of harvest season was for the children and the clothiers, every costumed child in town competing to see who could pull the most elaborate prank. But the Festival of Light was a more traditional event.

While artisans in the town spent the week between the market day and festival replenishing their stocks, my father and I worked to keep their operations going and help Councilwoman Bendle prepare to host the whole county. The oldest and most curmudgeonly of the family farmers would make their way in to Dorchester for the festival even if they didn't come for the "fancy distractions" the traders brought on market day. Just today, the last day before the Festival, I had fashioned a new pilot light for Ros's oldest oven, repaired an old pump in the fountain by town hall that pulled water from the town's underground basin, and walked out to the Mahan farm to take a look at the old farmer's grain cart — promising to return with a new funnel that would make it easier for him to unload when he brought the harvest into town. Father had spent the morning decorating the front of the workshop with our Legion blue banners, sharp contrast from the red decorations for House Dornan that embellished the rest of the buildings in the square, and was now in the back of the workshop fashioning new wheels and axels to replace the inventory we had sold.

We had developed a good system in the five years I had been helping run the workshop. He got there before I did most days, the stench of the previous night's drinks mixing with this



mornings before I arrived and he handed me a list with the jobs around town I needed to check on. Then he went to the forge in the back room and started making parts I'd need for jobs or that we were just running short on in general. Each time I finished a job around town and returned to the workshop the parts for the next job would be sitting on the front table. If I was in the shop, it usually in one of the old first floor storage rooms I had turned into my own little machine shop. Father liked working with wood, and he could do a fine job forging parts and keeping machinery running, but I was the true machinist of Dorchester. I started working in the shop when I was 12, and at first had just enjoyed watching my father take a lifeless piece of metal and make it work again. I quickly surpassed him in understanding the machinery that was brought into the shop, staying so late in the workshop after father left for the tavern that a few times a month I'd wake up facedown slumped on to my workbench. At first I had simply enjoyed the act of taking the engines, water pumps, and automatic hoppers apart and putting them back together, but by the time I was fifteen I was grinding down gears and replacing overly complicated parts with more streamlined designs. Now, a week before my seventeenth birthday, I had personally designed about a quarter of the machines that kept the town operational. I was particularly proud of a new sewing machine I had built for Annie almost a year ago. Her grandmother's original machine had given out, and while I did fix it so she could hang on to the memory of it she boasted about how much more productive my design made her for almost a month. In return she had made me a wonderful wool-lined jacket with enough interior pockets to hold all manner of useful items that I wore almost daily.

A ring from the small brass bell on the front door roused me from my thoughts and in my hands old man Mahan's new funnel was polished so bright I could nearly see a perfect reflection in it. Light footfalls, too heavy to be Ros but too light to be my father sneaking back into the shop after

a trip to Jarrick's, wandered comfortably down the hallway that led to the machine shop and a moment later a soft knock sounded at the door before it opened.

"Hey Wilt," I said.

I took my cloth to a fingerprint I had made turning over the funnel, buffing it out and then using the cloth to place the funnel onto a piece of oiled canvas and wrapping it.

"Hey," my friend responded. "I hate to ask, but do you have time to come check out the still? Pop said he wanted me to apologize for having you look at it also."

I hesitated for a moment, unsure what was worse. Wilt had been my closest friend for as far back as I remembered and Jarrick like another father, but the still provided nearly all the whiskey my father drank and definitely all of the flavored whiskeys Dorchester was becoming famous for.

"Sure," I said. "Yeah of course, that's no problem."

I wasn't promising to fix it. I could always tell him I couldn't. I looked down at the wrapped up funnel on the workbench and remembered.

"We'll need to stop by the Mahan farm though."

It was a good day for a walk. The winter had been mild, most were in the Atlan Valley where Dorchester was located. Lots of rain and cold wind, but the snow tended to have trouble getting over the mountains and generally dissipated once it worked its way into the valley. But the first inklings of spring were pushing their way into the world; seasonal trees were beginning to bloom

in brilliant pinks and whites, birds dipped and dove in an intricate aerial dance, and earthworms were peeking their heads out into the first days of deep green grass on the sides of the road. To top it off, old man Mahan had only threatened to shoot us with his relic musket from the second Hobbold war once — which tied the record for the fewest times he had made the threat in the years I had been coming out to his farm to fix broken equipment.

The farm was only about a half hour walk south of town and Wilt had been unusually quiet. It was usually all I could do to keep him from talking about sails and ships traveling the ocean to find new lands, never mind the fact that he had never seen the ocean. So I decided to lighten up the mood with a game we used to play as kids.

“Almost half of all Hobbold’s have one arm that is shorter than the rest,” I said matter-of-factly. “Scientists theorize that it was an evolutionary trait from a previous era of warfare in which the shorter arm would wield a short sword meant for stabbing enemies too close for their clubs.”

It took him a moment, but when he realized what I was doing an intelligent smile started to form at the corners of his mouth. He stared into the distance for a second, trying to think of a fact that I hadn’t heard before.

“The sails on the common design for small freight ships are hoisted a pulley system that can bring them toward the bow or stern depending on the captains need,” Wilt said.

“The Shield Cohort is the only unit in the Legion with only Striker pilots,” I said. “Even their ground repair crew is technically a different unit.” I said.

“You’ve used that one!” Wilt said. “Last year after that fire at Annie’s.”

I almost always lost to him, not that I tried to most times. He was a small man, barely reaching

my shoulder and made almost entirely of skin and bones which had caused him to be teased by a lot of the town kids growing up. He ended up spending a lot of time at the town's library, working his way through books like a scythe through wheat, and genuinely seemed to enjoy every second he spent with a book. I had never met someone as in love with knowledge as Wilt.

We continued walking the worn dirt road back toward town, the sun inching its way toward the horizon and the figure of town hall towering over the rest of Dorchester coming into view.

“Are you going to ask Annie for the last dance at the Festival?” Wilt asked.

There was asking girls to dance, then there was asking girls to dance at the Festival of Light, then there was asking girls for the last dance at the Festival of Light. The town legend went that at Dorchester's first Festival of Light centuries ago a young man and woman who hadn't known each other were paired in the final dance of the night. As the music wound down, they continued to sway slowly to the sound of the air whistling through the streets or whatever music had been playing in their own heads. They continued until the town slept, and a week later had been so madly in love they were married in the middle of a rainstorm on the front steps of town hall, not even able to wait until the late for work clerk unlocked the building and instead accosting the mayor who had also been waiting on the clerk. Now it was most often used by children and teenagers to poke fun at their friends and by the old farmers and their families that had been on their plots before the story ever happened.

“Not a chance,” I said. “I'm telling you she doesn't like me like that. I've known her almost as long as I've known you!”

“To be fair, you're really bad with women,” Wilt said. “You probably wouldn't even know if she was.”

“Based on what evidence?”

“Remember what happened when you tried to hold Jamie’s hand at the Harvest Festival and she asked if it was because you were scared of the other kids costumes? Or when you kissed Opal and she dumped that wine on your head at Ros’s birthday?”

I hit him lightly on the arm to make him stop recounting my embarrassments.

“In my own defense I was scared when I grabbed Jamie’s hand but it was more of me being scared of her,” I said. “And who are you to talk?”

“A lack of data cannot indicate a trend,” Wilt responded.

We crossed the gates of Dorchester as sixth bell was ringing and the fading light from the sun blared hot orange and red at the horizon. Wilt and his family lived across the alley from us, barely a few feet separating the backs of our houses. My parents’ fifth birthday present to me had been moving their room downstairs and my own upstairs so that my window would face Wilt’s.

We wound our way through the outskirts, multi-level homes tightly packed in every available square foot with narrow alleys separating the backs and slightly larger streets at the front. It wasn’t a particularly nice place to live, it had more break-ins and muggings than the merchant district or city center and the inhabitants were far poorer than in either of those places, but the outskirts was a community. Almost nobody that lived here could afford to pay merchant prices for clothes or food, and in response somebody filled a niche. Annie made and sold clothes out of the second floor of her family’s home, Ros sold bread for far cheaper in the outskirts than in her store, and Wilt’s father Jarrick distilled whiskey. Though much of the official part of that business was now housed in an old storage depot at the edge of the merchant district with how popular his bottles had

become, he kept his original still in the attic of their house and gave most of what he made at home away as gifts.

“Gods above it was the vanilla you wanted that broke it I’m telling you!” Jarrick said. “The liquids work better than the powders. Gah.”

Jarrick finished his sentence with shooing motion, which his wife Natalia ignored and wrapped her husbands arm around her shoulders as they turned toward the opening door.

“Aimon my boy!” Jarrick said. “I hate to ask but is there any way you can take a look at the still?”

“No problem Jarrick,” I said, still unsure what I was going to do. “Wilt filled me in. It’s getting trapped transferring to the keg?”

Jarrick nodded and I went to take a look. I considered it a feat of machinery that the old still even halfway functioned, it had to be older than Jarrick himself. I pulled out my old multitool, battered and missing a few of it’s multiple tools, and went to work trying to pop the lid off the keg where the Whiskey was supposed to deposit after being distilled, nothing but the overpowering smell of my father and vanilla undertones.

I checked the feeder into the transfer tube and again came up empty on anything that could be causing the malfunction, leaving just the tube itself as my culprit. A pressure valve had to be broken, making it so the alcohol physically couldn’t flow into the tube.

“I’m going to need to bring this into the workshop, but I can bring it back out tomorrow night?” I said to Jarrick. “I think the pressure valve on one end is busted, but it should be pretty simple to fix.”

“Thank Idalta,” Jarrick said while making a quick gesture of his fist over his heart. “I’ll be able to get the festival presents out for everyone still, just a little late.”

Jarrick was an odd man, but he was one of the good ones. He got joy out of giving people joy. His eyes looked somewhere faraway just like Wilt’s did when he was thinking, and Natalia mouthed “Thank You” to me before bringing Jarrick to the kitchen.

“Aimon you’re welcome to stay for dinner!” She called from around the corner. “I can send you back with a plate for your father too.”

“No thank you,” I said. “I ought to be getting back, he’ll be wondering where I got off to.”

She swung her head back into the living room and gave me a knowing look but simply nodded.

“We’ll see you at the festival then?” She asked.

I nodded and headed back out the door to the hue of festival lamps.

I walked straight past my front door in a trance, pushing past the merchant district and diving into the center of town. The last of the preparations — tables, chairs, and food— would be brought in tomorrow afternoon from the surrounding buildings after the majority of wagon traffic had gone through but already the square was awash in decorations. My family’s stark blue Legion banners hung proudly defiant of the Dornan red that outfitted most of the rest of the buildings that made up the square. Ros’s display case was filled with lantern shaped cakes and cookies and massive bouquets of flowers had been brought in to decorate all of the permanent lanterns that burned in town square through the night.

I was about to head back home to eat a cold dinner, but motion and a dull clunking noise on the far side of the square stopped me before I could fully commit. About fifty meters away large man in work clothes was bent over the fountain I had fixed that morning with some sort of club, whacking away at the base of the geyser through the water and muttering under his breath.

“Hey, you alright over there?” I called out. “You lose something in the fountain?”

The huge man turned to look at me, regarded the heavy chunk of wood in his hand, then turned to walk into a dark alley behind town hall. I ran to catch up to him, but by the time I turned the corner he was gone. I checked the fountain on my way back, and couldn’t see anything wrong with it in the dull lantern light. Ten minutes of walking later and I was home.

My father snored off the tavern on the couch as I collected smoked ham, bread, and hard cheese and climbed the steps up to my room. Light from Wilt’s room was peeking in through my own window, and a few pebbles thrown across the alley later Wilt’s window opened.

“Have you seen people looking at the fountains around town?” I asked.

“Yes?” Wilt replied.

“No. Not me. I mean like people fixing them?”

“Who’d be fixing them besides you?” Wilt asked, then added. “Or your dad.”

“I have no idea but I just saw some random man whacking one by town hall. It was the weirdest thing. I called out to him and he just left.”

Wilt’s brow furrowed close together like it did when he thought about anything.

“No idea. That’s really strange. I mean what harm could he have been doing. It’s not like he



was pouring anything in. And even if he was nobody drinks out of that.”

The furrow went away, and Wilt dismissed the event as a weird coincidence — though I couldn’t quite do the same.

“Hey I ran into Annie after dinner,” Wilt started.

“Nope. Not this again,” I said.

I got up and started to close the window playfully, but Wilt stood as well.

“She asked if you were going to the festival is all. I’m done trying to push it.”

We said goodnight and I drew the curtains in from the side to block out the light from Wilt’s room as I flipped a switch on my custom made nightstand to stop the oil flow to my lantern and send my room into darkness. I fell asleep thinking of the man at the fountain and if Ros was going to bring me a pastry in the morning.

### 3.

A gust of sweet cherries intertwined with the burn of whiskey invaded my nose as my father's voice broke down my dreamscape. Glittering festival lamps and fast, jovial music fading into the backdrop as his face came into view between my squinted eyelids and his smell choked my nostrils.

"Mayor came by and asked if we could help with the stage," he said before turning away from my bedside and heading for the door.

"You're already drunk," I responded.

He didn't turn back, didn't even acknowledge the words.

"Have to get it done before people start gathering. Laid out some clothes in the washroom."

Out the window the sun was just starting to crest the Atlas Mountains in the distance, rays of light piercing the last of the darkness from the night. The farms surrounding Dorchester would already be bustling with activity as children and adults alike rushed through their chores so they could come to town. Inside the town limits The Outskirts would be similar as parents prepared heavy holiday breakfasts and laid out clothes for their children. But in the city center the noble and wealthy would still in the deep embrace of slumber, their stewards and cooks preparing the morning meal. I idly wondered if Annie would be with her mother, Mayor Dowles, when we were putting the stage together before banishing the thought and climbing out from beneath the blankets.

Downstairs a pot of water sat warming on the stove, my father nowhere to be found. I picked up the pot with the heavy hot mittens that hung on a rack above the stove and walked my way past the ancient godwood table, taking care to avoid spilling the water, through the family room that

we hadn't used in years and acted more as storage for the shop than anything else, and into the washroom.

I loved the process of shaving. Not necessarily the end result, I thought about attempting to grow a beard like some of the farmers around Dorchester regularly, but the actual actions. Lathering my face and neck with soap and water, the drag of the razor dicing through stubble, the feeling of washing it all away with the hot water at the end. The way it soothed me and the feeling of being fully awake after. This morning, though, it felt mechanical and my mind wandered.

The large man from the fountain had invaded my dreams over night, never letting himself become the center of the dream but always inching his way into the frame of my eyes. Underneath the stage at the festival, leading a charge of Hobbolds into the square, dancing with a woman who must have been his wife — even a particularly troubling image of him dancing with Annie that took me a full quarter hour and a walk down the stairs to the washroom in the middle of the night to get out of my head.

As far as I had seen, he hadn't done any real damage to the fountain the night before. There hadn't been a lot of light, but all he had seen were a few dents that would definitely make it more complicated to remove the cover that housed some of the more precise machinery inside the vertical centerpiece in the fountain, but shouldn't effect the water flow itself. Most of that machinery was on the other end of the pipes where the water from the basin was sucked into the system. Besides, it had worked the night before when I left.

Still — I couldn't shake the icy pinprick of worry at the base of my neck.

The shirt father had laid out was new, its matching bone buttons polished to be nearly reflective. I dressed quickly in the washroom, adding the jacket Annie had made for me to the

outfit and feeling the comforting weight of my multitool in its pocket, as I walked out our front door and directly into the seamstress herself. She bounced off me, falling to the ground of the alleyway and dropping the bundle she had been carrying

“Gods I’m sorry Annie,” I said, scrambling to help her back to her feet.

“Probably a good idea to look before stepping into the street,” Annie said. “I could’ve been a handcart.”

She straightened up her shirt and brushed the dirt off her pants as I bent to pick up the bundle she had been carrying. It was heavier than I thought clothes had any right to be. As I stood again she examined my clothes.

“A shirt and a jacket I made?” She said, attempting to hide a laughing smile that tugged at the corners of her mouth. “On a festival day no less? Careful Aimon, the girls around Dorchester like my clothes.”

I puffed out my cheeks, playing up the exertion it took to shoulder the bundle.

“Not if you keep making them out of pig iron. Where were you headed? I’ve got to get to the square but I’ll walk with you,” I said, quickly adding. “If you want?”

She set off, and so I followed. We wound our way through the alleys of the Outskirts, dropping off festival dresses and freshly sewn shirts in exchange for some silver Nobles, but primarily for goods. Jarrick exchanged two bottles for a new dress for Natalia, Ros’s daughter Elise’s cost her a pair of shiny earrings. In each home Annie carefully opened the bundle, pulled out the garment she had made, and then retied the twine holding the bundle together with practiced hands. Each new piece of clothing seemed to outdo the last, and by the time the bundle had only one dress

remaining I was in awe of how much happiness she was bringing people. The realization came as I started to watch the eyes of the young girls seeing their dresses. Older residents of Dorchester were appreciative of Annie of course, but every time the delivery was for a child the excitement hit a new level, and Annie would become a bit of a performer. At the last house she hid the clothes behind a wall, asking if the girl wanted to see it enough times that the adolescent energy seemed ready to burst from her. When it was finally unveiled, a jovial shriek erupted from the girl and she rushed wrap Annie in a hug.

Half an hour later we exited the homely maze of the Outskirts into the pre-bustle calm of the square. A ring of red Dornan banners decorated the building faces; each of dozen buildings that made up the center of town declaring their adoration for the lords of Dorchester except the workshop. Instead, from our windows and eaves hung the deep, inky blue of The Legions.

“Time to face the music,” I said as I handed the bundle, now filled with bartered goods, back to Annie.

“Oh mother won’t be too mad,” Annie said. “I told her I’d be waylaying your morning.”

Annie waved to the approaching mayor, her mother, before turning on a heel and heading back out of the square without an explanation.

“Mayor Dowles” I said as the woman approached. “I’m sorry I’m late.”

She was imposing. Not physically, but more like an aura she carried with her around the town. When she walked through the Outskirts, where she had grown up and still lived, Mayor Dowles almost filled the role of matron for the community. She’d be seen mediating tense conversations and bringing around pastries with Ros for birthdays regularly; but outside the comforts of the

narrow alleys she was one of the sole reasons the Baron Ment and his merchant allies hadn't eaten up more of the town. Everyone could see it weighed on her, but almost nobody else had the power to help.

“Right on time Aimon,” she said, greeting me with a smile. “But we've got a good bit of work to do before noon-bell. Your father's cutting some new boards to replace the ones that warped over winter in storage. Can you work on staging the. . .”

The mayor trailed off, then laughed to herself.

“Well, staging the stage I guess. Trapped myself in that sentence,” she finished.

I set to work. When father had built the stage a decade ago he had done it in sections, like a puzzle. Each was labelled with a letter and number, and had these intelligently crafted hinges that would connect with the other sections at set spots, each labelled to tell which portion connected to which hinge. We stored them in pairs underneath town hall, one section flipped to sit on top of the other flat side to flat side and then strapped down. As I approached I reached into an interior pocket to pull out my multitool and found a sphere in the breast pocket next to it, — a singular, foil wrapped, festival candy. I unwrapped the chocolate ball, popped it in my mouth, and thought briefly about thanking my father before remembering the disassembled still on my desk and setting to work.

Over the course of the next few hours the three of us worked in tandem, without ever really engaging. Father and I would hand off tools and trade jobs by simple experience of working in close proximity of each other for nearly a decade. The mayor was no slouch herself, well practiced in the thrice annual construction of the stage for festivals, and must have read the situation well enough to realize any attempts at conversation wouldn't have gone far.

As we pieced together the stage, hauling over section after section and attaching the hinges of already placed sections onto the new, the square began to bustle with energy. Ros, Jarrick, and other vendors set up stalls for food and drink. Fiddlers, drummers, and other troupers arrived and began to practice. Groups of young boys and girls gathered to trade different flavors of festival candies away from the watchful eyes of parents who might interrupt a one-sided deal. The energy and crowd was a good distraction from the monotony of the work. Diagnosing a problem with a machine was all experimentation; trying fixes and failing and then trying again. Even the cutting of gears and smelting of new parts had an excitement to it, a danger of messing up. At one point early on working in the shop I had tried to convince my father to let me put a trap door in the stage, but he wouldn't let me without a practical reason that my adolescent mind couldn't find. The stage was all labor, no style.

We finished the stage just before the noon bell rang out from town hall and echoed its way through the cobbled streets and alleys of Dorchester. The tolling bell and the sun at the top of it's arc had brought the farming families into town and families with young children that wouldn't be staying awake long enough for the dancing had been lining up for food and drinks or finding their way with their meals to the rows of tables around the edges of the square when I rushed back home. The water on the stove refused to boil while I was watching it, so my fingers found a purpose in the hose from Jarrick's still. I was fairly certain my original diagnosis of the problem was correct, and without really thinking about it I was out the back door of the house and digging through old gardening equipment that had likely not been touched by any hands in the years since they had been moved there. They had stayed in a crate under the stairs for a few years after mother died, until one day I came downstairs to a newly bare house - all reminders of her removed.

At the bottom of the pile I found my quarry, a hose with a pressure valve on one end to turn

the flow of water into a drip that mother had left in different planters around the house to water over time. Back inside I stripped the valve off the hose and dabbed it with sealing putty before jamming the tube from the still into it and leaving it to dry. Bubbling from the stove and my own smell reminded me why I was home in the first place, and I went to the washroom to clean the dirt and sweat from the mornings work off before re-dressing in one of the few non-work sets of clothes I owned and heading back out the door.



## 4.

The troupers that played music for the festival had brought lamps with stained glass, and as the sun dipped below the Atlas Mountains they bathed the square in color. Shades of blue, red, yellow, green and more dancing to a music only they could hear. Below them in the square the town followed suit; the fiddlers in full control of the crowd as they spun their web of music across the crowd. Each time the energy of the crowd waned, the tune would change and new life infected the tired soles.

Wilt and I sat at a table close to the stage and watched Jarrick spin Ros around and to a new partner, and in a flourish turn to spin Natalia as well.

“You ought to have him teach you that,” I said.

“He tried,” Wilt replied, heaving his legs up and straight out from where he sat. “Feet made for the rigors of academia I’m afraid.”

“At least they’ve got a brain to match,” I said, a forced chuckle the only response. “What’s going on? You love festival days.”

“I hate festival days,” Wilt said.

“Well, yeah you hate the festival, I said. “You always love the day though. ‘Brain breaks should be,’”

“The scholar’s closest friend,” Wilt finished. “Just a lot to think about.”

I turned away from the dancing crowd, bringing my eyes to Wilt’s.

“Do you want to talk it out?” I said.

“Not really,” Wilt said. “If that’s okay? Just not tonight.”

I didn’t like leaving him in one of his moods, but he had never reacted well to being forced into talking. He’d come around, he always did. So I nodded, and the relief was visible on his face as his brows unknotted and his shoulders relaxed.

Across the square I met Annie’s eyes for a brief moment before turning quickly to the fiddlers on stage. I clapped along to the rhythm the fiddles threw into the air, trying to make her believe I never saw her — or more that I wasn’t looking for her.

The fiddler’s bows slowed from their breakneck pace, to a sprint, to a gallop, and finally to a trot. Their notes elongated, swirled around each other into a memorable final song. The dancers streamed from the area in front of the stage in droves, the only remaining people those already happily married or on their way.

“Aimon,” Wilt said, elbowing me in the side. “Aimon!”

“What?” I said, too loud.

I turned and saw her already halfway across the square, striding toward our nearly empty table with purpose.

“Godsdamnit,” I muttered under my breath.

The sound of the music was fighting a losing battle with my heartbeat in my ears. It drowned her out the first thing out of her mouth. I saw her say it, but all I could hear were garbled voice-like noises until another elbow from Wilt screwed something in correctly.

“What?” I said.

“I asked if you would like to dance,” Annie said.

Out of the corner of my eye I could see Wilt nodding emphatically.

“I would,” I said, trying and failing to keep my inflection neutral.

I stood and took her arm, and across the square saw Annie’s closest friend Evelyn giving two heavy thumbs up. Annie found us a spot at the edge of the slowly growing crowd close to the fountain and stage, and on legs with the strength of wet sealing putty I took her into my arms and remembered what Bertrand had told me about dancing.

*Very few people truly know how to dance, and you’ll never learn from an old soldier. But the next best thing is to listen to the rhythm, try and match it, and look her in the eyes.*

Her eyes were a cacophony of color. The normal light brown inundated by blue, then green, then red as we swayed in and out of streams of light from various lanterns. I felt my mouth twisting into a smile, saw the same on her face, heard a heavy clunk behind me, and felt the base of my neck go icy cold all over again.

A second clunk sounded from the fountain, tone more clear like something was climbing up the pipe from the basin and was about to reach the top. For a second the water flow stopped and I dropped my hands from Annie’s hips, then it erupted out the top of the fountain — gushing twenty, thirty feet into the night sky and cut through by beams of multicolored light. As the water reached the top of its ascent, it crashed back down to the ground in a powerful sheet that sent two of the fiddlers to the ground and the rest scattering off the stage. I turned back to Annie, thinking to pull her away from the water. Too late, I watch the water crash over her and soak her down to the bone.

For a moment she was stunned.

“Annie?” I asked, reaching toward her while trying not to end up wet myself.

At her name she turned and ran from the square. At the same time the crowd came back to life. Men and women surged toward the fountain, pulling dancers who had been thrown down by the water back to their feet and ushering them away. Eyes darted to me, to the fountain, back at me.

“Alistair’s boy...”

“Aimon. . .”

“... fountain just yesterday.”

I walked directly into the water. The sheet of it nearly knocked me to the ground, even though I was prepared for the impact unlike the others. Inside the wall of water was strangely blissful. The only sound that could be heard was the release of pressure as the water shot out of the pipe and the impact of it hitting the ground seconds later behind me. I reached into a pocket for my multitool and popped the casing off the pipe, the intense pressure at least sending the water high enough and away from the fountain enough that it wouldn’t get into the wiring. Inside it was totally normal, just as it had been when I left it the morning before. Nothing was broken. Nothing to suggest what was happening. I flipped the emergency shutoff valve, and the geyser cut out instantly. A second later the last of the water crashing to earth revealed me back to the rest of the world, all eyes directed at me, and I walked directly out of the square.

I listened to the collapse of the festivities as I made my way from the square. Mayor Dowles attempted to bring the music back, but with half the fiddles soaked the troupe was done for the night and the crowd went with them. I debated walking right out of town, right up the pass into the Atlas Mountains. Bertrand would be out that way, unloading grain and smoked meat he bought leaving Dorchester along with the bags of coffee from the coast into barrack storehouses under the watchful eyes of a quartermaster. The way news travelled in Idacia as long as he made it a few towns over he'd escape the story.

But what would happen to Dorchester? Father couldn't fix the new ovens in the bakery or the new sewing machine at Annie's. Wilt wouldn't stand up to Zachariah and the other merchant and noble sons and daughters that tried to keep him and the rest of us from the Outskirts feeling unwelcome in The Silver Hare at night. And I'd never find out what happened to the fountain; why even with no parts out of place it could have. . .

The parts.

They had been in place, but had they been made correctly? Nobody but the mayor and Edward Dornan had the keys to reach the ancient aquifer, so none of the below ground machinery could've been tampered with. Nothing in the fountain itself was improperly installed. So, one suspect remained.

The lantern in the living room was on when I turned the knob to the front door, rehearsed calm interrogation disappearing at the sight of my father passed out face down in his cushioned chair. I slammed the door shut behind me, the crash of wood stopped by the latch reverberating through the walls of the house and causing my father's eyelids to flutter open as his pupils struggled to focus on my face.

“I’m not sure why I bother hoping you’ll be in your own bed when I get home,” I said. “Or that the smell might have changed.”

“How was the festival?” He slurred, pushing himself up from laying face down to sitting.

“You were the guest of honor without showing up,” I said, watching the confusion the statement created in his face. “Made it rain. When did you start communing with Nelaeryn?”

“What are you talking about?” He said.

“The fountain exploded during the last dance. Your parts turned it into a geyser.”

A bit of the fog cleared from his eyes, and he stared down at his hands as if they were the betrayer instead of the betrayed.

“Soaked half the fiddlers and most of the crowd Alastair. Slagged it all.” I finished.

“I . . .” He started. “I didn’t.”

He looked up at me, true fear in his eyes. More than I expected, but seemingly more than the situation called for.

“I couldn’t have,” he said with certainty. “I stopped drinking in the shop. Thought I’d wreck it for you, thought I’d push you out if it was there too.”

“Seems like you forgot,” I said, and turned on my heel to walk back to the stairs.

He didn’t say anything else as I climbed the steps. Neither did I. Inside my room I was greeted by the soft taps of pebbles striking the window. The light from Wilt’s room bled softly through the blinds, and I pulled them aside to see his worried face.

“I almost gave up,” Wilt said. “Was about to head out to The Greatwoods to see if I could find you.”

He would’ve been lost till sunup in the woods, but he would’ve done it. And I loved him for it.

“Just got in a fight with Ala. . .” I started, then switched to. “My father.”

“About the fountain?” Wilt said. “Are you alright?”

“Yes,” I said. “And no, not really.”

Wilt reached across the thin alleyway between our houses, holding out a bag and shaking it lightly — offering its contents to me. Inside my fingers found a foil wrapped ball and I swiped at a tear that was forming in the corner of my eye with the other hand.

“He hid a candy in the shirt he laid out for me this morning,” I said. “I thought he was trying to fix it. Finally diagnosed the problem and was working it.”

Wilt sat silent for a moment, methodically unwrapping a candy and popping it into his mouth — letting it melt like he always tried to convince me was the proper way to enjoy them.

“I think he was,” Wilt said. “Trying. Mother thought so.”

Not hard enough. I didn’t say it, but I thought about it. Wilt fell away, lost in thought about something with half his mind while trying to recount what little happened in the square after I left. After a quarter hour and a few more candies we went to our respective beds for the night and I fell into fitful sleep.

“. . . my pleasure to announce the arrival of Ide Malwich, the master machinist famous for the recreation of the Shield Cohort suits on display at the Library at Idas!” The young boy on the steps of town hall announced. “Master Malwich will be working out of the Ment estate until a proper workshop space in town can be acquired for his services, and he will begin to take customers in one week’s time. Furthermore, The Baron Ment admonishes the fine citizens of Dorchester to abide the rules of public morality. Support of citizens who degrade the public only brings down the community as a whole.”

At the very least, the Ments did away with the propriety of veiling their attacks. I had experience with the backhanded insults Zachariah had leveled at my family growing up, but this was a new evolution to our childhood dance — an escalation. There would be new rules, and at least one of them would be that I wouldn’t need to convince people of the nefarious undertones, they were on display now.

I had almost missed the announcement. There had been significantly less service requests in the box we left nailed to the front door of the workshop that morning, enough for a full day but not much past that. I spent the morning machining new parts for the jobs, and had been intending to walk into Ros’s bakery to work on an oven when I noticed the curiously well dressed audience in front of town hall and had walked over. Now, all around me, the nobility and merchant families of Dorchester milled aimlessly talking excitedly about the new master machinist who would be my family’s executioner.

I fled from the square, trying to keep my pace normal and disguise my unease at the feeling of being transformed into prey surrounded by carrion birds. Safe inside the bakery, the feeling of



being hunted abated and my breathing returned to normal.

“The Outskirts will never be able to afford his prices,” Ros tried to comfort me as I worked inside her oven. “They’ve tried and failed before to push us out. Doesn’t stick.”

I admired the woman. Almost entirely solo since her husband’s death in the Second Hobbold War, Ros had protected the bakery in the square, her husband’s last gift to her before leaving for the front, for almost thirty years. Every few years some new merchant would offer her enough money that if she had kids they wouldn’t have ever had to work, and every time she offered them pastries and tea before turning them away. But even Ros hadn’t ever truly gone up against the family of the Baron.

Our conversation faltered slightly, and we spent a quarter hour in semi-comfortable silence. Inside her oven my hands worked almost independently of me, stripping the aging gas line that fed the right half of the oven and putting a brand new length of pipe in its place. As I tightened the fastener in place, she broke the peace we had settled into.

“I heard there was quite a commotion down the road from my house last night,” she said innocently. “Some sort of screaming match between two people that ought to know better.”

“I don’t want to talk about it,” I tried, but she cut me off quickly.

“Well, that’s too slagging bad,” Ros said, and I was stunned into silence hearing a swear coming from her. “You’re waist deep in my oven talking around it so we’re going to stop pretending.”

I finished tightening the faster and slid myself out from the insides of the oven, but I stayed in place sitting on the floor.

“Men,” She exasperated. “The two of you have been dancing around this fight for half a decade. Inching your way back to each other hoping to avoid it. Well it’s here.”

As she talked the kettle on the far side of the kitchen began to whistle and steam. Ros stood to pour the boiling water into two cups, floral and earthy scents rising into the air with the steam, and brought me one of the cups taking the other back to her place at the table.

“He’s been trying to drown the blame he feels over Emory’s death. Now I’m not saying it was the right way to go about it but there is a reason behind all of this, it wouldn’t do to forget that. Your mother was a wonderful woman. Cut from the same cloth as Idalta herself. For weeks after the raid I’d come to open up the bakery in the morning and find him sprawled out here.”

Ros took a deep sip of her tea then continued.

“You were staying with Jarrick and Natalia at the time. He’d shown up one morning after Jarrick had left for the fields and asked Natalia to take you for a while; said he didn’t know how to be a parent without her. I’d find him in here, and he’d go all stone faced until I brought him some tea — always opened him up. And then he’d start talking about how he wanted to trade places with her. How he wanted to go barter with Zannitos to trade her soul for his.”

I had never heard the story before. On rare occasions when I was younger father would tell stories of life before the raid, but never anything like this.

“He’s got all that bouncing around in his head every morning when he opens his eyes and every night when they close. He came out of it eventually — threw himself into the work, even if he couldn’t give up the bottle. Became really proud to help people, and he passed that on to you. Meanwhile, you’re around town making sure that everyone and the gods above know you’re better

than he is. And he loves it. Absolutely adores getting to brag about you when he stops by in the morning and when he talks to Dowles. But you've got to understand that it hurts him a bit too when people around town ask for you instead of him, even if he knows why."

She didn't make me answer her, which was for the better because I didn't know how to. She finished up, collected the now empty cup of tea from my hands, and brought me a bough-berry pastry before ushering me out the door and telling me to spend the day thinking.

Ros had probably meant to go home or out to the Greatwoods to think, but I thought best while my hands were moving. The workshop was empty, a nuzzling warmth radiating from the coals at the bottom of the furnace the only sign that my father had been there. The re-used pressure valve worked well enough on Jarrick's still, but I had already had one part I hadn't made fail on me and wasn't going to allow that again. I brought the furnace back from its slumber, working the bellows until the embers inside their steel cage re-ignited, and shuffled through the cabinets of castings until I found the size valve I needed, the same as the ones we used for the fountain. Of course it was.

It was a simple design really, just enough complexity to it to do its job and nothing more. I couldn't understand how he had been so careless on such a simple part. Three thin rings of iron that tightened over each other with the pressure regulator in-between the second and third ring. Use putty to attach it firmly over a hose and like magic you could regulate the pressure of whatever fluid was coming out of it — or, like I did on this one for Jarrick's still, flip it around and control the pressure of what was coming in.

While the putty dried the new valve back onto the still's hose I went about closing up the

workshop, letting the furnace open to the chilly evening air to die back down to embers and scraping the leftover bits of metal out of the casting before putting it back in its place. The rest of the shop, outside of my personal workspace tucked in-between the storage rooms, was already put to rest for the night. He might've actually stopped drinking in the shop. The space was big enough and had enough of its own smell that his scent had never lingered, but it did seem — cleaner. More put together maybe.

Putty dried and workshop cleaned, I locked the front door and walked into a hopelessly dark and wet night. Spring in the Atlan Valley was marked by near constant rain and cloud cover, the tall peaks that protected the valley from the worst of the winter storms from the mountainous center of the continent corralled the spring rains coming in from the coast and holding them over our heads. It made the valley one of the best agricultural centers in the kingdoms — certainly the best in Idacia, but if the stories were anything to go by the Elven kingdom of Nelemor had more food than they knew what to do with.

Lampights highlighted windows and threw crisscrossing beams of light across the alleys of the Outskirts, giving it a homey glow that the closed down square and wealthier districts with houses spread apart had lacked. I wound my way through the alleys to Wilt's house, trying to ignore the lack of light coming from my own as I passed.

The door opened on my second knock, Natalia beaming at me in the entryway and ushering me inside and out of the rain.

“My favorite machinist!” Jarrick said as I turned the corner into their dining room. “Wilt just ran upstairs for the night. Boy still thinks he needs to study! Hah!”

“Hush Jarrick,” Natalia said. Her voice was stern for a moment, out of place. “You can head

on up if you want Aimon. He's not busy."

"I actually came by to drop off the hose," I said as I started to unwrap the oil cloth it was wrapped in. "I made a new valve for it and tested it out. Should get the still going again."

"Probably'll work better than it did before!" Jarrick said, then without his usual jovial tone. "It means a lot, you doing this one in particular."

Unsure of what to say, I nodded to Jarrick and climbed the stairs to the second floor. The house was similar, though not entirely the same, as my own. The second floor rooms in Wilt's slightly smaller, but with an extra room that mine didn't have where Jarrick's whiskey stills had originally been housed. I knocked twice in rapid succession, then opened the door to Wilt's room.

"Hey Aimon," Wilt said without turning from the book on his desk. "I'm kind of busy what's up?"

On the page he was examining I saw a pair of outlines for sails and mathematical formulas. Something about surface area and mobile sails that I couldn't easily decipher.

"Dropped the new hose off, wanted to say hi." I said. He never put down a book when we started talking, that was just his way, but this felt different. He could typically keep reading and put part of his energy into the conversation, at least be present. "Didn't see you all day."

"Been reading," Wilt said. "Studying."

"All right then," I said. "I'll leave you alone."

"Hey, do you want to go to the Hare tomorrow?" He came out of his daze just for a moment, then was back to the work. "Need to talk about something."

“Yeah Wilt,” I said. “No problem.”

I shut the door behind me and walked back through the front door and around the house to my own door. The house was empty. Alistair closing down Atlan’s most likely. I wished Bertrand was back in Dorchester. It wouldn’t be long, sometime in the next couple of weeks the caravan would roll back through after spending a couple of weeks at the borders selling their stores to quartermasters.

I rummaged around the kitchen, pulling together a dinner of cured ham, bread, and a hard cheese before I realized that there was a plate sitting out where father typically left breakfasts for me. Already prepared to remind him in the morning just in case he forgot in the morning. I stared at the plate while I ate, brain racing between loving him for making sure he remembered and hating him for needing the constant reminder. I settled into the anger, letting the worst parts of the day rise to the top, and left a single finger of whiskey in a glass next to the plate before climbing the stairs toward sleep.

## 5.

The bell at the top of the town hall tower woke me the next morning, as it did every Eves. Through the floor I heard the clatter of father getting himself ready for communion, the one practice he had never altered in mother's absence. Typically Ada Kempt led the communion discussions, her position as Dorchester's librarian allowing her to transfer the information in dense agricultural and engineering pamphlets sent by Idas Academy to the community. But today's communion, to be held in the tribunal instead of the library's common room for extra space, was to be Master Malwich's show.

I waited until I heard the front door click shut then rolled out of bed and got ready for the day, simple pants and regular jacket to keep the rain off with a heavy shirt underneath to fight off the chill in the air. I would need Wilt to help me make sense of the new Master Machinist, and we still needed to talk about what had been bothering him. The second part would come when he was ready, so the first goal of the day was to get him on board with the first part. I turned the two corners from my front door to his street and saw Wilt pulling his own door closed — notebooks in hand.

“Want to get some breakfast before communion?” I said.

“Before?” Wilt said, turning from the door and falling into step with me toward town square. “You're going?”

“First chance to meet him,” I said. “Figured I should get to know the man who wants to take the workshop away.”

“Aimon. . .” Wilt began.

“I’m not going to do anything stupid” I said. “But if there’s a way to prevent him putting down roots here I have to find it.”

“The outskirts will be with you both,” Wilt said. “You know nobody out here can afford to pay what he’ll be charging.”

“It’s not the outskirts I’m worried about,” I said. “Nobody out here can afford to pay us either. That’s why it’s all repair work. But everyone that can afford it will switch. Then there’s no real paying work and we wouldn’t even be able to afford the fee to use the building in the square.”

I stopped in the alleyway and looked at Wilt.

“I’m a machinist Wilt, not a handyman. I’d go crazy.”

“Fair enough,” Wilt said, after a pause.

I hadn’t been to communion since my mother’s death, but from what I remembered the scene in the tribunal room of town hall was about as far as it could possibly be from a typical meeting. Instead of Ada’s calming instruction on new crop tilling methods and trade values of new currencies from Nelemor and The Peak Kingdoms, Master Ardell Malwich spoke solely of himself in arduous monotone. Even so, he held the standing room crowd in rapt attention.

“. . . recreation of the first generation Striker units used by the Shield Cohort in Idalta’s Defense posed a significant challenge. Even for a studied man like myself you see, the histories of the founding moments of Idacia and our culture as a people is difficult to sift through.”

After nearly an hour I felt like I could burst with the energy in my body, similar to the many



children who swung their legs back and forth from their places in seats trying to will the time until they could return to their lives to move faster. I reached into one of the jacket's interior pockets and pulled out a ball of twine, twisting it into shapes and knots over and over again to keep my hands busy while I listened. Beside me Wilt had discarded his notebook, any hopes of thoughtful commentary or sources of information to dive into deeper in his own time lost in Malwich's celebrity.

"Now, I believe I am coming up to my time limit if I haven't already passed it," Malwich said, looking toward Mayor Dowles. "My apologies to my good friend Mayor Dowles, I ran into this problem quite a bit in the lecture halls of Idas."

The mayor was in the front row, and with Ros and Annie between my father and her she sitting in just the perfect place to have her seat be only potentially political. She sat straight backed and at attention, nodding curtly to Malwich.

"I look forward to getting to meet each of you individually over the coming weeks and months, especially once I have my own workspace somewhere in the center of town to make it easier. For now, I will be beginning operations in the morning from the Ment estate with a rolling price scale better serve the whole community."

Wilt turned to look at me, but luckily enough our hidden place in the back meant that most of the eyes in the room that did leave the stage bore into my father instead of me. As Malwich finished his speech, the crowd rose and moved forward to greet him. All but my father, who turned hard at the middle aisle dividing the seats in the room and strode out the doors.

The meek rain of the morning had abided when we left town hall so we stopped at the Silver Hare to grab a road lunch of semi-fresh buttered rolls, hard cheese, and crisp green apples before

heading to the banks of the Atlan River that made up the western border of Dorchester to eat. Weak clouds pushed their way over the mountains in the distance, their energy spent climbing the tall peaks leaving them without any more rain to renew the small rainstorm of the morning.

Even in the chilly air Wilt laid at the bank of the river and let his left hand drift through the current of the water, idling in the calm. His notebook lay open next to his rucksack, the pages on it filled by small bits of notes from Malwich's speech and dozens of idle drawings depicting sails and ships.

"So, I need to tell you something," Wilt said, rising to a sitting position on the bank of the river.

"What's been eating at you?" I asked, relieved to finally be able to approach the subject.

Wilt always came around to say what he thought, but if I tried to force him he would've brushed it off to not inconvenience me with whatever he needed.

"I . . ." Wilt started, then turned to look at me. "I'm leaving Dorchester."

When the words came out of his mouth my stomach felt like it dropped out of my body. I heard but struggled to process what came after — he had been accepted as an apprentice shipwright in Brighton, he was leaving in a week, he'd spend five years as an apprentice, hopefully be hired on to begin designing and building his own ships. It started to dawn on me — Wilt wasn't just leaving, he was never coming back.

"Aimon?" Wilt said.

I hadn't answered, had no idea how long he had been talking. I forced myself to smile, the act deepening the pain in my chest.

“It sounds perfect,” I said. “I’m so happy for you.”

-

The Silver Hare was packed full. Not quite shoulder to shoulder inside the confines of the largest inn in Dorchester, but full enough that the morning server Amalie was still working well into the night. Wooden mugs clattered against the bar top and tables throughout the room, harmonizing with the scratches of chairs and the deep bellows of laughter from the old farmers and a pair of traveling legionnaires spinning tales in the corner near the hearth. Wilt, Annie, Evelyn, and myself sat in the opposite corner of the far wall from the old timers, my friends’ mugs filled and refilled and Wilt’s face growing ever more red as he punctuated the thoughts in his story with heavy drinks from his mug.

I leaned my chair onto its bag legs, resting its back against the wall to keep my balance and took a sip of the coffee in my mug, the subtle taste of chocolate marking the beans as some of Bertrand’s stock originally from the coastal provinces in southern Idacia, trying to enjoy the joy on Wilt’s face as he recounted a meeting with the master shipwright he’d be working under.

“He said he’d love to see my sails in action,” Wilt said. “Said it reminded him of the love he had for the work when he was my age.”

“Ahhhhh I’m so happy for you!” Annie said. “You’ve wanted this for so long!”

I was happy for Wilt, but I couldn’t help but feel abandoned by him. He would be around for another week, and then I’d be facing Malwich and the Ments on my own. Annie would stay, and while she had immediately said yes when I asked if she wanted to celebrate Wilt’s news tonight

we still hadn't talked about the night of the festival, about what the moments before the fountain's explosion meant. And her mother's political position would mean she wouldn't be able to go against the Ments directly. The happiness of the moment couldn't be removed from the feeling in my stomach that hadn't disappeared.

"I'll finally get to experience some culture, father always says he's never seen a production of 'Idalta's Gambit' as good as even the worse players in Idas."

Zachariah Ment's voice was painfully perfect. Each word recounted in a perfect Idas accent due to his family's Academy trained tutors. Ada had told us in lessons when we were younger that it was an old tradition, the nobility of Dorchester and the Dornan lands in general emulating the attitude and culture of the capital all the way at the edges of the Kingdom.

"Edward Dornan himself came to the estate just a month ago, helped us set the groundworks for the... project," Zachariah said.

He was two tables over, closer to the bar and in direct eye-line of the servers so their mugs would never be empty, sitting with two of his cousins and a mercher woman by the silk in her shirt. They had already been at their table when we walked in an hour ago, and hadn't even stopped their conversation to look our direction when we sat near them. He knew I was here at the very least, he had been giving me sly smiles all night whenever he lost interest in what his table mates had been saying. He saw me watching him and listening, and stared directly at me as he knocked his nearly empty mug against the table and stood for attention.

"I'd love to share a bit more exciting news for Dorchester if you all would let me," he said, raising the volume of his voice to quiet those around him. "With Master Malwich comes an even more exciting bit of news, our home is to become the newest site of a Striker factory! Each member

of the community will be uplifted by the factory, as my father is dedicated to giving gracious employment to every single citizen of Dorchester before he even thinks of looking elsewhere.”

The applause started as his own table, the overgrown cousins he had brought with him staring down the tables nearby until they joined in. Zachariah basked in the forced adoration, waiting for the noise to quiet down before delivering his finale. The crowd was there, but he was only looking at me.

“In response to the projected increase in profit for the town, Edward Dornan himself has offered me one of his house’s annual positions in the Crystal Tower. I will be the first pilot born in Dorchester, and pledge to return to my home and defend it from all who would do us harm!”

The pit of my stomach, empty and missing since Wilt’s revelation at the river, was filling with fire. Zachariah Ment, to my knowledge, had never done a day of work in his life and was going to take both of my dreams from me. The one that was realistic, the one that was going to be my life in Dorchester, had already been cracked before he stomped on it. But now he would get to fly? He, solely because of his station, would be welcomed into the ranks of the same house army that let my mother die for an extra night of drinking. The burning climbed up my stomach, spread through my legs, sent waves through shoulders into clenched fists, and finally ignited like a forge fed by bellows.

“You’d join the house of piss drunk pilots?” I said.

I did not shout, simply spoke loud enough to be heard over the tepid applause. The hottest part of the forge fire wasn’t the tips of orange flame that danced and boasted, the heart of the fire was the subtle blue and white flames that hid underneath. Zachariah gave me a toothy smile but I pushed past it.

“You’d fly with the same pilots that let the community you say you want to protect burn? We all remember it Ment, even if you’re far enough away on your estate to forget we all remember the lives they cost.”

Wilt laid a hand on my shoulder, attempting to pull me back but I was already climbing to my feet. The fire needed fuel, and it wouldn’t find it at the table.

“Of course you would,” I said. “Your father has always bent a knee to whatever power found its way to Dorchester, makes sense his heir would too.”

Around me the last patrons that hadn’t been watching turned their attention to us. The Ment cousins scowled, their legs stiff as coils ready to spring to their feet if needed. Zachariah stood just like his father, shoulders square and jaw set. Confident in the protection of his position. I stopped an arms length away from the lordling, the smile on his face pushing the fire to build.

“Well, if you are to work well in the factory after closing up shop we can only hope your father hasn’t taught you everything he knows,” Zachariah said, pausing to gesture around the room with sweeping hands. “Though, it seems you’ve picked up his haunts at the very least.”

I hadn’t thrown a punch since the one that left his nose slightly crooked as children, but I had always been good at keeping the rust off of tools. I was faster, oh so much faster than him or his cousins. A straight right re-broke Zachariah’s nose, sending blood into the air and staggering the lordling. And then I was on him, both of us on the ground. An arm around my throat tried to stop me, and a wooden crack from behind caused the grip to loosen and let me get another blow in before a sharp whistle pierced the chaos and a baton sent me reeling backwards. In the last seconds before unconsciousness I saw the blue hue of legion uniforms and Wilt, standing with the broken handle of a wooden mug.

## 6.

Pain radiated from my right cheek, through my skull, and down my spine. I was on the ground, a thin blanket the only barrier between the cold of the stone floor. My right eye swollen half shut, the room around me started as blurry and came halfway back to clear — enough to take in the three stone walls and ceiling, the wrought iron bars that made up the final wall of the room. Of the cell.

I was in the cells beneath town hall. I had watched father make some of those bars. Gods, I could feel the blood pumping through my head. I felt like I could feel the small space of time between my heartbeat and the blood pushing its way to my fingers and toes.

“Hello?” I croaked, the words falling almost silent past parched lips.

I cleared my throat, tried again.

“Hello?” I said. “Is anyone there?”

“Oi, you awake down there then?” A voice called from my left.

His accent gave away his upbringing, he was from the western reach, House Narren lands. Better than hailing from Dornan lands at least.

“Yes,” I said. “Yes sir. Do you have any water?”

My voice cracked on the last word and I went into a fit of coughing, my dry throat trying to get any kind of moisture it could. The beams of light from the small window at the top of my cell

illuminated the legionnaire as he came into view, wooden bowl in one hand and a mug in the other.

“Aye, been waiting for you to wake,” the legionnaire said. “I cracked you a bit harder than I meant to, but you can’t really blame me can you? Gods boyo not even that oaf your friend whacked could stop you.”

He wasn’t an old man, he was probably younger than Bertrand. But he wasn’t some new recruit on his way to the Hobbold front either. The water was wonderful, crisp and cool, and I finally felt like I could speak again after a few deep gulps.

“What’s going to happen to me?” I asked.

“Edward Dornan wants you as a soldier,” the legionnaire said. He cast his eyes down for just a moment, a bit of pain in his face, before he cast it aside and stood.

“Let me know if you need some more water,” he said. “The trial is in a few hours. Benefit of us being here, at least you don’t have to wait in the cell.”

His footsteps echoed down the hallway as he retreated, the chill from under my thin blanket grew deeper. Dornan levies were fighting primarily at the Hobbold front. Pushing up the lines inch by inch to take more land for iron mines in the mineral rich lands of the Hobbolds. It was a death sentence, an actual one. A weight settled onto my chest making it hard to breathe. The fountain, the shop, Malwich — it all seemed so small all of a sudden.

Zachariah was smiling, even after I hit him the first time. Not after we went to the ground, but he was happy about it beforehand. He had been talking to the crowd, but really to me. He wanted me here.

The factory! It was a play for more power, or more direct power. I would be gone, and they’d



push people to work there. What power the outskirts had was in the economic independence the individual trades gave us, but almost nobody owned their homes. Mayor Dowles, my family, Jarrick and Natalia, Ros — maybe a few others but not many. And now with the way father was they'd be able to cut off more wealth that was independent of them. Either people would go to work for the factory or they'd struggle to pay for their homes and the Ments would bring in people that would work and could pay.

It was diabolical, and it made perfect sense.

By the time the legionnaire returned with his partner the rays of light were diminishing, the sun on the other side of the building from my window as it made its way back toward the horizon. They didn't restrain me, they didn't have to. Each of them had their heavy wooden batons at their hip and between them they'd likely been fighting longer than I'd been alive.

The tribunal, somehow, was more full than it had been the morning before. The large room wasn't often used and was sparse in design, though before now I hadn't realized how intentionally it was built to make it feel like the world was crashing in on you. I spotted Wilt and Annie in the crowd, and right behind them Ros sat with Jarrick and Natalia, each of them trying to give me their own versions of supportive smiles. Rows of elevated benches on either side of a sunken middle aisle leading toward a raised table with three place settings. Only one seat was filled as I was walked in.

Edward Dornan: Lord of the Eastern Reach, protector of the Atlan Pass, and founder of the Flash Cohort would be presiding over my trial personally. He was still dressed in his flight suit, though he wore a deep red cape emblazoned with the Dornan crest — a roaring bear in a deep shade of black bordered with gold threading. Even in his seat he had a towering presence, a pilot

of immense renown who presided over the lives of thousands.

The two legionaries directed me to a table occupied only by Mayor Dowles, and then climbed the two steps up to the higher table and took their seats on either side of Edward Dornan. All around me people I had grown up with and around stared down at the back of my head. Chatter from dozens of hushed conversations swirled around the room until the legionnaire that had given me the water stood and cleared his throat, bringing all the attention to himself. In my head I thanked him for the momentary respite from observation.

“Aimon Solan, son of Alistair Solan, as he sits before you is accused of malicious assault on a member of the nobility,” the legionnaire said. “Last night, in full view of myself and other witnesses, Aimon Solan began the fight that led to Zachariah Ment’s current condition.”

All around the tribunal heads turned to the crowd and took in the bruised face of Zachariah. It didn’t lessen the grip of fear around my body, but it did give me a small bit of satisfaction.

“How does the accused plead to the charges?”

Outside the closed doors behind me a commotion stopped the proceedings, and the doors opened violently to Bertrand. Out of breath and red in the face, the aging man gave off an aura of power in an outfit I had never imagined he would wear. Bertrand strode up the middle aisle in a full pilot’s jumpsuit, a slight limp in his left leg but without the cane he typically used.

“What is the meaning of this?” Edward Dornan demanded, rising from his seat and somehow still not regaining the commanding presence he had lost to my friend. Mayor Dowles rose and spoke quietly to Bertrand before moving into the crowd and taking a standing position in the back. Bertrand walked to me, speaking softly but with urgency.

“You will not speak unless asked a direct question, and only from the blues,” He said, not giving me a chance to speak. “Do not speak to Dornan. Let me handle that.”

He turned to the high table, taking a brief moment to collect himself, and then began.

“As is my right as a pilot and legionnaire, I will be defending Aimon in this trial. You can take the time to check my records, but I hope the ill-fitting jumpsuit is proof enough and we can continue?” Bertrand said, waiting for a response.

After a gesture from the legionnaire who hadn’t yet spoken he continued.

“Aimon Solan pleads guilty to the charge of assault,” Bertrand said, my brief respite from fear from his arrival shattered by the statement. “but, I demand the nonsense of malice be dropped before proceeding. They are boys, old enough to know better certainly but boys at the end of the day. After just brief conversations with witnesses I believe it obvious that the accused was goaded into violence.”

Bertrand turned in a slow circle, addressed the whole room while gesturing to me.

“You all know the boy’s situation. He had to grow up too fast. He didn’t learn all the lessons he ought to have but gods he learned a lot more than he was supposed to.”

Bertrand looked to the high table, watching as the legionaries and Lord Dornan conversed quietly. After a minute of hushed arguments, the legionnaire who I had spoken to rose.

“The charge will be adjusted to simple assault, though the accused would be wise to understand that both charges carry the same sentence. The only difference is on the length of conscription,” the legionnaire said.

I could swear I saw a smirk from the legionnaire. Something going unsaid between the old soldiers.

“Thank you,” Bertrand said, turning to shuffle through aging parchment papers he had dropped haphazardly on the table until he found his quarry. “In response to the sentence, the accused sites Legion code 003: Any citizen of Idacia sentenced to a crime not resulting in the death of another may stay his sentence in exchange for service to the Legion.”

The crowd behind me burst into commotion. Lord Dornan stood again, the mask of his face breaking slightly and showing the anger beneath. Both of the legionaries simply smiled, the one who had brought me food nodding his respect to Bertrand and myself.

“This is an outrage!” Edward Dornan bellowed. “The Legion oversteps its bounds!”

“I apologize my lord, but Legion code doesn’t simply predate your laws, it predates the monarchy itself. It is the precedent. I already have a letter into a colleague in Idas Academy, the boy will be accepted to train as a Legion Engineer, putting his talents to better use than the front would.”

Edward Dornan turned to the Legionaries on either side of him, looking for an ally where he would never find one. Blue and red didn’t mix well. Bringing his emotions under control, Edward Dornan took back control of the room.

“I will not overrule the Legion in this matter,” Edward Dornan said flatly. “But I will also require payment of worth for my lost conscript. That is non-negotiable. The Hobbold front is the most pressing military position in the kingdom and I am holding it my self.”

Bertrand nodded, standing calmly and seemingly waiting. His action became clear moments

later, when another commotion sounded from the hallway and the doors again opened to a man dressed in Legion blue. His boots fell hard on the wooden floor, the thin strip of rug doing little to deaden the sound. He stopped fast in front of the high table, holding still. The holster at his hip sat empty, and it was the first time I had seen it in a decade.

“Centurion Alistair Solan, First Cohort of the First Legion,” My father said. “I’ve come to re-take custody of the cadet.”

A long, high whistle escaping between the teeth of the silent legionnaire was the only sound in the tribunal for a moment.

“First of the first,” the quiet man said, standing at the same time as the one who had brought me water in deference. “Godsdamn.”

“The honorable Mayor Dowles currently holds the deed to the workshop in the town square,” my father said, turning his attention to Edward Dornan and putting all the fire he could into his next words. “I trust that will cover the fine, my Lord?”

“It will,” Edward Dornan said after a moment, a smile curling the corners of his mouth.

“Thank you, my lord,” my father said.

Then he turned to me and came close, close enough to notice the lack of smell on his breath.

“Lets go home son,” he said softly. “It’s over.”

## 7.

Two caravans readied themselves at the crossroads just south of Dorchester the following morning, caravaneers methodically moving along the wagons to check that axels, bridles, and cargo were secure as my friends gathered to say goodbye to both Wilt and myself. Wilt had secured a ride on old man Mahan's wagon transporting wheat the half day's ride to Abelford where he could ride a flatship down the Atlan river to Riridre and his apprenticeship. I would be riding Bertrand's wagon with him and Finch, the legionnaire who had brought me water and food in the cell, as a part of the larger caravan making its way overland to Idas. Ros, Annie, Mayor Dowles, Jarrick, and Natalia each brought me into an embrace, trying their best to ease the anxiety and fear of leaving my home. I had too many things to say to each of them — too many questions, apologies, and thanks to even start to try and rectify them.

“It may not be flying them, but you're going to get to design Strikers,” Wilt quietly said as we embraced for what might be the final time. “I'm not happy about the circumstances, but I am happy I'm not leaving you alone here with Zachariah.”

I broke the embrace but stayed close to my best friend. He had a slightly new demeanor about him, shoulders square to the world like he might push back against it.

“And you'll be building your own ship to come and find me in no time,” I said.

“Wagons are moving!” A caravaneer called from further up the line.

Behind me father lifted the leather travel bag that I had packed my life into. The straps of my rucksack grew leaden on my shoulders, seeming to dig into my skin. Bertrand pulled Ros into an

embrace before turning to the wagon, and I gave one last look to my friends in front of me and Dorchester behind them before turning to follow. Finch was already seated in one of the seats on the front bench, and with Bertrand climbing into the drivers spot I made my way to the open ended back of the wagon. Father's hand on my shoulder stopped me before I climbed in, and he turned me half around to face him.

"I'm..." he began, tears welling in the corner of his eye but never fully forming to leave their perch. "I'm sorry I wasn't the father you needed me to be. I just..."

He looked to the ground, trying to settle himself.

"I thought at first that it would stop hurting eventually. The hole she left in me. I didn't learn until it was too late that it never would, and that I couldn't fill it."

Looking back up to me, the wetness around his eyes felt different. Like hot iron that was starting to cool into something solid. My throat clenched shut on its own and I was unable to speak.

"She detested violence," he finished. "But she would've been so proud of the reason you used it."

He lifted my bag into the back of the wagon, the wagons directly in front of Bertrand's now starting to move, and I embraced him for the first time in years — the only smell that of soap. He helped me up to the wagon, let the flap come closed to break me off from the world I knew, and hit his hand against the heavy wood of the wagon to set us to motion.

I don't know how long I stayed in the near dark of the wagon's interior. I know I cried. For the home I had lost, for the people I had left, for both the version of my father that had been drowning in pain and the version of him I had only briefly met at the end. By the time I opened the flap on

the back of the wagon again the setting sun was casting deep shadows across the landscape and an evening fog was had settled onto the peaks of the mountains in the distance. It would be between a ten and twelve day trip depending on the weather, but sometime tomorrow we would be further than I had ever been from Dorchester. A few days after that we would climb the Alvek mountain range east of the Peak Kingdoms where the Dwarven clans held dominion and cross at the Kennot pass out of the Atlan Valley and into house Atticus lands.

When the line between shadows and darkness started to blur a melodic bell sounded from further up the line of three dozen wagons, around us wagons slowed and veered off the road to form smaller circles on either side. Bertrand kept ours moving forward for another hundred feet or so, eventually pulling off the road into the last spot in a small circle of four wagons. I mechanically helped set up camp: unfurled my bedroll, found sticks for kindling, and finally unwrapped the a bundle of pastries Ros had sent along with Bertrand to hand out to the old soldiers and their families that Bertrand preferred to travel with. Finch fit right in with the crowd, who were happy to hear his new stories and add them to their collections, and I ate the dinner of hopper and potato stew while trying to banish the fear of my new home.

The traders and travelers said the towers of Idas stretched so high into the sky that their tips would be hidden on foggy mornings like the peaks of mountains. They told stories of the flowing silk awnings around the market in the high quarter, the sounds of barter and laughter that wound its way out from the stalls and taverns in the low quarter, and the heavy smells and sounds of industry from the Rift. And the Crystal Tower, the gleaming heart of the city in which perspective pilots trained and sometimes died. The unseen home of Idalta at its peak. I tried to picture it, but could only see market days and the Outskirts of Dorchester. The Atlan Mountains looking down on my home.



“Aimon,” Bertrand said, gesturing with his head toward the wagon. Shep, enjoying whatever was coming out of the cask he was leaning against, was telling Finch about an elf that could somehow still speak in his mind and asked him how he was every so often — and so I slipped from the circle that had formed around the fire and made my way to Bertrand.

“How much do you know about where we’re heading?” Bertrand asked when I came near him. The flickering light from the fire erratically illuminated his face.

“Just what traders say,” I said. “The different parts of the city mainly.”

“That’s what I figured,” Bertrand said, another moment of firelight showing a tense expression on his face. “You’ll have to watch your tongue in the city. Everything that led to this, it only ended up this easy because we were in Dorchester.”

“It worked because of the Legion’s laws,” I said. “Because you were there.”

“Yes, but that won’t hold within the city,” Bertrand said. “Idas is a neutral city, no allegiance to any house or the Legion. Its laws are decided by the city council, made up of members of the great houses and the Merchant Guild in equal numbers. And those laws are enforced by the Silversticks, trained and paid by the Guild. A fight with the nobility or a merchant might’ve eventually landed you in a trial if you lived through an encounter with them but they don’t do prison or conscription in Idas, only fines. Most criminals end up working off their debt in The Rift.”

“Legionnaires will just sit and watch that happen?” I asked.

“The soldiers from the garrison can go into the city as citizens, but never armed and usually not in uniform,” Bertrand said. “That city is the only place in the Kingdom Legion laws are

secondary. Don't give your trust to the Legion."

I couldn't believe what he was saying. He had always said good things about the people he had served with. I just assumed that extended to the Legion as a whole.

"Bertrand," I started. "Why did you never tell me you were a pilot?"

"I didn't want you to end up here Aimon," he said. "I knew you wanted to fly. Thought knowing would've just encouraged you."

"Why would it be so bad?" I said. "Most pilots are heroes. All of the Legion are."

"Another time."

"But. . ."

"Another time Aimon," Bertrand said, his voice starting to crack. "Please."

-

The rest of the journey passed in the same way as the first day. The caravan started off at first light, ate road lunches on the move, and broke into smaller camps just before dusk before starting up the next day. On our last day the dozen towers of Idas grew from small pins on the horizon to the massive constructs that they were, dozens of floors reaching toward the sky. But none went as high as the Crystal Tower, the iridescent reflection of the sun on its nearly smooth surface broken up only by holes for its ten hangars full of Strikers.

We broke off from the convoy at the last crossroads before the city, turning east on the road toward the large Legion garrison on the edge of the city. Finch's presence got us through the gate easily, and we made our way to what Bertrand called the "logistics officer" — a very disorganized

man by the appearance of his office. He rustled through stacks of papers, eventually finding the letter Bertrand had sent ahead and reading through the situation before handing me a writ of admission to Idas Academy and ushering us back out of his office. I thanked Finch for the way he had treated me in the cell, and the aging Legionnaire left for new recruiting orders before Bertrand brought me into the city.

Even though the cobbled road through the gate was twice as large as the central road through Dorchester, the city seemed to press in on us even more than the tight alleys of the Outskirts. Hundreds of people: humans, dwarves, and even occasionally tightly packed groups of elves lined every foot of the sidewalks and streamed through open doors carrying boxes and bundles of trade goods. He must have seen the awe on my face, Bertrand chuckled and spoke over the clamor.

“Just wait, this is just the transport district where the caravans unload and take on new cargo,” Bertrand said, pointing off to the east. “The city opens up to the Idas river down that way for ship transport too.”

We stopped the wagon in front of a large warehouse, and Bertrand exchanged paperwork with a thin man holding a clipboard receiving four reels of silver coins in return. Eighty marks! I was lucky to get a whole mark for any job back home, that amount of money could’ve paid the square fees for the shop for years!

“I’ve got to go bid on a new load,” Bertrand said, climbing back into the drivers position next to me on the wagon. “Tamorin’s is just up the road there on the left, you ought to get some food before we go to the Academy. It’s not Ros’s, but it’s about as close as you’ll come. Meet me back here after.”

I couldn’t stop looking up as I walked the wide streets. Even the buildings in this district were

taller than any besides town hall in Dorchester. Massive warehouses gave way to three and four story homes, small shop fronts in many of the ground levels. I spotted the sign for Tamorin's, and made my way toward it before seeing a brilliant painting of a star in deep purple and shimmering gold that was being painted over by one of the Silversticks, his uniform a deep slate and a silver handled baton at his hip.

“Out of the way grubber!” A man's voice belted out from behind me.

I barely got out of the way of a cart loaded down with boxes, ducking a thin stick that the driver of the cart had swatted at me with. I bumped into a short man wearing a cowl, and mumbled an apology before noticing the Silverstick looking toward the commotion and opening the door to the shop.

The inside of Tamorin's smelled like a slice of home, sugar and baking bread mixing together in the air to remind me of Ros's bakery and bringing a bit of melancholy to my heart. There were a half dozen occupants of the room spread between a few tables and talking amongst themselves, but nobody behind the display case at the front. Inside the case sat dozens of various pastries and sweets: candied apples, peach tarts, chocolate rolls, and a lonely sweetbun glistening with glaze at the very end. I bent down to get a better look at my quarry.

“Oi,” a deep voice said from the other side of the case. “Grubber. You buyin' something or you want me to get a silver?”

I stood back up, and on the other side of the case stood a dwarf that would've looked more at home in a blacksmith's apron than the white baker's apron he wore. The muscles of his arms were corded like the ship's ropes in Wilt's books, and the parts of his face not covered by a dense brown beard were pocked with scars. I glanced down, onto his side of the case and saw he was standing

at a stool to be at my eye level.

“Oi!” The dwarf yelled, his face flashing red in anger. “I got a business to run here and it don’t involve letting street rats ogle me.”

“I’m sorry!” I said. “I’ve just never met a dwarf, it startled me. Can I have the sweetbun?”

The man, Tamorin it must be, looked down at my dusty road clothes and raised an eyebrow to me inquisitively.

“I’ve got money,” I said, reaching for my purse in the large left pocket on the interior of my jacket. “How much?”

“ ‘Alf mark.” He replied.

My pocket was empty. I frantically checked my others, all filled with twine, tinderbox, wax. No purse. I reached back into the left interior pocket and felt a thin piece of paper. I pulled it out, the same purple and gold star that had been painted on the wall across the street emblazoned across the front of it. On the other side of the display case, Tamorin was using a serving spoon to transfer the sweetbun onto a small plate. I didn’t know what to do, the half mark would’ve been a quarter of the money I had on me in the first place but it was all gone. I looked up at the dwarf, scared of the anger coming back. His face started to redden again, and I bolted from the store.

“Oi! Godsdamned street rat!” He yelled after me.

I slowed down after a few dozen feet, checking that the angry man wasn’t giving chase, and made my way back to Bertrand with an empty stomach and the strange card with the star on it.



## 8.

“How was it?” Bertrand asked as I returned to where he had left me.

His wagon was nowhere to be seen, so I guessed he had gotten a new cargo and it was being loaded. I didn’t want to tell him about losing my purse.

“It reminded me of Ros’s,” I said. “Not the same, but you’re right it was close.”

A small smile tugged at Bertrand’s lips, but he didn’t let it grow larger. The closer we had come to Idas the more reserved my friend had become. I had thought it was because he simply preferred life on the road to the city, but I couldn’t shake his comment about not trusting the Legion.

“Come on,” Bertrand said, turning to strike out further into the city. “Ought to get you across the bridge.”

I carried my travel bag and rucksack, and as we wound our way through the city’s arterial streets, the stories I had heard about Idas began to make more sense. The visible parts of the city proper were arranged like a giant half circle leading to The Rift, a wide natural crevice cutting through the ground, that separated the Academy grounds, noble estates, and Royal Palace from the rest of the city. There were three bridges that crossed The Rift, but the central bridge was by far the largest and led directly to Idas Academy.

Bertrand stopped before reaching the bridge, pulling me off to the side and out of the way of the foot and wagon traffic making their way across. From deep in The Rift the sounds of industry echoed their way up to the surface. For hundreds of feet below me workers toiled in the refineries

and factories that supplied Idacia. We had passed the entrances to elevator shafts that transported workers, both free and those paying off their fines to the Guild, down to their workplaces three times a day and brought the previous shift back to the surface on their return. Almost everyone on the street around us looked like regular citizens, the nobility and merchants with access to the high quarter carved into the mountainside across the bridge usually stayed on their side of the bridge. Close to a dozen Silversticks stopped everyone before they could cross the bridge, checking identifications and writs to ensure that they were allowed to cross. I waited for Bertrand to speak, but he just stared up at the Crystal Tower sprouting out of the center of Idas Academy, reaching up to the sky.

“Thank you,” I said. “For bringing me. For everything.”

The sound of my voice roused him from whatever he had been thinking about, and he turned to me with a sad smile.

“You didn’t deserve the Hobbold Front,” Bertrand said. “Gods, nobody does.”

“Bertrand,” I said. “What happened to you when you were flying?”

“The second Hobbold War,” Bertrand started, then trailed off — going somewhere else in his mind again. “It wasn’t really a defensive war. During the first war we took enough Hobbold territory to find out that the lands they lived in were rich with metals. After the Guild and Dornans found out just how much money they were going to make off of it they kept pushing forward, just like they’re doing now.”

Ada had taught us during Communion that the Hobbolds had invaded for no reason other than bloodlust. That the biologists in the capital had decided Hobbold’s were closer to animal than man



and were violent in nature.

“That’s what caused it, why all those people died,” Bertrand continued. “I wanted to keep you out of this because I wasn’t proud of most anything I did.”

I didn’t know what to say, and so I simply reached to embrace my friend. A single sob escaped him before he composed himself, and he returned the hug. When we broke apart he wasn’t the jolly man I knew but he wasn’t quite as hard.

“I can’t go further than this,” Bertrand said. “The Silversticks will look at your papers and let you know who to talk to on the other side. If it’s still the same as it was they’ll put you in a wing with other non-landed students. Just promise me to stay clear of the Ment boy.”

“I will,” I lied. “That’s caused me enough trouble.”

Zachariah had tried to ruin me, it was only fair to repay the favor if I could.

Crossing the bridge the clatter of industry grew louder with fewer obstacles to dampen the noise. Heavy impacts of metal on metal scored my steps like a drummer for a marching army. On the far side a thin elf with a clipboard and thick glasses scanned the small crowd that crossed looking for students between the cart loads of grain and split pieces of firewood. His eyes settled on me, expanded by the refraction of the glasses they looked comically out of place on the man’s small face.

“Aimon Solan I presume?” He said as I grew close.

“Yes sir,” I said, reaching my hand out to greet the man. “And you are?”

He scanned me up and down, a quizzical expression on his face, before tentatively shaking my

hand.

“Master steward Tariel Netyoive,” he said with a slight bow. “Director of hospitality for Idas Academy.”

“Oh,” I said. “I appreciate someone of your position coming to greet me personally.”

“My morning staff has returned to the rest of their duties,” he said. “You are quite late.”

He turned on his heel and set off at a fast pace toward an open gate and courtyard beyond. The walls of the academy towered over us, a deep grey slate that was almost black in color. They felt designed to impose — I couldn’t imagine they had ever been used as a true defensive measure this far back from the high walls of the city its self. The walls were a sharp contrast to the glittering Crystal Tower that jutted from the center of the courtyard. A tall iron door was the only blemish on it’s surface, each side of the door guarded by a striker wearing a brilliant purple cape — members of the Shield Cohort! The King’s own elite strikers, and the heir’s to Idalta’s own. Even from the distance they radiated power and authority, their eight foot frames towering over the students that walked through the courtyard.

I rushed to fall into step with the tall elf, nearly needing to take two steps for every one of his. Crossing the threshold into the Academy itself, I was expecting to feel joy and instead was met by dozens of watching eyes. A finely dressed woman near me laughed, turning toward her friends and gesturing in my direction.

“The central courtyard is often the fastest way to get between classrooms and the dormitory wings,” he said, turning left toward the eastern wall. “Non-landed students of all kinds live in the east dormitories, men on even floors and women on odd numbered. The sun rises directly through

your windows, so I would recommend a trip to the high quarter. . .”

Tariel stopped for a moment to look at my clothes and pack.

“I would recommend a trip to a market to find thick shades if you aren’t an early riser.”

Tariel opened an ancient door under an archway, ushering me inside and then pointing down a hallway to the right before beginning to climb the stairs

“The South wall is four times as thick as the rest, and contains the majority of the classrooms as well as the mess. East wing eats first at each meal: eighth bell, noon bell, and fifth bell in the evening. West wing eats thirty minutes after east. If you need food after that you’ll need to buy it yourself in the market. Just don’t keep it outside of a cabinet that can close please, my staff is quite sick of mice after one of the Tok boys ignored that advice for most of last term.”

We left the stairwell on the sixth floor and walked a dozen feet down the hallway before stopping outside of a heavy looking door. Tariel rapped on the door three quick times, and moments later it opened to reveal a human man with deep olive skin and curly locks of brown hair cascading halfway to his shoulders. He was from Rommel’s lands to the south east then, luxury crop country. The house robe he wore was of fine silk and emblazoned with a house crest I didn’t recognize — an owl in flight.

“I’m afraid I must leave you here to prepare for the evening meal,” Tariel said, turning to the man in the doorway. “I trust you can fill in your last suite mate on the inner workings of life at Idas?”

“I think I can manage Tariel,” the man in front of me said.

Tariel left with a slight nod to me, and I extended my hand to introduce myself to my suite

mate. He looked at it with a tinge of distaste, and hesitantly shook my hand and then wiped his hand off on his robe.

“Aimon Solan,” I said tersely.

This man’s reaction felt different than Tariel’s. The steward had seemed surprised at the handshake, this lordling thought he was better than me.

“Otro Carrack,” He said. “You’re with the dwarf.”

He backed away from the doorway and pointed off to his left to an open door, then turned the opposite direction and disappeared into what must’ve been his bedroom. Inside half of my bedroom was covered in geodes and a giant Warhammer mounted to the wall reflected the light off its jeweled pommel. My dwarven roommate had his back to me, pulling clothes out of a chest at the foot of his bed and laying them out. I cleared my throat, and he turned toward me and scanned me up and down before giving me what seemed like a genuine smile. I closed the distance to him and tried for another handshake, and the dwarf’s smile grew even wider as he clasped my forearm.

“Donnel Krize, forge-son of Clan Krize, lords of the lower peaks.” He said. He didn’t seem to be boasting, just proud.

“Aimon Solan,” I said, slightly embarrassed. “Of Dorchester.”

“Up by the Hobbolds? Gods that must’ve been fun!” He said.

“More nerve-wracking I’d say,” I said. “Forge-son. You’re nobility? Tariel said this wing was for non-landed students. The other man, Otro, he was from a noble house as well.”

“Well Pimly is a slaggin’ prince,” he said. “University laws only recognize holdings in Idacia.”

“What about Otro?”

“Minor house, only recently recognized and under Rommel’s patronage. New money silk traders, must’ve brought in a hell of a profit to land one of Rommel’s pilot spots. Or ran off with one of his daughters.”

Donnel finished his last sentence with a wink, then pointed to the bare mattress on the side of the room that hadn’t been decorated by him.

“I left everything over there for you, wasn’t sure how you’d want the room set up.” He said. “Steward told me we could do whatever we wanted with the furniture but it had to be packed back into the corners when we moved out.”

I nodded, and walked over to my side of the room to put down my bags. I closed the door that separated our room from the lounge room between the two bedrooms, and started to unpack clothes.

“Did Otro seem a little,” I started.

“Pompous?” Donnel finished.

“I was going to try and be a bit more diplomatic,” I said, chuckling. “So it wasn’t just me? He wiped his hand on his clothes after shaking mine.”

Donnel looked away from his chest for a moment.

“Well, you are covered in road dust,” Donnel said. “I don’t mind, no point in trying to keep clean hands under the mountains most the time. But I doubt he’s used to that.”

I looked down at my clothes and hands. The shopkeeper and the cart driver had called me a

grubber. Taniel even looked like he didn't want to shake, but he had at least been somewhat kind. Was that what they meant? Donnel was still looking at me, and I tried to hide the fact that I hadn't even thought about it.

"Yeah the," I said. "The caravan I was traveling with hit bad weather and we got in late. Didn't have time to find a bath."

Donnel just shrugged, turning back to the task of unpacking. Outside a bell sounded twice, the deep note reverberating through the stone walls.

"Like I said," he said. "Don't bother me much. Might want to use the baths before dinner though. From what I've seen since I arrived in Idas most people, even non-nobles, are more aligned with his sensibilities. And personally I'd rather not have another reason to stick out around here."

"Do you know where they're at?" I asked.

"Did one of the stewards not show you around?"

"Taniel showed me here, but said he needed to go help with supper. Otro told me he'd show me around but I don't think that's happening now."

Donnel chuckled lightly, then grabbed opened up his wardrobe and pulled on a cloak.

"Probably not," he said, walking toward the door. "Come on, lets go. You should still have some time to get clean before the meal if we leave now."

Donnel strode across the common room to the other bedroom, rapping lightly on the door twice. The common room itself was sparse, just as my half of the bedroom had been without decorations. Four arm chairs, sturdy and well made even if they were a bit lackluster in design,

were arrayed around a circular table. There were two bookcases, one partially filled with books bound in fine leather inlaid with gold inscription, and a bank of cabinets along both the right and left hand walls.

“Pimly, new roommate and I are going on a walk come on,” Donnel said through the closed door, then after a moment added. “Otro you’re welcome to join.”

A moment later a finely dressed elf ducked through the doorway. He was the tallest person I had ever seen — easily a half a head taller than Edward Dornan he had to be nearly six and a half feet tall. Even with his long frame he carried himself well. He scanned me, but still reached out his arm for a greeting like the one Donnel had given me, clasping my forearm instead of shaking my hand.

“More of a dwarf greeting Pim, but I’m glad to see you picking it up,” Donnel said.

“I told you I do not like the shortname you have given me Forge-Son,” Pimly said, then turned to me again. “Pimly Eilsae, crown prince of Nelemor at your service.”

At this he swept his cloak to the side and bowed slightly. Confused, I tried to match his bow and saw Donnel laughing silently out of the corner of my eye.

“Sorry Pim, you’re stuck with it,” Donnel said, walking toward the door and opening it for us to file out. “Annoying to pronounce elven names. Pretty sure it’s because you all get more oxygen down here, messes with your brains and makes you pick funny names.”

Donnel and Pimly brought me through the rest of the east wing of the castle. Like Taniel had said, it was primarily made up of dormitories like our own. While we weren’t supposed to go onto the female floors, there was also nobody to stop us so Donnel took our group through a shortcut

that I'm certain was actually longer than if we had simply finished walking to the ground floor. At the far end of the hallway a spiral staircase climbed the tower and the hallway turned sharply right into the south wing.

"Workshops for the machinist track students up that way," Donnel said pointing up the stairs.

"That's where I'll be working then?" I asked.

Both Donnel and Pimly stopped and looked at me.

"What?" I asked.

"I had assumed that you were on the pilot track," Pimly said.

"Aye," Donnel said. "Everyone else in the suite is I just figured you were as well. Do you want to go up and look around?"

All three of them were training to fly? The Academy continued to confuse me. Why had they put me in a suite with them, not other machinists or regular students? Could I find a way to fly in one of their suits? The excitement of the idea spread a tingling sensation through my arms and legs that I pushed away by moving. I shook my head, gesturing toward the open hallway.

"Probably ought to find the baths first," I said. "I can always come back."

Like Taniel had said, the South wing of the castle was significantly larger than the east wing had been. Doors opened up to classrooms on either side of the hallway, the basic stone walls replaced by intricate wood paneling and expensive stonework. Two large doors stood at the far end of the hallway, a pair of stewards appeared to be guarding it, and Donnel pointed toward them.

"Mess is down there, but Taniel doesn't let anyone in outside of meal times," he said. "One of



the last dwarfs that came through here, a machinist I think, said that a bunch of drunk heirs from the great houses broke into the kitchens through there and ate half the next day's food before Tariel found them."

In front of the doors was a crossroad of hallways. We turned left, heading toward the smaller rear gate of the castle. Behind us, a group of well dressed students came in from the courtyard. I could almost ignore them until I heard a familiar voice — even though it was nasally there was no way to mistake it.

"Our court criminal finally made it to the big city!" Zachariah Ment echoed down the hallway.

I was almost able to keep walking.

"And he found his pack of freaks!" Zachariah continued. "Ah the poor Carrack kid, getting trapped in the reject suite."

I turned around, slipping out of Donnel's attempt to grab my shoulder, and marched up toward the group of nobles. He was at their center, the rest of the students orbiting him like a star.

"Still covered in road dirt too!" Zachariah laughed, his pack following suit. "Sorry we couldn't spare you a lift, but Lord Dornan and the Flash Cohort couldn't be bothered to carry more than one sky barge. Have to be ready to fight if need be right?"

I stopped a half dozen steps away from the group, Donnel and Pimly staying back where I had left them. Zachariah was trying to cover his bruised face with makeup, to little avail.

"Had to get over early so you'd have more time to try and hide the damage I did?" I said, anger boiling in my stomach.

Some of his pack looked toward him confused by my words. He must've told them a different story.

"Seems to me you haven't learned the lesson your Lord was trying to teach you there," I continued. "We can have another lesson if you'd like?"

Zachariah took a step forward, but before anything else could happen a new voice came from the hallway behind me.

"Ahem," an older woman's voice said. "Is there a problem here?"

Zachariah's eyes went wide, and he stepped back into line with his pack. I turned to see a short woman — a deep purple cape, the colors of King Atticus's house, emblazoned with gold stitching covering her pilot's jumpsuit. Tariel stood off to her side, his writing tablet in tow. The Chancellor ran Idas Academy, and was an instructor for students on the pilot track.

"No Chancellor," Zachariah said quickly. "Just introducing some of my new companions to an acquaintance from home."

"Glad to hear it Mr. Ment." The woman, the Chancellor, said. "Go ahead and continue on with what you and your friends were doing. Yes?"

"Yes Chancellor," Zachariah said.

He turned quickly and walked with his group back the way he had come. The Chancellor came closer to me. Behind her Tariel was shaking his head slightly and muttered something about a meeting under his breath.

"Aimon Solan, I presume?" The Chancellor said.

“Yes Chancellor,” I said.

“Would you mind following Taniel and myself up to my office? I’m sure your friends can finish this tour another time.”

## 9.

The Chancellors office was a sharp contrast to what I had seen of Idas Academy. Even the more ornate halls we had walked through in the south wing of the castle paled in comparison to the room. Situated at the top of the Southwest tower, the circular office spread out from a large desk made of dark Godwood. On the far wall of the room a war table with topographical maps and positions of garrisons was cluttered with opened letters, and above it a board with **FLIGHTS** was split in half. I couldn't make out the details, but each side of the board seemed roughly equal. The floor itself resembled a Godwood tree's rings, alternating between a light stained wood and deep brown that bordered on black. Windows lined the entire room, with small bookshelves packed full of heavy tomes reaching down to the floor beneath — from this office she could probably see every inch of Idas.

Tariel led the way into the room, making his way past the desk to a table on wheels to the left of the war table. He started pouring water from a large jug into a smaller kettle, though there was no fire in the room outside of a hearth near the entrance to heat the water. The Chancellor sat in a plush chair on one side of the desk and gestured to a similar, though slightly less gaudy, chair on the other side in which I sat.

“Would you like some coffee or tea?” The Chancellor asked.

She gestured toward Tariel who looked for my answer over his shoulder, one hand holding the handle of the kettle and the other held across the bottom. I nodded, and a half minute later there was steam escaping out of the kettle's nozzle and a high pitched hiss echoing around the office. I looked back at the Chancellor, who smiled mischievously, and moments later a steaming cup of

rich coffee sat in front of me. I sipped carefully, but the temperature was perfect to drink without burning my tongue already. I looked up at the master steward and he winked at me in return, then snapped his index finger and thumb together. A flame flickered in his palm, small like the burning wick of a candle, and after a few moments I realized my jaw had fallen open. The Chancellor chuckled from her place across the desk.

“Tariel is an elementalist Mr. Solan,” The Chancellor said. “You’re not imagining things, or at least you’re not imagining that flame.”

“Elementalist?” I asked Tariel.

“I have dedicated my education to the understanding of the core elements that make up our world,” he said. “And being an elf comes with certain advantages. Some study the elements like me, some study the mind and it’s workings. They are the mentalists.”

“Mr. Solan,” The Chancellor said. “I have to say that finding you nearly in a fight on your first day is not the impression I was hoping for, especially after being informed of your. . . status.”

“I’m sorry Chancellor,” Aimon said. “Its just that Zachariah Ment. . .”

“I know about your history with Mr. Ment,” The Chancellor said, cutting me off. “And I want you to know that it will not be a valid excuse. You are no longer a country child Mr. Solan, you are a student at Idas Academy and a citizen of the city itself. You will have to learn that quickly.”

Her eyes felt like an owl’s, deeply intelligent but with an undercurrent of danger.

“I will try,” I said. “Though I can’t promise he will do the same.”

“Because Lord Dornan has no direct relatives in the Academy this year Mr. Ment’s status as

the next Baron of Dorchester makes him Edward's scion at this school," The Chancellor said. "But there are over a dozen Dornan sponsored or allied students in the ranks of the Academy. You will not have an easy time at this school if this feud continues."

"Why do realm politik matter at a school?" I asked.

The Chancellor huffed out a brief chuckle and reached down to flare her purple cloak on both sides.

"For the same reason I wear my brother in law's colors walking through the halls Mr. Solan," she said. "What you call realm politik is the manifestation of the struggle for power within Idacia, and Amorset as a whole. Students on the pilot track receive commissions based on their performance, and the commander of the winning side of the final exams is made into the lord of a minor house if they are not already. They receive the prestige and political power that comes with that position, and they are given funds by the crown to outfit a flight of pilots."

The Chancellor pointed behind me, to the flight board on the wall.

"The last three classes have been won by students pledging loyalty to Lord Dornan's faction of the government," she continued. "The military strength Idacia is as even now as it was the last time House Atticus went to war — in the years before the second Hobbold War."

A test? Commissions? It was overwhelming. Why hadn't Ada ever talked about the other houses besides Dornan? I wished I had asked Bertrand more questions, or asked anyone more of these questions. Did father know about this struggle? I had been so focused on the idea of joining the Legion, what did I know of any of this? The Chancellor cleared her throat and I realized I had been sitting silent.

“I.. I’m sorry,” I stammered. “I just, I’ve never even thought about most of this.”

The older woman nodded slowly, then changed the subject.

“I was happy to see you walking with Mr. Krize and Lord Eilsae,” she said. “Some from the country struggle to accept the other races of Amorset.”

She was a reformer then, which made sense wearing the color of house Atticus. The King had been pushing for a united Amorset since his ascension. The Legionaries who travelled with Bertrand had spoke highly about the Dwarves and Elves they had fought with. I had never really considered an alternative viewpoint.

“I guess I had some good teachers Chancellor,” I said.

The Chancellor nodded and sipped her coffee. She seemed to be waiting for me to continue.

“Chancellor,” I started. “I know a small amount about the Academy from the man who brought me here, but he was a pilot. So are the people you have assigned me to live with. I don’t get to fly, what exactly will I be doing here?”

For a moment the corner of her lips curled into a smile and she cleared her throat.

“I have found the best analogy for Idas Academy is a golden mark,” The Chancellor said, holding up a coin and showing me each side in turn. “On one side the face of a King, on the other the crests of the five great houses. Each side weighted equally, and each side important to the whole.”

The Chancellor stood, leaving the coin on the desk where it tempted me, and walked toward the windows. I followed a few steps behind, and the city came into view from the edges in through

the glass. The outlying farms, the garrison, the city walls, shipping districts and housing districts for workers, the low quarter, the rift, the bridges, and finally just the hint of the Academy walls below us.

“You are on the scholars track, and will be taking classes primarily focused in military engineering and theory as well as continuing to improve your skills as a machinist in the workshop. These classes are held in the rooms you were walking past earlier, while students on the pilot track attend their classes in the Crystal Tower.”

She turned toward me then, softening her expression slightly.

“I did intentionally place you with our less traditional students due to the similarities of your positions,” she said. “Truthfully, I’m not sure how the rest of the students will react to your position. We have not had a conscript in these halls in the decade I have overseen Idas Academy.”

“How are we similar?” I asked. “Pimly and Donnel are both nobility aren’t they?”

“In a sense,” she said. “But they are some of the only non-human students at Idas Academy. We have one more elven student on the pilot track— Emoria Eilsae, Lord Eilsae’s sister — and a handful of daughters from the Peak Kingdoms studying politiks and city planning for the various clans.”

Pimly hadn’t mentioned a sister. Though I hadn’t asked either. Could he do magic like Taniel? Or the other kind he mentioned? Could she? That would be useful if Zachariah or his friends were going to continue to try to torment me here.

Taniel walked up to us, perfect posture with his hands and clipboard clasped behind his back.

“Taniel will show you back to your room,” The Chancellor said, pulling a letter from a pocket



inside her cloak. “I recommend you dedicate yourself to your studies here Mr. Solan. The Legion needs new master machinists, and from what Bertrand told me you have quite a talent.”

The mention of my friend’s name settled the chaos in the pit of my stomach slightly, even now he was helping. And to become a master machinist? I’d be able to go anywhere in the Kingdom after my conscription, maybe with the title I could return to Dorchester and reclaim our workshop. But it still felt wrong. I could almost reach out through the windows and touch the Crystal Tower — I had to find a way to fly. Even if it was just once. I thanked the Chancellor for her time, promising to try and stay out of trouble.

Tariel took me on a different path back, walking through the upper levels of the eastern wall of the castle directly back to my room instead of back down to the bottom floor. Along the way we past several good sized individual workshops, and peeking through the small window on the doors I saw that each was outfitted incredibly well. Sturdy workbenches, pulley systems to hoist heavy pieces, small smelters with automatic bellows, rows of tools on pegboards. Every piece of furniture on wheels to create optimal an optimal workspace for each new project. But workshop number 21, the final door in the line of workshops and smaller than the rest as it fit snugly between two supply rooms, was a dream. A floor to ceiling bank of windows that could be opened fully to cool the room on the far wall, and the wall opposite the peg board covered in an overly large chalkboard — perfect for working out new designs. It was almost the exact same size as my workshop in Dorchester. It was perfect.

The suite was empty when I returned, and I quickly gathered a second pair of clothes and made my way to the baths. I was quickly learning my way around at least part of the Academy grounds, and appreciated how intelligently the campus had been laid out. The wings with living quarters

funneled students toward the high activity areas in the southern wing. I passed by the same place Zachariah had waylaid us earlier, turning left and out the southern gate. The road led down a small decline, and hidden in a copse of Godwood trees bordering the Idas river sat a squat stone building. There were a few sitting areas arrayed in the clearing, benches arrayed in semi-circles facing the road, and one was occupied by a half dozen well dressed noblewomen. They watched me as I approached the door to the bathhouse speaking in whispers.

I opened the door and a short dwarven woman exited wearing a gem studded vest over an undershirt. She was talking excitedly to someone behind her, and not paying attention, stumbled slightly before regaining her balance outside the doorway. A burst of laughter came from the sitting women, but it was cut short when a tall elven woman exited behind the girl who had tripped. She stared daggers into them — her long legs tensing below her like she was preparing to dash toward them, her hands curling into fists at her side. I couldn't afford to be around a fight right after leaving the Chancellor, so I reached out and laid a hand on her shoulder. She whirled around on me, left hand coming up to swing. I was overcome with intense fear, so heavy that my body reacted without my brain and I raised both hands in surrender. After a moment she grinned smugly and turned away from me. The grip of fear vanished in an instant, just as fast as it had appeared, and the elven woman strode away, the dwarven woman in tow.

Emoria Eilsae — Pimly's sister. She certainly fit the expectation of royalty. Terrifying and commanding, but the way she walked had a regal air. Pimly had seemed more a scholar than a pilot, but his sister would be a terror in a Striker rig.

“I've got some rolls left from the first seating's allotment, and I think there's a tray of sausages

left over from the staff meal let me check,” the steward said before rushing into a back room.

The mess hall wasn't as big as I had expected. The split meals made more sense after seeing the room. It was around the same size as the lecture halls had been, and around 100 students sat at the 20 or so circular tables around the room. I was the last one to get my food, late from the bath but finally free of the road dirt that had accumulated over the journey to Idas, and stood near the buffet line on the far wall from the room's entrance. All of the spaces on the buffet for food had been cleared already, when I had arrived. The door to the backroom opened again, and the steward came back out with a plate holding three rolls, a pair of sausages, and a small piece of hard cheese.

“I'm sorry about the quality,” he said. “It's always hard the first few days after new arrivals, figuring out how much of the regular food to make.”

“It looks fantastic to me,” I said. “I appreciate you finding some for me. . .”

I trailed off, unsure of how to address the steward. He seemed confused at my tone for a moment, then said.

“Abel. My name's Abel.”

“Thank you Abel,” I said, smiling as I took the plate from him.

He returned a warm smile, and then headed back into the kitchen — probably to prepare for the second seating. I turned and walked toward the tables. Most were full, but in the back I saw Pimly and Donnel talking over clean plates and made my way toward them. All of the walls of the mess hall held murals with depictions of Idalta. The largest, depicting Idalta's charge with the Shield Cohort, took up an entire wall but the other three contained paintings of her overseeing scientists, machinists, and other scholars.

I realized what Abel had meant by regular food as I sat down, a student at the next table over was eating some sort of roast fish and had a plate of what looked like roasted potatoes with some sort of sauce. It looked like the kind of food we had on festival days in Dorchester, the kind that servants prepared for nobles and merchants. I wasn't upset by my plate, I sat down and ripped open one of the rolls to make a sandwich out of one of the sausages and the cheese.

"Aimon!" Donnel said. "Found the bathhouse I see. What did the Chancellor say? And where did you get the sausage? All they would give me was the slugging fish. Fish! A man can't survive on food from the water."

"I quite enjoyed the meal," Pimly said, eyeing the food on my plate skeptically.

"She wanted to warn me about making trouble," I said. "Pimly you didn't say your sister was here too."

"What?" Pimly said, before his eyes widened just a bit and he continued. "Oh yes, Emoria and myself were both admitted to become pilots."

"A sister?" Donnel said. "Pim I asked you to watch out for my cousins why didn't you say anything?"

"Emoria doesn't seem to need much watching out for," I said. "You two don't seem anything alike Pimly. She was intimidating."

"Emoria and I had a different upbringing," Pimly said.

He seemed like he was holding something back, and I didn't want to pry after just meeting him. I tried to think of a new subject, but the only thing that could come to mind was if the students knew I had been conscripted. I didn't really want to get into it, but Zachariah would surely be

telling people and I didn't really want these two to find out from someone else.

“Did they tell you anything about why I am here?” I asked.

“To study?” Donnel asked, confused. “Why else?”

“I got into some trouble at home,” I said. “Zachariah Ment, that noble student that stopped us earlier, I got into a bit of a public fight with him. His father is the Baron and, well they were trying to ruin my father and me. I lost my cool, that's why he's still got those bruises.”

“HA!” Donnel said. “Served him right!”

“What does that have to do with you coming to the Academy?” Pimly said. “Did they try to take your acceptance away?”

“No that's why I am here,” I said. “I wasn't accepted. Lord Dornan wanted to conscript me for the Hobbold front as punishment.”

“By the deep,” Donnel said. “The Hobbold front is a death sentence. How'd you get out of it?”

“An old Legion pilot vouched for me,” I said. “And my father's an old Legionnaire. I was conscripted by the Legion instead as a military engineer and machinist.”

Donnel let out a whistle and leaned back in his chair. Pimly laid a hand on my shoulder.

“I'm sorry,” Pimly said. “Forced to leave your home like that. It is hard.”

I nodded my thanks, and a smile grew across Donnel's face as he pointed toward me.

“At least you gave the baron's boy a bit of a parting gift!” Donnel said. “And probably gave the town a gift too, a good story goes a long way.”



## 10.

“While your other classes will have you writing papers and answering theoretical questions,” the Master Alduin said. “In my class you are examined only on what your hands can create.”

The Academy’s master machinist was an incredibly tall man. Easily Pimly’s height, and with long limbs and fingers, he might even have elven blood in his lineage. I had gotten nearly lost trying to find the room and was one of the last people into the room before he had begun his lecture so I sat in the front row of chairs — notebook on the small half desk attached to the right armrest and a dozen other students around me.

“In future courses we will discuss the specifics of different design philosophies and begin working on Striker suits,” Alduin continued, pausing as excited murmurs spread through the room. “But a master machinist is equal parts artist and engineer. Before we practice established and tested designs I want to see what your minds can create on their own. If you have had the chance to look at the workshops you may request a specific room, otherwise one will be assigned to you. These are your workspaces, and you will receive keys to ensure privacy if you wish for it.”

There were only two students wearing house colors, but I didn’t recognize the color combinations. Pimly had suggested I sign up for one of the courses on realm politik after I had annoyed him after dinner the night before asking after the dozens of minor houses. He was probably right, I’d never know if these two were allied to Zachariah and house Dornan without studying but the thought of it made me nauseous. This class made sense to me — I was to be a master machinist and military engineer, I should be making things not forced to trudge through

histories and genealogies.

Alduin started with the students in the back of the room, most just asking to be assigned a room. A student asked for room number twenty, and my stomach dropped. I needed room twenty-one, the room I had seen when I was walking with Taniel. One of the nobles picked room one, and the other picked room two. Both on that top floor and they had conjoining doors within, so their families must be somewhat allied. It would be so much simpler if the major alliances had at least one specific color. Finally reaching the front row, Alduin looked to me with an eyebrow raised quizzically.

“Room twenty-one please,” I said.

The beginnings of a smile tugged at the corner of his mouth, and he rummaged in a metallic box on his desk and tossed a key in my direction. It was heavier and longer than I had expected, like one of the keys made for the older buildings in Dorchester before Father had miniaturized a locking mechanism and made keys that could easily fit into a pocket. Luckily the coat Annie had made me had the large internal pockets. I slipped it in one on the left side just before the master machinist began again.

“Okay,” he said. “There are papers on a table just outside the door detailing your first design assignment, grab one on the way out the door and familiarize yourself with your workshops today. I’ll see you in a week for proposals, good luck with the rush!”

With that he flipped a switch on the side of the box that had contained the keys and began walking toward the door. I started to put my notebook in my travel pack, thankful I wouldn’t have to sit through a long lecture today like Ada had been fond of, but looked up when a gasp went through the room. The box had grown legs! Eight spindly legs pushed the box up from its resting



position, and it scuttled down the side of the table and followed Master Alduin out the door. The rest of the students sat awestruck at the machine and the beginnings of my design were forming in my head.

I shouldered my pack and rushed out the door. Alduin was nearing the end of the hallway, the spider box trailing a few steps behind.

“Master Alduin,” I called. “How did you get it to follow you?”

“Wrong first question Mr. Solan,” he said without turning.

“What’s the right first question?” I asked.

“Closer!” He replied. “Don’t forget the assignment sheet.”

He turned the corner and was gone. I stalked back to the table with the papers, the rest of the students beginning to file out of the room now. Most picked up their papers and dispersed in small groups, but one tapped my shoulder as I picked up my own sheet.

“Hi,” she said. “Workshop twenty-one right?”

I turned to face her and nodded. She was short, barely five feet tall, with dark red hair that only fell to her shoulders. She wasn’t nobility, or at least wasn’t wearing house colors.

“I’m in twenty,” she said. “Looks like we’re stuck at the end of the hallway together. Im headed that way now, if you want?”

“Sure,” I said. “I was going to head up too and start sketching.”

I fell into step next to her as she headed for an unmarked door in the opposite direction of the

main stairs.

“Already figured out your design?” She asked.

“Yeah I,” I started. “I think so. Do you have any ideas?”

“Oh no,” she said. “You’ll have to wait just like everyone else.”

She pulled open the door she had been heading for revealing a narrow staircase. I was starting to feel like I’d never discover all the secret ways through the Academy.

“Stewards paths are so much more convenient than the main halls,” she said as she started to climb.

A few flights later we exited into the hallway filled with workshops. We were only a few doors down from our rooms. This was going to be an extremely useful staircase.

“I thought this was a closet the first time I came up here,” I said.

“I think that’s why they don’t label a lot of the doors,” she said. “If everyone knew about them the stewards would be slowed significantly.”

She walked up to room twenty, and I kept walking toward mine before realizing I had never asked for her name.

“Oh,” I said, turning back toward her. “My name is Aimon.”

“Lania,” she said.

She disappeared through her door, and I fished my key out of my jacket. The lock turned easily, and I took my first steps into workshop number twenty-one. The room was covered in a thick layer

of dust, unused for longer it seemed than the break between terms without students. I could see why it would be overlooked: end of the hallway, smaller than the rest of the rooms, and with older equipment like the chalk board instead of the newer marker boards. But they were all missing the perfection of it. A workshop was like a good jacket, just big enough to fit what you needed inside but not so big that it envelopes the person wearing it. In this room I could reach everything I would need in only a few steps — and the windows opened, what more could a machinist ask for?

After a quick trip back out the door to the supply closet I re-arranged the workshop for the task, bringing the workbench into the middle of the room so I could unfurl a large piece of paper behind me while I worked on the blackboard and went to work. When my first piece of chalk was too small to effectively write with, I switched to the paper and a pencil, refining the more intricate pieces of the design where it was easier to be precise. I didn't have a clue how I was going to make it work, but as long as Master Alduin didn't mind being a source of inspiration I thought he would appreciate the design nonetheless. Besides, the experimentation was the fun part — once you had it figured out it was only putting it all together and hoping you were right.

As the sun set through the window I returned to the supply closet looking for the box of candles that had sat inside just hours before, and found the entire closet completely empty save for empty glass and ceramic jars. The second closet was more of the same, luckily it seemed the hallway lanterns were maintained by the stewards as they continued to keep the darkness at bay, even if the intermittent spacing left gaps of for dusk-like light. A few doors down a flickering light escaped through the window in Lania's workshop — a candle light.

A few seconds after knocking the door opened a crack, Lania's green eyes filling the gap.

"I told you you'd have to wait to see what I'm working on," Lania said. "I'm getting one of

Alduin's assistant positions, nobody's stealing my designs.”

“I told you I already have my designs,” I said. “Wait, assistant?”

“Wow,” she said. “You really are out of the loop. Everyone's been saying you didn't fit but I figured you'd know something.”

My cheeks started to burn, muscles tensing. I turned and started walking back toward my room, I could find another candle without being insulted. Behind me the door squeaked softly as it opened further.

“Wait,” Lania said. “I'm sorry, my mother tells me I need to learn how to install a filter between my brain and mouth but I keep ignoring her. She's a horrible designer, how would you even do that without scrapping the whole design of a body and starting over?”

I stopped and turned to her, trying and failing to stop myself from chuckling at the joke.

“Seriously, I didn't mean it like that,” she said. “It's just that most of the students here know each other and had older siblings or parents that went to the Academy. It has to be hard to come into this place blind.”

“It's been interesting,” I said. “Like finding the supply closet empty when I needed a candle.”

She went back into her workshop for a moment and came back out with a handful of inch long candles and a wax tray. I thanked her as she handed them over.

“First thing I grabbed out of there,” she said. “Didn't want to pay for candles all term.”

“Pay for them?” I asked.

“The school only stocks the supply closets once at the beginning of the term,” she said. “They’re locked until after the first class and then I mad dash to get to them. Alduin calls it the rush, I figured that’s why you were headed straight to the workshops after the class. After today students have to buy the materials and hope that Alduin likes their work enough to buy the designs for the school.”

My stomach dropped as I counted how many coins I had in my purse back in my room. A few silver marks and maybe enough coppers for one more silver. A few half marks. Barely enough to buy paper to replace what I had used, let alone try and buy the materials to build it.

“Gods,” I said. “How in the realms am I supposed to buy materials?”

“Common students usually go study history or politiks or the likes, the courses that you only really need paper and ink for,” Lania said. “That’s why I want to get picked as Alduin’s assistant. He picks two assistants after the design proposals and they get paid for helping with prep work. I’m the youngest of my siblings and crop prices have been going down steadily since the end of the war last year. Either that or get I get a job in the low ward.”

Between classes most the week and working here, if I wanted to be able to sleep I had to be one of those assistants. Lania started to move back toward the door to her own workshop, but I needed more answers before she left.

“Wait,” I said. “What war? The Second Hobbold War was almost two decades ago.”

“The border war between Narren and Tok?” She said. “Gods, what do they teach people out in the valleys?”

“I’m starting to wonder the same thing,” I said. “Communion was almost always focused on

the farming pamphlets sent from the Idas. Sometimes Ada talked about histories and politiks but mostly new farming methods.”

“The wars are pretty common,” Lania said. “One of the minor houses gets in a dispute with another and their soldiers skirmish. If they owe patronage to different great houses it usually escalates pretty quickly.”

“We never heard about any of them,” I said. “Only the Hobbold raids.”

“Raids?” Lania said.

“Once in a while a few hundred would break through the Atlan Pass or come up from the border,” I said. “We’d run to the bunkers around Dorchester and wait for Strikers, then rebuild whatever they burned. It happened once when I was young it’s. . .”

I stopped myself. The hallway behind Lania darkened for a moment and I saw the pilots fighting Hobbolds around my mother’s corpse. My heart pounded in my chest, and it became hard to breathe. The pilot was thrown into the wall, slumping down next to her. The Hobbold in front looked right at me and charged before disappearing, the hallway coming back into focus and Lania’s hand on my shoulder.

“Hey,” she said. “What happened? You just started staring and breathing really hard. You looked like you were going to run away.”

“I,” I stammered. “Thanks for the candles.” I said as I walked back into my workshop and shut the door, the darkness light disappearing. I dropped all the candles but one, the rest rolling almost silently in haphazard directions. I reached for one of the smaller pockets on the right side of my jacket and pulled out my small tin cylinder of sulfur firesticks. My hands were shaking so much it

was hard to pull off the lid. I felt my heart beat in my ears, felt the blood rushing through my veins. Faster and faster. I got match out, dropped it, pulled out another and struck it against the tin igniting the small tip of phosphorus. The flame did nothing to the larger darkness in the room, but it gave me a small bubble of light. With shaky hands I lit one of the candles and pushed the bottom of it deep into the wax tray to hold it in place. My bubble expanded, my heartbeat slowing slightly.

I sat, back against the wall, until the candle had burned through nearly all of its wax. The wind was picking up outside, and started to howl through the open window in the room — finally rousing me from my place. The darkness outside the window felt threatening. The Hobbolds were hundreds of miles from Idas. Lania hadn't even known about the raids, there wouldn't be one in the heart of the Kingdom. Still, the Dornan pilots hadn't stopped the monsters the legion had — and from what the Chancellor had said they and the King were in danger of losing the political war raging in Idacia. They needed more pilots. Zachariah wouldn't stop the monsters if he became a pilot — he was a bully not a bulwark. Inside of a Striker suit the Hobbolds couldn't hurt me.

My legs still shook as I walked unsteadily to close the window, and I had to brace myself against the work table to inspect the design. It wasn't perfect, but even with the time sitting against the door I had made good progress on the day. I packed my design and meager supplies, barely enough to finish this design if I didn't make a mistake, into the storage cabinets built into the table and started the walk through the upper levels of the academy toward my room.

# 11.

Most of the week passed without incident. I spent time in the workshop perfecting my proposal, went to the tavern with Pimly and Donnel, even ran into Emoria again without receiving a glare — a big leap forward for her I was beginning to find out. The military history course I was in felt like it would be easy, and even the course on realm politiks that Pimly had suggested wasn't as sleep inducing as I had thought. Nelemday, the last day of the week before the break on Zanemday, meant the weekly seminar for Legion sponsored students studying to be military engineers like myself.

It was an afternoon course, starting just after second seating for lunch. Waking up earlier than the noble students to make it to breakfast was annoying, but I actually preferred the early seatings for lunch and dinner. They made it easier to get to class on time and get some extra time in the workshop before I needed to use candles at night. The food continued to be much more fancy than I was used to, and Donnel and I bonded over the uselessness of the delicate salads they served at lunch. At least there was always rolls. Not quite up to Ros's standards, but gods were they good.

"I simply dislike having my hands constricted within those unseemly large gauntlets," Pimly said between bites of food. His favorite meal was always lunch, he said it reminded him of home.

"At least you can see out of the forging things without needing to put blocks of wood in the feet!" Donnel replied.

"Are you allowed to make alterations to the suits?" I asked. "I could maybe help. I just need to find a way to get materials, and probably get help from Alduin to make sure I don't break them. But hopefully I'll be his assistant by Monday."



“The forgemasters of the peaks cannot discover the mysteries of Striker suits,” Donnel said.

“You think you can?”

“I didn’t say I could,” I said, hurt a bit by his dismissal. “I said I might be able to help, could maybe figure it out.”

“He is studying to be a master machinist,” Pimly said. “The Dwarves are not the only masters of metal in the world Donnel.” Pimly said.

“Bah,” Donnel said. “Humans can only make the suits because of their goddess.”

“And your people don’t rely on the teachings of Bondumir to artifice your mystical weapons and armors?” I said.

Donnel looked for a moment like he would lash out, his face growing red. But after a moment, a large smile split his face and he let out a booming laugh.

“Fair point friend,” Donnel said. “I did not mean to insult your talent. It’s just, you really think you might be able to modify our suits?”

Pimly and Donnel both looked at me hopefully. They had been struggling in the early flight classes trying to fit into the suits designed for humans.

“I don’t know,” I said. “But I’ve never found a machine I haven’t been able to figure out.”

We went back to our meals. I tore open my second roll and slathered butter and honey inside. At the food counter a group of dwarves and Emoria were denied rolls, even though there was a whole tray sitting behind smug looking steward. Most of them gave up, heading toward a table in the opposite corner of the room, but Emoria stayed staring at the steward. He eventually brought

over the tray, laying it on the counter and refusing to serve her the roll. After a few seconds, a confused look on his face made him turn back toward the kitchen, and in a flash Emoria had a half dozen rolls on her tray and was gliding through the crowd toward the same table as the dwarven women.

“What’re you grinning at?” Donnel said, turning to look over his shoulder and follow my gaze. “Ahhhh, Pimly you better watch our friend here.”

“Hmm?” Pimly said, looking up from a book in his hands to see his sister sitting at the table. “Oh, Emoria Aimon? She is. . . not what she seems. Be careful.”

“She’s your sister Pim,” Donnel said. “You don’t have a problem with our friend taking an interest?”

“I am not taking an interest!” I said. “She swiped some rolls from the steward for her friends, I thought it was funny.”

“She should not be acting in that way,” Pimly said, returning to his book and absentmindedly eating more of the salad.

I ate the last bite of my roll then stacked my plate and told my friends I’d catch up to them around dinner. I made my way toward the exit, but took a longer path through the tables to walk by Emoria’s. I would never have stolen from someone like Ros or any of the outskirts shops, but I wasn’t above nicking an item or two from an unsuspecting merchant. If they wanted to drive the price up, it was only fair that the little people get a taste.

“Nice moves with the steward,” I said quietly as I passed.

Emoria spun around toward me in her chair, her eyes hard until she saw it was me and she

turned dismissively.

“I don’t know what you mean,” she said.

One of the dwarven women smiled at me before taking a large bite out of her roll.

“Try them with honey on top of the butter,” I said and moved on out the door.

Alduin’s office was only a couple of floors above the small meeting room for military engineering, and after a week of exploring the Academy I was starting to know my way around a few of the stewards pathways. I ducked into one of them, a few doors down from the meeting room and climbed the two floors, exiting in a long hallway of offices for the schools masters and administrators. As I closed the door, Taniel exited one of the offices and gave me a warm smile.

“I see you are finding your way around better than when we first met mister Solan,” he said.

“I’ve had a bit of help,” I said.

In truth, I had asked Abel to show me some of the more useful stairways to get out of the chaos of the main hallways. The young steward was a generally nervous person but he seemed to know every nook and cranny of the Academy. During the walks through the steward’s passages he had told me he wanted to apprentice to an architect, design buildings of his own.

“As long as you don’t pass on the secrets to too many,” Taniel said. “It wouldn’t do to have my staff have to fight through clogged stairways.”

“Of course sir,” I said.

He nodded and entered into the stairway I had just left. A few steps down the hallway I knocked softly on Alduin’s door. He had been strangely hard to find around the Academy after the first day

— almost never in his office, or at least not wanting to answer when I knocked.

“Come in,” a muffled voice said from the other side of the door.

I opened the door and stepped inside, closing it behind me. He was looking over a diagram on a large piece of paper, pencil behind his ears and looking generally much less put together than he had in class. He looked up, then cocked his head quizzically.

“You’re not Taniel,” he said.

“I am not,” I replied.

“I asked for Taniel,” he said. “Why did he send you?”

“He didn’t Master Alduin,” I said. “I came to ask you about the design assignment.”

“Bother,” he said. “I wouldn’t have answered the door. Go back outside and knock again.”

He looked back at his diagram and began making notations. I retreated back through the door and knocked once again. He didn’t answer, but Taniel came back through the door down the hall carrying a tray with a teapot, a small jar of honey, and two cups. He laughed when he saw me, and motioned with his head for me to step to the side. He easily balanced the tray on one hand, knocked lightly twice, waited, then knocked once more.

“Come in,” the master machinist said through the door.

Taniel handed me the tray, then opened the door and gestured for me to enter. He closed it behind me, and Alduin looked up from this work again.

“You said Taniel didn’t send you,” he said.

“He didn’t last time,” I said, placing the tray on the corner of his desk not covered in papers.

“Hmph,” he grunted. “Annoying man. Always making me talk to students when they should be thinking instead.”

Alduin stood and began pouring two cups of tea and drizzling honey into them.

“They’re cluttering the hallway,” Alduin said in a poor impersonation of Taniel’s accent. “Like I care about his hallways.”

He handed me a cup of the tea and I took a sip — deep minty flavor with a hint of the sweetness from the honey. Taniel did have a way with the drinks he prepared. The master machinist returned to his chair and sipped from his own cup.

“Go on then,” he said.

“I was wondering how you got the spider machine to follow you,” I said. “I think I have motion figured out, but not that part.”

“Why do you care?” he asked. “I already designed it, why would I need you to design it again?”

“I’m not,” I said, losing a bit of patience with the stubborn man. “I just want to know how you did it. It could be used for so many different machines. Farm equipment, wagons, ships even!”

“Farm equipment?” He asked. “Hmm. Yes. That would be smart. No need for work animals. Smart.”

He shuffled through papers on his desk, many of them falling to the floor around him.

“Ah!” He exclaimed.

He began writing notes on the paper, then looked back up to me.

“Oh,” he said, then reached into his pocket and pulled out a metal cylinder around the size of his palm. “I used the beacons we put in Striker suits to track their locations.”

“Could I?” I started.

“No,” he cut me off. “Good try, but that would get me in trouble with the Chancellor and she’s already upset about me setting another room on fire. Even if it was her fault for interrupting me. Put it in your design if you’re going to use it. Trust me, it will work.”

“But how,” I started again.

“No,” he said. “I’m busy, and you have to get to class.”

He pointed to the wall behind me, and the clock showed I only had a few minutes before the seminar started. I quickly said goodbye and rushed back down the stewards stairs to the room, finding a single chair left empty and sitting down. It was a testament to the oddness of Master Alduin that I didn’t think to ask why he knew my schedule until halfway through the class. We talked about historic battles that had been lost due to poor defensive emplacements, mostly in the Second Hobbold War but with some of the house wars mentioned as well. Lania’s comment still stuck with me, we had been denied the knowledge of the house wars in Dorchester, and they hadn’t been taught of the Hobbold Raids in her home. It had to be intentional, I just didn’t know why. Near the end of the class, a large man raised his hand to speak and was called on by the Legion Captain instructing us.

“Captain,” he said. “Is Oliph’s Exemption real? My older brother in the infantry says he met a pilot who used it.”

The captain sighed deeply and nodded, a bustle of excitement grew in the rest of the students. I had no idea what they were talking about.

“Any person with a Striker suit may join the graduation tests for the pilot track,” he said. “But how, cadet, do you expect to obtain a suit?”

After a few moments of silence, the man who had asked hung his head slightly and the excitement in the room died down. All but my own. There was a way I could fly, even if it was an improbability.

“I know it is exciting to think of becoming a pilot, especially in this place surrounded by so many,” the Captain continued. “But you must focus on your studies to help the Legion however you can. The only people that have used the exemption since Oliph have been nobility, those that could afford to purchase a suit on their own. Your work for now is to study the proper defense of your fellow legionaries. And in defending them, you defend the kingdom.”

The captain turned back to the markerboard to continue his lecture on various ways to mitigate the effectiveness of a calvary charge. I was only half listening to him, my thoughts on the potential to become a pilot even now. Oliph’s exemption would let me fly, I just needed to find a way to get a Striker rig. If I could get Alduin to help me work on Donnel and Pimly’s I thought I might be able to build one. Would that be legal? My mind was racing but it kept coming back to one realization. I had thought the Ments had stolen both of my dreams back in Dorchester, but in reality they had given me a chance to achieve the one I never thought was possible.

After the seminar ended, I rushed back to the suite still thinking of ways to get a rig for myself. I'd never be able to afford one. Donnel and Pimly were both probably richer than the sugar lords on Idacia's southern coasts, but the sale of Strikers to non-humans was still restricted — and even if they weren't the prospect of asking friends for money was out of the question. Even with Alduin's help, and my interactions with the strange master machinist gave me no reason to expect he would help, I had no idea if I'd be able to build a whole suit by myself. In eight months the graduation ceremony would take place, and I needed to have a suit by then. Preferably earlier, so I'd have time to actually practice flying and not kill myself crashing into something.

Down the long hallway a group of finely dressed noble students were coaxing somebody out of a room to go to the taverns with them. Bits of their conversation echoed down to me, but I couldn't make out most of it except for the names of a few of the upscale places on this side of the Rift. The Lotus Flower, The Swan, Riftwatch Tavern — all places I'd never be able to afford anyway. Just a few cups of coffee at The Retreat, Donnel and Pimly's favorite tavern just over the bridge, had taken almost a quarter of the money I had brought from Dorchester. I needed the assistant's position or another job in the Low Quarter soon or I'd be copperless.

Inside the suite Otro was reading in the last bit of light that filtered through the windows. He looked up briefly when I entered, then went right back to the tome of a book in his lap. The hallways outside grew louder for a moment as the group of students drew near, then quieted as they passed. He again looked up, almost hopeful this time, until the noise diminished. I didn't like how dismissive he was, but I still felt bad he seemed separate from the rest of the nobility.

“Not going out with your friends tonight Otro?” I asked.

“Just reading,” he said.



Pimly was inside my room with Donnel. Pimly was in an even nicer outfit than he had been wearing this morning, and Donnel was pulling on a more formal jacket of the Dwarven style that resembled a military coat.

“Aimon!” Donnel said as I closed the door behind me. “We were thinking of heading to some of the taverns after dinner, want to join?”

I agreed, and went to the wardrobe to put on my jacket. While it wasn’t nearly as fancy as most of the clothing around here, it fit me well and would cover up my shirt which was meant more for labor than lounging. I hoped they weren’t planning on the same ones as that group of noble students, a tavern that Zachariah might show up at was probably not the best place for me to be. With his connection to Lord Dornan he’d get a slap on the wrist for inciting anything and I’d end up out of the school and more than likely on some front fighting for my life. I kept some of copper marks in an interior pocket in the jacket, but when I reached for it my fingers found a piece of paper I had forgotten about — the first lesson I learned in this city. I pulled out The Star’s calling card, and started to get an idea of how I would get a Striker rig for graduation. I turned to my friends, a smile spreading across my face.

“We went to yours last time,” I said. “How about we head to the Low Quarter this time around?”

## 12.

"Why exactly are you bringing us all the way out here again?" Donnel asked. "You had fun at the place two nights ago, and we didn't have to walk forgin miles to get there!"

"I expected Pimly to put up a fight not you Donnel," I said.

"Oh just because we live under the forging mountain we like to go slumming?" he said.

"No," I said. "I figured you might like to be around some of the dwarves that work the shipping district."

"My kinsman that live in the city do not always get along with those of us who live in the Peaks," he said.

"It is often the same for elves," Pimly said. "My mother was deathly afraid of me coming to the city. Too many people, too much potential for trouble. She prefers the company of the trees and sun."

It made sense. It was the same a lot of the time for humans. I couldn't count the number of times old man Mahan had said the city was where good folk went to forget what work felt like. He was wrong of course, men and women with the rough-worn clothing of laborers weaved in and out of crowded streets. The half heading home covered in soot and sweat, the half heading toward the elevators preparing for the drop that would take them to their factories and refineries for the next eight hours. Both groups had the same eyes — worn out and not really watching anything, simply taking in what was in front of them so their brains could react. Ahead of us the street opened up in to a familiar open square. Wagons rolled through the gates even now in the dark — pulling up to

whatever stall the foremen told them and waiting to be unloaded of their goods before loading back up to leave the next morning. I held out a ridiculous hope I would catch the sight of Bertrand, but my friend was long gone from the city by now and probably wouldn't be back for months. Before he left me he said he was making a run up to the western coastal region before looping back to the Hobbold front. New mines meant new boom towns, which meant new buildings that needed lots of wood. Eventually he'd wind his way back down through the heart of the country and end up back in the capital. The night's true mission had been to find The Star.

"When did you say you had been down here before?" Pimly asked.

"Right when I got to the city," I said. "I rode with a friend's caravan, and he had to drop his goods here."

"And this is when you went to whatever Tavern we're going to?" Donnel said.

"Not exactly," I said. "I went into a bakery, then I think I almost got arrested."

Both of them looked at me like they couldn't quite decide if they thought I was joking. I pulled them both to the edge of the wide square and spoke softly.

"Last time I was here I was pickpocketed," I said while pulling out the calling card. "I need to find whoever left me with this."

Pimly took the card and began to examine it, and Donnel couldn't keep in a deep laugh.

"And we're going to find them how?" Donnel said. "Just walking into the closest tavern and flashing the card?"

"I," I stammered. "I don't know. But it's important!"

"Aimon," Donnel said. "If you need money you could have asked. We know you are waiting to see if you get picked as the assistant to Master Alduin."

"It's not that," I said, exasperated. "Have either of you ever heard of Oliph's exemption?"

Both of my friends shook their head. I wondered how much of the legend was centered around the Legion. It would make sense, men that wanted to fly would generally be those that wanted to fight. Many of those ended up in the Legion if they didn't end up in the jails first. Or in my case, if they did.

"It's a way I can fly," I said.

"What do you mean?" Pimly asked. "Like, a magic?"

"No," I said. "It's a rule at the Academy. Anybody in a Striker rig can participate in the graduation and earn their license."

"Who told you that?" Donnel asked. "And how many drinks had they put back before they said it?"

"The Legion Captain who instructed the seminar," I said. "I think it's real."

The two of them looked at each other, then Donnel began slowly.

"Okay," he said. "And how is this person who gave you a card when he took your money going to help?"

"He's the only lead I have to whatever sort of underworld might exist in the city," I said. "If there's anywhere I can get a rig, or even parts of one, that would be where."

"And again," Donnel said. "How do you plan to find them?"

"Well," Pimly said pointing over my shoulder at something behind me "At least we know we're in the right neighborhood."

A massive painting of a star, nearly identical to the one on the card in Pimly's hand, was emblazoned on the side of the farthest warehouse from us, down the same street as the bakery I had been to before. I smiled at my friends, and began moving down the street and hoping they'd follow. Where the daytime atmosphere of the street had been businesslike, this far from the rift elevators the crowds of workers became non-existent and were replaced by the evening outfits of Idas's working class. Most of them were dressed quite similarly to me. Working shirt, but clean, and a slightly nicer jacket to keep the wind at bay. There were also significantly more Silversticks than during the daylight hours. They walked around in packs of four or five, almost all of them with a hand already resting on their baton. Down the street a sharp whistle blew, and a group of them set off chasing a shadow dressed all in black down an alleyway. Donnel and Pimly catching up to me, their wealthy clothes held the attention of every Silverstick and citizen we walked past.

Stuck on the Academy grounds or in taverns just across the rift, I had almost been able to forget the differences between Dorchester and Idas but in the streets of the low ward the differences came rushing back. Merchants and nobles in Dorchester had waxed poetic about the culture and civility of the city, but I couldn't see how anyone could look at streets that had to be patrolled so heavily and think it was an improvement over life back home. Dorchester may have been minuscule compared to Idas, might have lacked the play houses and variety of taverns for nights on the town, but even the poor of my home had the community of the outskirts to fall back on. Here it seemed that if you got too far behind you had to do whatever you could to stay afloat.

Even with the guards, I preferred being down here to some of the taverns my friends had brought me to closer to the estate district. Gone were the pianos playing soft music as a background to quiet conversation — here fast paced fiddles and troupers lutes wound their melodies together and were punctuated by lyrics belted from the mouths of half the drunken occupants. Music meant to be lived instead of listened to spilt from open doors up and down the street, and lacking any idea of how to really find The Star I picked one at random that seemed a little less full than the rest and entered.

Within minutes of entering I realized the error of bringing Donnel and Pimly along. Donnel was fine ordering a simple ale — he grumbled about it but he did that with any non-peak made drinks. Pimly asked for a dry red wine, forcing the barkeep to dig into his storeroom for a small cask of the stuff and earning us slower service and surely an expectation of a higher tip that I don't think my simple coffee quite erased. I had planned to ask the barkeep, assuming he'd know more about his patrons than anyone, but after serving us and disappearing to talk with a group further down the bar we decided to split up.

“There's a group of dwarven workers in the corner by the hearth,” I said. “And the clothing of that group by the door looks a bit nicer than most in here Pimly.”

Donnel nodded and tried to get the barkeeps attention, half of his ale already gone. I was about to head toward my own target, a man sitting alone at a small table on the far wall from the door in road clothes and a dusty cloak, when Pimly's hand on my arm stopped me.

“Be careful asking around for a criminal Aimon,” he said.

“I will Pim,” I said. “You have fun with your group.”

“The foremen won’t tell me anything,” he said. “But I will ask nonetheless. The type that you are looking for don’t take well to questions about their activities.”

“You almost sound like you’ve got experience with this Pimly,” I said.

“The forest cities of Nelemor are not so unlike their human counterparts,” he said. “The Peaks are more like a series of large towns, and no matter what he likes to pretend dwarves often stick together so Donnel may have good luck. But. . .”

Pimly trailed off for a moment, looking around the room intensely.

“Just be careful,” he continued. “I’d rather not have to rush you to the medical wing back at The Academy tonight.”

He set off to mingle with the better dressed crowd by the door. Foremen he’d called them. It made sense, they’d be better dressed than the regular workers but still not wealthy enough to visit pubs closer to the wealthy parts of the city. Pimly knew more about the world than he was letting on, but I couldn’t figure out why he was so timid about his knowledge. I made my way toward the man in the cloak. He didn’t have the hood fully pulled up, that would have been improper indoors and drawn attention, but he did have the side facing the room pulled higher than it’s natural resting place — effectively hiding the lower half of his face. He had dark hair left to messily tumble down his head and obscure more of his features, and watched the lutist by the hearth intently while distractedly rolling a thick ring between his knuckles with the hand that wasn’t on his mug. Sitting in the chair opposite him, I was surprised to find that his mug was filled with the deep brown of coffee just like mine.

“Didn’t expect to find another here simply for the music,” I said, nodding toward his mug.

In a single quick motion he collected his ring from it's absentminded game, slipped it onto his index finger and brought the hand down to rest below the table. I leaned back in my chair, trying to keep my face clear of the nervousness I felt. His eyes a brown so dark they were almost black in the flitting light of the room.

"I'd prefer it if both your hands stayed on the table," he said gruffly.

I nodded and brought both hands up to hold my mug to keep them from shaking. The man relaxed slightly, but kept his hand where I couldn't see it. I didn't want to imagine what was beneath. I didn't think he could truly hurt me in a crowded room like this, but that didn't stop my body from reacting on its own. I was hoping to ease into the conversation, get the man talking about the music in the room before asking if he knew anything about The Star.

"What do you need?" The man asked.

"I was just hoping for someone to listen to the music with," I said.

"No you weren't," the man said. "I don't play games kid, you ought to know that if you're across the Rift looking for something special."

"How did you. . . " I began.

"The only foreign nobility in the city are students at Idas Academy," he said. "You may have thought enough to put on what you thought would be low quarter clothes but your friends and not knowing who you were talking to gave you away. You're either a student or an idiot, if not both."

He made a shooing motion with his hand. He was trying to get me to leave, intimidate me into fleeing from his table, so I placed the calling card on the table with the star facing up and pressed on.



“I’m looking for information on this symbol,” I said. “I’ve seen it multiple times in this area of the low ward and figured you’d be someone who could tell me about it.”

He didn’t look at the card, not that I could see. He looked directly into my eyes, somehow seeming aggressive and inquisitive at the same time?

“And what makes you think I would know anything?” He asked.

“Far enough away from the music to still hear lowered voices easily,” I said. “Hood of your cloak concealing part of your face, hair concealing another.”

He just continued to look at me, so I shrugged and went with honesty.

“You’ve also just got that feeling about you,” I said.

A deep laugh escaped his lips but he didn’t smile with it. There was a feeling about him, but sitting across from him it was more a feeling of danger even through his laughter.

“An idiot,” he said. “But not stupid. I’ll give you that.”

He finally broke eye contact for a moment to look at the card, and only then did the corner of his mouth inch upward into a grin.

“Little cutter took some coins off you then?” He asked.

I nodded back to him.

“Well, I might have a reputation,” he said. “But I think the kids are kind of cute. I like their style. Sorry I can’t help ease your woes.”

He tipped his mug back, taking a long drink of the coffee within it. Then made another of his

shooing motions when he saw I hadn't left during the pause.

"I really just need," I started.

"Kid," he said. "I'm going to give you some advice because, generally, dead students make for bad times in my line of work. You've been a breath away from a crossbow bolt in your stomach twice since you sat down. First with the hands, then when I thought you were a Silver. Don't try your luck. Stick to your side of the river purse."

I was approaching Pimly before I even realized I had stood up from the table. I must have looked horrible, because Pimly cut out of his conversation rudely to meet me away from the ears of the foremen and quickly whisked me outside. A moment later Donnel was with us, and we were walking back toward The Rift.

"What happened?" Pimly asked, breaking the silence.

"I think I almost died," I said. "A few times, actually, according to the man I was talking to."

"He threatened you?" Donnel said, slurring slightly.

"Not really," I said. "He was. Well I think he was just letting me know."

I stopped suddenly, the shock of nearly dying slowly being replaced by a new realization. I had been close. The stranger had known The Star, or at least knew of them. He'd called them a kid. Or, no he had said he respected *the kids*. Maybe The Star wasn't one person, but a group? I hadn't found an answer, but new questions were almost as good.

"We've got to go to a few more Taverns," I said.

"You just nearly got killed," Pimly said slowly. "And you want to go to more and keep trying?"

“Ha!” Donnel said. “I think you have the Peaks somewhere in your bloodline my friend.”

“No,” I said to Pimly. “I don’t want to keep trying to get killed but I think I can do a better job of it this time. He told me about a group of child thieves. We just need to be more subtle about how we ask! Or I do.”

Donnel began marching back the way we had come, and I turned to follow. Pimly sighed deeply but came with us, whether it was to protect us or not wanting to walk back through a predominantly human city by himself I don’t know.

We spent the rest of the night in half a dozen different taverns in the surrounding streets. I didn’t see the intimidating man again, but I did get better at finding the people like him in the taverns even if I didn’t approach them. Almost every one we went to had one. A rough looking man or woman, one time even a dwarf with muscles that looked like ships ropes, by themselves at a table with an eye-line on everyone in the room. All of them dressed like they had just finished a shift down the elevators or come in on a wagon an hour ago, they did silent business in the relative privacy that a crowded bar room could have if you set yourself up in the perfect spot. Their tables were always further apart than the rest, giving them room to have quieted conversations that were drowned out by music or the other patrons. Even if I was able to identify them, I wanted no part in talking to another so I focused my attention on bartenders and servers.

I thought I was gaining more skill in each conversation. At the final tavern of the night, as the servers cleared tables and the barkeep cleaned behind the bar I learned that the kids meant the Children of Idalta. That they were street kids who, because they saw the adults doing it, started working together. And then I asked if he knew where I could find The Star and got laughed out of the closing bar and sent back across the Rift with a bit of new information, a tired Pimly, and a

staggering Donnel who somehow lost all hint of slurred speech when asked why we were coming across the bridge so late by one of Tariel's stewards.

As we made to head for our rooms, the steward stopped me with a nervous yelp.

“Aimon Solan?” He asked.

I nodded back to the man. He had to be close to my age, one of the younger stewards like Abel. Which made sense, the night shift on the bridge had to be the most mind numbing job the stewards could be given.

“I almost forgot, a message from Master Alduin,” he said. “Asked me to give it to you when you came back from roughing it. He also told me to say roughing it specifically.”

I thanked him, but didn't open the folded piece of paper until I reached our rooms. Otro was either already asleep or had finally decided to join the noble students on their night at the taverns. Donnel and I said goodnight and split with Pimly — the exhaustion of being up too late, and in Donnel's case having far too many mugs to drink, came rushing up now that we had returned. Donnel was asleep before his head hit the pillow, though he had removed the expensive clothing and lay on top of his blankets in a simple shirt and underwear. Before I put out our lamp for the night, I pulled out Alduin's letter. In the middle of the otherwise blank page he had written five words.

Congratulations. My office. Morning bell.



## 13.

The next month at Idas Academy taught me quickly that I had been I to think I could consistently go to the low quarter to search for The Star while keeping up my studies. My position as one of Alduin's assistants was both a blessing and a curse. Lania and I were given free reign to use his supply requisitions as long as we could show what we were using the supplies for, and they came quickly. If I put in a requisition at breakfast, it was usually delivered to my workshop by the time I made my way up there after lunch. But it also required dozens of hours a week as a scribe and extra set of hands in Alduin's own workshop at the top of one of the Academy's towers. He complained constantly about the draft in the tower room, even with the small forge fire almost always warming the room, because the Chancellor had moved him up here in case he blew up another room. Lania tried asking how many he had blown up in our first week and had been informed that he hadn't blown any up, though four rooms had blown up with him in them at one point or another.

Alduin's design class was the only break in my week. The courses on military history and strategy were enjoyable, the instructors made almost every class meeting into some kind of competition, but the reading required for them sequestered me in the Academy library for hours on end. The library itself though was incredible. Abel told me that originally the library had been inside the Academy's south wall where the workshops are now. As the story goes, the Master Librarian's assistants had brought so many books into circulation that they had to build a separate building within a decade. I loved my assistantship with Alduin, but I'd be lying if I said I didn't dream of the life of one of those librarian assistants. They were regularly excused from course work to travel the lands of Idas, Nelemor, and the Peak Kingdoms searching for books and

information to add to the collection. Forgotten texts, interviews with men and women who had lived through historical events, sailing up and down the coasts and rivers of Amorset in search of knowledge. It sounded like a life Bertrand would have enjoyed.

It was five weeks into my time at the Academy, and I hadn't made any more progress on finding The Star but I was stuck in a small reading hole in the upper floors of the library reading about the Charge of the Thunder Cohort during the Unity War. King Atticus I, then just Lord Atticus of Idas, took the last of his functioning strikers and formed the cohort that broke House Tok's siege of Idas. It revolutionized striker warfare and while patrols were still often done with only two pilots striker pilots began to fight in flights of six instead of pairing off into duels.

It was an enjoyable read, the historian Hammond enjoyed writing his histories after a storytelling style as opposed to the more modern objective approach of simply stating facts in as dense of a way as possible. But I couldn't keep focus, reading about the strikers only made me think more about the fact I had only months to find the designs for and build a rig of my own to participate in graduation. Less if I wanted to be able to practice. Many of the academic tracks called for multiple years of study before graduation, but pilots and legionaries were always needed and so our studies were completed in one year at the Academy.

My reading hole was typically quiet. Most students stayed on the lower floors of the library unless they needed specific titles in the higher stacks, but because many of the noble students were in my military history course to prepare for running their own house armies in the future I often found a small group of them on my floor and had picked my hole in part because it was as far as possible from the table they liked to use in group studying sessions. Today they were loud enough to hear.

I gave up on the history, the next class was still five days out, and switched to reading a book on design philosophy for Alduin's class. While it was generally easy as I had been practicing as a machinist for a decade, I figured studying whatever book Alduin was assigning might be important to staying in the man's good graces. Long hours in his workshop might be annoying, but the weekly marks and free supplies more than made up for it. I tried, and failed, to block out the distractions and lose myself in a chapter on balancing function and fashionable design.

"Just get me my book runner boy!" echoed through the stacks.

I couldn't have a single thing here without them trying to ruin it. I pushed back my chair, leaving my books open on the table and jacket draped over the back of my chair, and made my way through the stacks in the direction of the chatter and laughter. There was no real organizational pattern to the upper levels of the library. On the lower levels stacks were organized like city streets in grids, but the upper levels seemingly grew new pathways every time I walked through them. It was kind of like the Outskirts back in Dorchester, the alleys went where they went and you just sort of learned to deal with it. I exited the stacks into the open walkway that ran around the outer walls of the building, and off to my left the half dozen noble students were doubled over laughing as an obviously exhausted librarian's assistant panted trying to slow his heart rate. The only student standing was the one I would recognize without him having to turn around. I had avoided Zachariah Ment for almost a month outside of the military history course we shared, no longer it seemed.

"Wrong one," Zachariah said, handing a sheet of paper to the exhausted student. "Sorry my good man, I was looking at the wrong reading list."

"I'll fetch this one for you sir," the student said.



He turned and walked back through the door to one of the staircases, and Zachariah waited until the door closed to burst out laughing and send his lackeys into a fit of their own.

“You just can’t help yourself can you?” I said, causing the group to look my direction.

The loud laughter brought another surprise, Emoria stepped halfway into the open area a few stacks behind Zachariah and his group. For a moment she looked like she’d tear into them, but when she saw me she stepped back most of the way into the stack. The one time I actually wanted her to step in and she’d let me handle it — great.

“You see someone that you believe is below you and you just have to ruin their day,” I continued. “Is your father that insecure in his position that he passed the trait on to you?”

“It’s interesting you’d be so willing to attack my family when yours has been put in such a precarious position,” Zachariah said. “Or did you forget that your father is an Outskirts handyman now that my father has acquired the services of Master Malwich?”

“It’s interesting that you’re too dense to realize you just admitted to what I was causing you of,” I said. “Gods you’re lucky Dornan didn’t have any kids for this class. You’d never have passed the exams would you?”

The librarian’s assistant came back through the door behind Zachariah, not panting this time but sweating through his shirt.

“Oh did you find the lordling’s children’s book?” I said.

Zachariah came toward me, and I set myself in a strong stance preparing to react to any punches he threw. But behind him the door to the stairway opened again and Master Illien, the Master Librarian of Idas Academy, entered the room.

“Which one of you is playing games with my assistant?” He said in a low voice that somehow managed to carry itself.

Zachariah turned to face Illien and he went from standing tall to cowing before the short, balding librarian. At the table, his friends all quickly busied themselves with their studying and I could no longer see Emoria peaking out from her place in the stacks. The tired assistant, summoning a bit of courage with the Master Librarian behind him, walked up to Zachariah with a smug grin and held out the book to him. It wasn't the same volume I had been studying, he had planned to send the man running after another book after this.

A dark air came around the Master Librarian as he set his sights on Zachariah, and as much as I wanted to watch him tear into the pampered man I ducked into the stacks to avoid any trouble about the near fight. I realized after a few turns in the stacks that I hadn't felt the typical rage with Zachariah. I had been mad about his treatment of the assistant, and the slight directed at my father had caused a brief flash of the rage, but it hadn't taken over.

I retraced my steps from minutes before and made the last turn out of the stacks and ran directly into Emoria and nearly fell backward like I was running into a wall. She didn't move an inch, just stared at me as I found my feet and took an unconscious step backward from her. The fear that accompanied her gaze started to rise in me, but then dissipated quickly. It felt unnatural, how scared my body was of her with barely any input from me.

“Thanks for making them quiet down,” Emoria said in a hushed tone. “And for stopping them from toying with that steward.”

“I needed to study,” I said. “And I don't like bullies.”

“Not sure how accurate that first statement is,” she said. “One of Alduin’s chosen assistants, fast track to an apprenticeship in his workshop in the Artisan District.”

I looked at her quizzically, she always seemed so in the know.

“Pimly didn’t tell you that I was a legion conscript?” I asked.

“My brother and I don’t talk often,” She said. “How’d you manage that? Idacia’s Legion stopped pressing citizens into service after the last Hobbold War.”

“Not totally,” I said. “They still take prisoners in. I was going to be conscripted by Lord Dornan after a fight with that Baron’s son.”

I gestured back toward the other side of the building where Zachariah was hopefully still being berated.

“A good friend and my father got me out of that,” I continued. “But I still had to have some sort of punishment, so I ended up here.”

“Not really a punishment to attend the best school in the three kingdoms,” she said.

“The punishment is the service after,” I said. “And my father had to give our workshop to Dornan in payment.”

Emoria started walking toward my reading nook. I followed, unsure of how she knew where I had been reading. It was becoming easier to just accept that I wouldn’t be able to understand the Elven princess than to keep wondering.

“That’s where you learned your skill then?” She asked.

“I grew up in the shop,” I said. “More just did it than truly learned from anyone.”

“Your father?” She asked.

“We have an . . . interesting relationship,” I said.

“And your mother?” She continued.

A jolt of pain went through my body like lightning. It was quick, originating in my chest and moving out to my fingers and toes then rushing back. Just a moment, but the pain came out in my voice.

“She died in a Hobbold raid when I was young,” I said. “We couldn’t make it to the bunker in time.”

She just nodded, a bit of sadness in her eyes. That made me feel better than anyone who had ever told me they were sorry about the event. Talking more about it, accepting the apologies of people that had never met her, only made the pain worse.

“You’ve seen one then?” She asked. “A Hobbold?”

“Yes,” I said. “Still see it some nights.”

“I do too,” she said in a soft, pained voice.

When we reached the reading hole Emoria left me with another thanks for stepping in, and disappeared back into the stacks. The light was quickly dissipating inside the building, and as there were no flames allowed in the building it would be emptying soon. After weeks of tweaking, I was scheduled to present the finished project that had landed me the assistant’s position to Alduin an hour after dinner and wanted to do some last tweaks. I packed my bag with the two books I had

checked out and made my way down the stairs to the main entrance. The first hints of winter were in the air outside, a new level to the wind that managed to chill your bones even through a jacket. Winter was supposed to be harsher here — without the mountains of the Atlan Valley to act as windbreaks and obstacles for storms to pass over the city was regularly covered in snow in the winters. Abel said it was the nicest time of year for the workers in the Rift, the cold air breaking the high temperatures of the refineries and factories that were open to the air of the gash in the land, but I wasn't looking forward to living in an aging stone castle for the cold months.

I had asked Abel at lunch to put together a small sack full of road food and I made a brief stop at a side door to the kitchen to pick it up before heading upstairs to my workshop. As good as the food served in the mess was, I had a fondness for the kind of food that Abel smuggled out for me on occasion. Hard cheese, bread, a dollop of honey butter, apples, and a hearty sausage — a meal that I might have had between projects or on the road out to old man Mahan's back in Dorchester.

My project was laid out in front of the workbench where I had left it covered in a bedsheet I had asked Tariel for. On the chalk board behind the table the technical details were laid out as a visual aid for the presentation, even though Alduin already had a paper copy of the same information. If it was up there, I wouldn't have to remember all of it when he asked.

The design of the machine was the best work I had ever done. It was inspired by the small walker he had wowed our class with on the first day, but designed to be much more versatile than Alduin's more personal version. It was easily five times the size and, with reinforced legs and a much larger motor, able to haul almost 300 pounds on its flat top. It looked almost like a metallic version of a storybook magical table, but it was also constructed to be adaptive for whatever job it was needed to do. On a battlefield, it could carry wounded soldiers back to hospitals on its open

flat top, but on a long march it could be outfitted with a canopy and used in a similar way to a pack animal. If the peak kingdoms kept improving their gunpowder cannons that topped the walls of their cities, it could probably even be made into a mobile platform for those large weapons. But at the same time, a farmer could have it walk behind them as they harvested and use it as simply a way to make fewer trips back to wherever they were storing their harvest.

But while I thought it was versatile, the real excitement had come when Alduin had approved using a modified motor from a striker suit to power the machine. He had given me power cells, even if he hadn't told me how they were produced, and instructed me on the ins and outs of the precise mechanics of the motor. Enough instruction that, with enough materials, I was confident I could make my own — one that would power the suit I would take to the graduation ceremony.

The hour passed quickly. I ate as I put the Autonomous Walking Transport, AWT-0, through start up tests. It walked in circles through the room as I sat on its flat top with my food arrayed in front of me until a knock at the door brought me back to the situation.

“One second!” I said, hopefully loud enough to go through the thick door.

I rushed to power AWT-0 down and covered it with the bed sheet again, it really did look like a short table under there, and made sure I had thrown away or hidden the scraps of food that were left before I opened the door to Master Alduin and Lania, who would be presenting hers after.

Alduin greeted me and Lania peeked around my body to see inside the room.

“You made a table?” She said jokingly. “I know you said you worked with wood a lot growing up but really?”

“Just you wait,” I said.

I moved to the side and let the two of them into the room. Even though I loved the smaller size, it didn't make for a great presentation space. I had moved the worktable to the back of the room against the windows, and so the sheet-covered AWT-0 sat on its own in the center of the room. Once Alduin and Lania were arrayed against the wall I pulled the sheet off with as much flair as I could and turned it on with the handheld control device that had the beacon built in. You could make the AWT-0 go in basic directions, but it would also follow the control device just like Alduin's small walker had. As I pulled the sheet upward, the AWT-0 climbed to its feet at its full height of three and a half feet and stood ready for a command.

Lania's eyes went wide with surprise and the grin Alduin saved for when someone was doing something particularly clever spread across his face. I spent the next fifteen minutes giving my speech on the various ways I thought it could be used, and then admitted that there was no way I had thought of all the possibilities. Lania talked excitedly about minors using it to stack ore on, and how restaurants could even use a version to deliver food to tables.

Lania's own design, presented to Alduin and myself after he had approved my work, was brilliant. A device that, whenever the sun wasn't hitting it, would activate lanterns to light rooms automatically. There was a lot of precise machinery in the project, and so it would likely be relegated to wealthy individuals and institutions at first, but if it became widely used it would be a big quality of life change for people to save the time on lighting lanterns every night.

After the presentations, Alduin told us he wanted us to start working on a new project without his oversight. He said he would answer any questions that books didn't, but that he wanted to see us do work like this without his input and would be approving requisitions without question as long as they were within reason.

It was perfect. I just needed to get my hands on design specifications for a suit.

## 14.

When the snow started to fall Idas turned into a storybook version of itself in front of our eyes. Bakeries and candy shops across the city advertised sales in their windows and the papers. The taverns opened earlier, stayed open and full later into the evenings. In the days after the first big storm the inns across the city had been full to the brim with stranded caravaneers and visitors, and the papers had announced a city wide uptick in reported pickpockets and muggings as the underworld took advantage of the large number of people without anything else to do filed through taverns. When I had walked through the low quarter a few days after the storm both Shield Park and the Central Gardens had been turned into battlefields for children released from the more rigid schooling of the city for Middle Term. Snow packed into walls and fortifications to hide behind from the onslaught of balled snow. I was jealous of the children growing up with the seasonal provided wonder, in Dorchester any snow that had made it's way over the mountains had been lackluster dustings and had never stuck around for more than a day.

Middle Term break, two whole weeks without classes where instructors gave large projects to test what students had learned, sent almost all of the nobility and even some of the non-landed students back to family homes and estates. Pimly had gone with Donnel to meet the clans of the Peak Kingdoms, Lania to her cousin's home in the city, even Abel had struck out with a caravan to visit his family a couple of days ride West of Idas in Norothem.



In truth, I liked Idas more like this. Life in Dorchester had been slow. Not in the sense that there was often not much to do, that was certainly true, but whatever you happened to be doing there was rarely an urgency to it. Outside of festival and market days, if you happened to not get a task done for one reason or another it would wait till the next day. In Idas, all there seemed to be was urgency. I felt it in the mess being forced to eat quickly before the noble students were seated, in the fast paced walk everyone including myself had quickly adopted to move between appointments and classes, in the bustle of workers in the low ward going to and from the elevators that brought them into the rift.

The projects assigned for both my military history and engineering courses were easy to complete with a few days uninterrupted in the library. Alduin's was proving to be more challenging. On our last day of class before the break, we had arrived to the lecture hall with a bored looking Master Machinist reading from a large tome with his feet kicked up on the desk. On the chalk board behind him he had written "Figure something out." When the clock tower bell sounded he briefly looked up from his book, pointed at the board, and instructed us that it was our midterm project and to have a nice break.

I thought it would be easy. I brought my notebooks to the mess, always open over the break with a skeleton staff, and used the constant supply of coffee to fuel an attempt to find something in AWT-0's design to expand upon. Once I started going through my design to try and find the something I wanted to define, I realized how many of the questions I had started with had been answered by Alduin. He had given me the beacon, the original concept to work off of, even the fuel cells. I had refined most of it, made my own mark on the design, but ultimately it had come from him.

In the end, the fuel cells were the only part of AWT-0's design that I didn't have any other knowledge on. Alduin had given me specific blueprints for motors meant to work with the cells and instructed me to follow them exactly and so I had. Explosions may have been common for him, but I generally tried to avoid them. I couldn't open the casing of the cell, it seemed like it was crafted entirely as one instead of created to be put around the fuel source inside. A single valve where it could be refilled from or emptied into a motor was the only blemish on the otherwise smooth metal of the cylindrical casing. So, lacking any way to analyze the contents myself and the knowledge of how to do so, I set out for the chemistry wing a few floors below the workshops.

Without any need to avoid the bustle of students on the central stairs, I used them instead of the servant's passages. The careful design of the millwork walls demanded to have it be known they were handmade, small imperfections screaming of personality as opposed to mistake. The polished bannisters showed Taniel's dedication — even without students his hallways would be up to his standards. The lower floors of Idas Academy were purposeful, designed to present an air of nobility and power on those that walked through them. The upper floors, like the hallway of workshops where my own resided, felt lived in and honest in comparison. While not bare, the walls lacked the artful patterns and decorations that populated the lower floors. Exiting into the fourth floor hallway, exactly halfway up the ancient walls of the castle, I decided they were the most honest of any of them.

Every few feet the design style seemed to change. The fourth and fifth floors of the south wing were reserved for the sciences, and each seemed to have touched their dominion in their own way. There were fewer doorways, as only research assistants in the sciences merited private basement labs, and instead both sides of the hallway were occupied by large communal labs. Chemists, metallurgists, astronomers, biologists — every department of the science track except for the

botanists who had their own greenhouses on the grounds made their home in the hallway and seemingly got to decorate their portion how they saw fit. In the few dozen feet I walked searching for the chemistry lab I walked past dissected and preserved animals, star charts painted from floor to ceiling and back down to the floor on the other side, and a section that felt like walking into a story set in a Dwarven city.

Just before the hallway turned to the left back toward non-landed housing a shattering glass echoed out of an open doorway ahead and broke the relative silence. I stopped just before the doorway as a conversation echoed out.

“Nelaeryn above!” A familiar voice yelled in the room. “I cannot get these Godsdamned solutions right!”

“Emoria dear,” a woman’s voice replied. “Why obsess over the fuel? Your suit maintenance will not be your worry after graduation.”

“I’d just feel more comfortable knowing,” Emoria replied.

“Well,” the mystery woman said. “We’ll have to pick this up tomorrow. You’re welcome to keep working in here, but only on the solutions from the assignment! No explosive materials until tomorrow.”

“Yes Master Oliphera,” Emoria said. “Thank you for your help.”

I backed away from the door to not seem like I was eavesdropping, and moments later a tall, spindly woman with iridescent red hair stepped from the room as I walked up for the second time.

“Oh,” she said. “Hello there. Looking for something? Are you a student?”

“I am Master Oliphera,” I said. “Aimon Solan. I was looking for Emoria?”

Behind her, through the doorway, I saw Emoria spin in her chair and look at me quizzically. The Master Chemist turned to look back at her and, receiving a nod from the Elven princess, left.

“You do make a habit of running into the Masters don’t you?” Emoria said. “Heard you even got a talk from the Chancellor on your first day.”

“Your sources are a bit out of date if that’s the only thing you’re getting,” I said as I put my notes down at the far side of her lab station and sat.

“It’s not,” she said. “So, you weren’t actually looking for me but you found me. What did you need?”

I pulled the half used fuel cell from my jacket pocket and held it up for her to see. There was a bare moment of confusion in her face before her eyes opened in surprise. She got up and quickly moved to shut the door on the other side of the room. When she returned, the surprise was gone and the Princess’s normal half scowl had returned.

“How?” She demanded.

“The Master Machinist is apparently not as strict with supplies as your Master Chemist,” I replied. “I needed them for a project, and since I’ve been here Alduin let me hold on to one to keep testing it.”

“And you just so happened to be eavesdropping and learned I was experimenting with it?” She asked.

“I,” I coughed to cover up the embarrassment before it reached my face. “I wasn’t sure it was

you while I was outside the door, to be fair. I needed a chemist.”

She took the fuel cell from my hand and gave it the same sort of once-over that I found myself doing whenever I was handed a new problem piece of machinery.

“The Master Chemist was right though,” I said. “Why do you really want to find out what’s in the fuel?”

Emoria sat, looking from the fuel cell to me and back, for a long time before answering quietly.

“Do you know how many places have factories to make Striker suits Aimon?” She asked.

I didn’t, and told her so. I assumed they were made in the city, down in the Rift somewhere. Most of the industry in Idacia was there.

“Three,” she said. “When your country was founded House Atticus was the sole holder of the designs. When they rose to the throne a century ago they gave up the design to the Merchant guild, backed by house Tok, to bring Idas onto their side in the Ascension debate. Now your Baron Ment has made Dorchester the third.”

“What does that have to do with the fuel?” I asked.

She started to answer, then looked back down at the fuel cell before continuing.

“Nothing I guess,” she said. “I just don’t like mysteries. Especially when I’m supposed to fly around powered by one.”

I had seen a lot of different machines, but almost every single one Emoria used to try and make her discovery baffled me in it’s purpose. The only one I guessed correctly was the first, a wheel with places to insert cylindrical vials of liquid that would spin fast enough to split the mixtures,

that she called a centrifuge. She drained the fuel cell of the liquid inside, split it with the centrifuge, and then took small samples of the three different liquids and the strange powder that had filtered to the bottom after its time spinning. These samples she placed under a magnification lens that looked more like a telescope. She let me look through it for a moment as long as I didn't touch anything else, and expecting to see close ups of the liquids I was surprised when I simply had no clue what I was looking at. Emoria explained that it was the component pieces of matter that made up the samples and that they couldn't be seen normally. One of the liquids was water, the other two some kind of alcohols according to Emoria, but after a few minutes of looking at the powder she slammed her hand down flat on the table in frustration.

“I have no Godsdamned idea what I'm looking at,” she said. “It almost looks crystalline but its like it's moving.”

I took a turn on the lens, and while I wasn't sure exactly what to look for what she had said made sense. There were jagged edges to the powdery substance, hard angles that came together at almost perfect 90 degrees in some places, but the sample seemed to be moving even though neither Emoria nor myself touched the lens or the table.

“It has to be some sort of explosive material,” she said. “The solution is mainly water, a bit of alcohol for initial combustion maybe?”

She drew diagrams on the marker board on the far side of the room from the lab stations. Odd hexagonal shapes with lines connecting them to others. Some older drawings on the far side of the board seemed more refined, their lines more precise, but hers seemed nearly as good as the practiced chemists.

“What are you doing there?” I asked.

“I really don’t have the time or skill to explain chemistry to you Aimon,” she said.

I looked at her expectantly, hoping she might try anyway. She sighed and continued.

“These diagrams represent some of the things you saw in the lens,” she said. “The lines that connect them are bonds that can be broken down, and when you do that energy gets released. Depending on the structure, sometimes quite a lot of it.”

“And that’s how the rigs get powered?” I asked.

“I would think so yes,” she said. “I thought I might be able to figure out what the missing piece was if I drew it out but. . .”

She trailed off, staring at the marker board and her sketches.

“Why did you study chemistry in the first place?” I asked. “You don’t have to take anything besides your pilot courses.”

“I didn’t get a very well rounded education growing up,” she said.

“It seems like Pimly did,” I said. “Why not you?”

“I didn’t grow up with Pimly,” she said. “Our parents kept us separated. Nelemor is much the same as Idacia. Those without power look to gain it however they can.”

“I’m sorry,” I said. “I guess it makes sense why you two don’t seem close then.”

Some of the coldness came back into Emoria’s voice at this comment, and when she looked toward me a tinge of fear started to rise in the pit of my stomach. Her ability to intimidate with just a look was terrifying.

“I appreciate you bringing this here,” she said. “I’ll let you know if I find anything out but I need to work on it alone. No offense, but you just get in the way in here and I really can’t teach you enough to help.”

I collected the now half emptied fuel cell and left the room and science wing. Alone, my mind wandered to Wilt and his life in Riridre. I remembered asking mother, before the raid, if I would ever have a brother or sister. She had always said I was the only child they had ever wanted or needed, but that I did have a brother — he just lived across the street. I wondered if Wilt had found ship-making as fascinating as he had reading about it. Riridre wasn’t as big as Idas, nowhere in the kingdoms was as big as Idas as far as I knew, but it was still significantly bigger than Dorchester had been. I wondered if he had adapted to the bustle of the city, if he had found a place he could be alone with his books, if he enjoyed the wind in his hair and the spray of the sea. I hoped so.

I had worked with Emoria through the open dining dinner, and just managed to scrape up some leftover bread and cheese to make a walking meal. A quick change of clothes later, and I found myself crossing the Rift into the Low Ward. I had been through all the taverns I could find in the shipping district, and so I struck out down another major road toward the more residential Hollows district. As I got closer to The Hollows the road narrowed considerably. At it’s widest it was built like the roads of the shipping district, meant to accommodate multiple wagons moving past each other in addition to foot traffic. Coming into the residential district primarily occupied by Rift workers, the streets got so narrow it would take a skilled wagoneer to keep from scraping against buildings. It wasn’t as tightly packed as The Outskirts in Dorchester, some of the buildings here had yards and private gardens, though it seemed to be a luxury.

As I wound through the narrow streets I realized I was starting to pick up on some of the ways



the city worked. On the border between districts local toughs leaned against fences and walls, just watching. At the first large intersection a cutter, the street slang for pickpockets and thieves, bumped into a well dressed man and nimbly came away with something that glinted in the fading light. Before the purse, what the cutters called their marks, could even notice what had happened the cutter was down an alleyway and gone. The man tried to complain to a silverstick who was stationed with a half dozen others in front of a grocer with Guild seals on the windows, but the officer waved him off. There were fewer of the silversticks in The Hollows because there were fewer Guild sanctioned businesses.

Officially, if you wanted to sell goods within the city of Idas you had to have a Guild seal. The seal came with a promise of a monthly portion of your profit paid to the Guild, which in turn paid for silversticks and the protection that came with them. But, the deeper into the Hollows I walked, the more often I saw people coming out of houses with various goods and walking down the street to homes that they used their own keys to get into. It seemed the Hollows operated much like the Outskirts of Dorchester, citizens taking their finances into their own hands and running unofficial shops out of their homes to avoid Guild taxes. Wherever there was profit to be made, it seemed somebody would always try and profit on controlling it. And wherever people were profiting on control there would be people living just outside of the law to avoid it.

With the light dying down, I made my way back out to the edges of the Hollows where more of the businesses and taverns resided. The Golden Key was larger than the surrounding taverns, and through opened windows and balcony doors on the second and third floor it seemed like the entire building was occupied by tables for patrons. Most multistory businesses I had seen had living quarters on the higher floors for staff or the owners, but this seemed to be solely maximized for the number of people they could accommodate.

The first floor was filled to the brim with patrons. Foremen In more tailored clothing, caravaneers in road clothes, rift workers still smelling of metals and soot — they all mingled at tables and danced on the open floor at the center. From inside I could see that the upper levels were actually balconies, the middle of the building open so from the floor you could see all the way up to the third level and from the top all the way down to the dancers. I made a circuit through the building, climbing to the second floor and eventually the more sparsely populated third floor where I found a second fully stocked bar, and a surprise waiting behind it.

“Otro?” I blurted out, surprised at seeing my suite mate in a place like this.

I had thought he left for midwinter to go back to his estate in the West near Riridre. He seemed just as surprised to find me here and picked up a glass to shine with the rag that had been hanging easily over his shoulder. He was wearing a spotless white apron, dressed to work, and gestured for me to sit at one of the open barstools. He tried pouring an ale, but stopped and disappeared through the door behind him for a moment before returning with a steaming mug of coffee.

“I didn’t expect to see anyone from across the Rift here,” he said.

“I don’t like much of the clientele on the other side,” I said. “Plus, I couldn’t make enough in four jobs to afford to be a regular over there.”

He let out a chortle of laughter, I think it may have been the first time I’d heard him laugh. It was a heavy laugh — Donnel would have loved it.

“Why are you working over here, instead of the other side?” I asked. “I’m sure with the prices they’ve got to make more money tending bar.”

“You can’t tell anyone,” he said.

His face went cold in a poor attempt at intimidation before softening into shame.

“Sorry, I . . .” he stammered. “I can’t let anyone know that I do this to keep myself in school.”

“You’re nobility aren’t you?” I asked.

“Newly recognized,” he said. “My family is silk traders, members of the Guild. Rommel sponsored us to appease them, but we aren’t nearly as wealthy as even the most minor elder houses. I’m the youngest, and after my sisters studied politics there’s not a lot left to go around.”

His shoulders sagged, his face pleaded with me. His actions toward Donnel, Pimly, and myself began to make a sort of sense. Being named a House Lord or even Baron of a tract of land under another would have put his family into conversation with others much stronger than them. His sisters studied politics to help their family, he would be a shield for them with his own Striker. If he gained a high position in Rommel’s army it would mean potential war with a great house for any that tried to bully them.

“Of course I won’t tell anyone,” I said. “Though I think you could trust Donnel and Pimly.”

“I doubt they’d be as understanding,” he said. “I haven’t been the greatest to either of them.”

“You haven’t been great to me either,” I said. “But gods Otro you’re an outcast from the nobility living with a bunch of outcasts from the rest of the population at the Academy, you didn’t think we’d understand your situation?”

“I had to ingratiate myself with the rest of the noble students,” he said. “And the heir to your home sure hates you, hates anyone that associates with you.”

That made sense too. Zachariah wouldn’t have accepted for one of his hangers-on not

following his lead. He's his father's son through and through. It didn't excuse Otro from downright hostile behavior behind closed doors, but at least gave context to it. We had fallen into silence, and Otro tentatively broke it.

"You never truly answer my first question," he said. "There's quite a few inns and taverns between here and the Academy, why come all the way down to the Hollows?"

I hesitated for a moment, unsure on if I should let him in on what I was doing. But I held his secret, he would hold mine or risk exposure. And he didn't need to know all of it. I took the now worn calling card of The Star out of my jacket pocket and slid it across the bar top to him. He let out another short burst of laughter at seeing it.

"What are you doing with one of these?" He asked.

"It appeared in my jacket pocket the day I came to Idas," I replied.

"And so what?" He said. "Months later you want your money back from the kid?"

"So you know them?" I asked.

"I know of them," he said slowly. "I know that they don't have your money any more."

"I don't care about the money," I said. "I mean I do, but it was only a few half marks. I need them for something else."

I tried my best to imitate Emoria's stare. I don't know how well I did, but he didn't press me for details. He filled drinks for a few others who had come to the bar, delivered food from the back room to waiting tables, and eventually dipped into the back room for a minute and came back out with a hastily drawn map of the Hollows with a star near the outer edge of the district and city —

right next to the wall. To leave immediately would've been rude, and I was genuinely starting to enjoy the minor noble on the other side of the bar. I didn't know if we'd go back to the way things were after the night, but for the next hour and a half I sipped coffee, asked questions about Otro's home, and answered questions about my own in turn. His family's estate was only a day's ride from Riridre, across the Priorbeck River that came down from the Peaks, and Otro had spent a fair amount of time in Idacia's third largest city. I told him about Will, and asked about the Master Shipwright's reputation with apprentices. He'd never met the man himself, but had said his father liked dealing with him whenever they bought a new ship for their small shipping fleet and that they'd never lost one of his ships to sea or storms.

I walked back to the Academy alone, winding through the streets of The Hollows then taking a new route through the Vista district that ran alongside the Rift. I passed all three of the house-sized elevators that ferried shifts of workers down to the various levels of industrial floor, the harsh steel cages intimidating in the dim light of the lanterns and light that escaped through shaded windows. The Silversticks at the bridge paid me barely enough attention to check my Academy papers before letting me cross, and I climbed the steps to my room tired but lightened by the knowledge that, when my friends returned in another day or two and could come with me to their hideout, I could finally find The Star.

## 15.

“Wake up,” the shaggy hound said. “We’ve got things to do.”

I stared at it, confused at why it had only just started speaking when it was trying to get me to follow it around my farm. After a few seconds, it sighed like an impatient human and transformed into a monstrously large version of itself with extra heads splitting out from its shoulders. My heart raced, I closed my eyes, and when they opened again I was panting and sweating in my own bed.

I looked around the room wildly. Donnel’s Warhammer on the wall, the geodes on the desks, my clothes from the previous day lazily on the floor, and Emoria standing in the doorway looking at me. I quickly pulled my blankets up my body to hide my near nakedness and felt my cheeks turning hot. Emoria gave me a knowing look before she laughed softly and turned around to walk back into the common room. The light wasn’t even coming through the windows on the other side of Donnel’s bed yet, I had only been a sleep for a few hours. Or had somehow slept through an entire day, which I thought was unlikely.

“Get dressed,” Emoria said without turning around. “The Baron’s boy is going to be back tomorrow and I thought we might give him a welcome home present.”

I dressed quickly and clumsily, needing to try twice with my shirt as I noticed just before walking out I had it on both inside out and backwards. Rubbing the sleep out of my eyes, I stepped into the common room to Emoria impatiently waiting on me.

“I don’t think you’re supposed to be in here,” I said.

“Tariel won’t get me in trouble,” she said, then added. “And he’ll also never know.”

“What are we doing?” I asked.

“Something fun and deserved,” she said.

She handed me a sack and led the way out the door after peeking out to make sure the hallway was empty. We walked quickly toward the stairway at the end of the hallway, and then descended to the fourth floor and turned toward the South side of the castle. I assumed she must have made a breakthrough with the fuel cell, but she hadn't told me to bring the half empty cell we had used to get the samples. We passed by the science wing, doors on either side closed and rooms waiting for the return of students to give them purpose, and paused just before entering the noble students' living quarters.

“Emoria,” I said cautiously. “Where exactly are you taking me?”

She grinned mischievously and set off climbing the steps. Flight after flight, all the way to the highest floor that connected with the walls before the stairs turned circular and continued to climb to the astronomy tower. Recessed into the wall here stood a thin door made of simple wood, even the doors to our rooms in the non-landed students' quarters seemed ornate compared to the strangely out of place entryway. Emoria produced a key, turned the lock, and flung open the door to a seemingly abandoned, very thin hallway. I could touch both walls of the hallway without fully extending my arms, it was so small that I doubted two people going in opposite directions would be able to turn and shuffle past each other without brushing against the other person.

Emoria tucked the key back into a pocket in her pants and looked to me, already expecting my questions.

“What is this place?”

“Servants quarters from before the castle’s time as a school,” she said. “I discovered it a few hours ago. I’ve been all over the castle trying to find the lock the key goes to.”

“And how did you come upon the key?” I said.

“I got it from Taniel,” she responded. “Or his office anyway.”

“I can’t believe I was the one that got saddled with the troublemaker reputation,” I muttered.

“Don’t worry,” she said. “I’ll have it back before he can miss it. But you have to see this!”

I kept my complaints to myself. Most of the school was emptied out, even Taniel himself had only a skeleton staff of stewards keeping services like the mess and baths ready to use for the small number of students who had stayed. There was little chance anyone would find us here. I followed Emoria, a lantern that she must have stashed here before coming to get me alight in her hands, through the tunnel like hallway. The lantern threw long shadows down the deteriorating halls.

“Before it was a school, the nobility’s dorms used to be the living quarters for the Guild’s chairman,” Emoria said. “House Atticus bought it after their ascension when they gave the secrets of building Strikers to the Guild and turned it into Idas Academy, though until the current king it was reserved only for noble children and only meant to train pilots. After the second Hobbold War they needed to replace all the pilots they’d lost.”

“Why didn’t they update this level?” I asked.

“I don’t know,” she admitted. “The chancellor pays stewards well, they can all afford to live in the city, so maybe there was just no reason to?”

That made sense. They’d never be able to put noble students up in these cramped quarters,



there would be a riot. Emoria stopped a few steps in front of me, and I peered around her to see the door she had decided upon. Unmarked, just like the last.

“We’re here,” she said, opening the door to reveal another stairwell. “Do you remember what was served the last night before Midwinter?”

I guessed fish, the Idas river provided ample fishing ground itself and easy access for coastal fishermen to ship their catches to a major port while still fresh.

“Red Spiderfish to be exact,” she said, gesturing to the bag she had me carrying. “Exactly what was served two nights ago as well.”

Emoria stopped one floor down the stairs and, using the key again, slowly opened the door enough to peek out of. I opened the bag slightly and was greeted by a small whiff of two day old fish. I gagged and quickly shut the bag back up, a growing sense of unease at what she had planned beginning in my stomach.

“Come on!” She said.

Emoria darted out of the doorway, turning left into the hallway beyond. She moved like a hillcat when it was hunting, silent and close to the ground. I tried to imitate her, but heard my footsteps echoing in the well adorned hallway of the noble students housing. She stopped three doors down and pulled a small leather pouch from a bag. She deftly slid two long pieces of metal out of the pouch and inserted them, one inverted on top of the other into the lock’s face on the door. Moments later a soft click echoed out of the lock, and the door in front of us slid open. She pulled me inside quickly and shut the door behind us, letting out a deep sigh. My own heart was racing, and I felt the urge to open the door again and flee back down the hallway, though I had no

idea how I would explain why I was walking through here to any students or stewards.

“Are you insane?!” I hissed. “Who’s rooms are these?”

“Relax, Zachariah won’t be back for hours,” she said, turning in a slow circle and opening her arms to gesture to the large room. “And, as you can see, he lives alone.”

Of course it was Zachariah’s rooms. After the confrontation in the library, she’d known my dislike for the man. The fear of being caught stayed, but a blanket of excitement at the prospect of ruining his return eased it slightly. I took in the room. It was around the same size as the common room that sat between Donnel and I’s room and Pimly and Otro’s. No shared doors, and four expensive looking floor to ceiling windows on the far wall. The floors were the same wood that made up our side of The Academy, but they were mostly covered by plush carpets. In a smaller room off the main sitting area was his slightly smaller bedroom, a four-poster bed with deep crimson blankets strewn recklessly against one wall and casually forgotten clothes littering the floor. On a nightstand by his bed sat small pile of used plates.

“Was he expecting a maid service?” I joked.

“Probably,” she said. “The stewards clean the nobilities rooms weekly, but over the breaks they leave bedrooms alone to avoid any accusations of stealing over forgotten objects. Or to prevent the theft itself.”

Emoria opened Zachariah’s wardrobe and started to examine the clothing inside. All of it formal wear that he wouldn’t have needed in Dorchester. Even the Baron, though he’d never stoop to actually doing work in them, often wore clothes meant to resemble the clothing of workers. They were finely tailored, of course, but he liked to pretend he was of the masses. It’s why he

focused on the jobs the Striker factories would provide in those speeches and why he had Zachariah play with the children of Dorchester as a child.

Growing bored with the wardrobe, Emoria asked for the bag I was carrying and moved toward the pile of plates. She took a deep breath, then held it in and undid the loose tie around the bag and slid the half rotten fish out of the bag and onto the plate, taking care not to touch the rancid mass. I pinched my own nose and tried to breathe through my mouth but still gagged slightly on the stench. Mission accomplished, she re-tied the bag and we fled back to the sitting room. Even through the door the smell lingered, but it didn't stop the smile that I felt plastered onto my face or the matching one on Emoria's.

“Well then,” she said. “I believe I have earned a nap.”

Emoria brought me back out the way we came in, again peeking slowly out of the door to make sure we weren't seen before dashing into the hallway and unlocking the door to the servant's level. We parted on the landing to my floor, Emoria climbing down two flights of stairs to her own rooms that she shared with some of the Dwarves I had seen her with. After she left, the initial elation of our unseen raid began to wear off, fear of being found out rising in its place as I climbed back into my bed. But out the window on Donnel's side of the room the sun was just rising, bathing the rooftops of Idas in the warm glow that only a winter morning can bring. My eyes drooped, the lack of sleep outweighing the rising fear, and I slipped back to sleep realizing that it was Emoria, more than Donnel and Pimly, that I would need to bring with me to meet The Star.

I slept through nearly the entire day, but just after lunch the steady creaking of wagons and raised voices of stewards carrying luggage woke me. I managed to make it to the bathhouse and

back before Donnel and Pimly arrived, though Otro came back from wherever he had been staying in the city in-between. We had a bit of pleasant, surface level conversation. I hoped the coldness would stay gone, at least within the walls of our suite.

Minutes before our seating for dinner, the mess hall back to its regular schedule, Donnel's laugh echoed up the hallway and my two friends returned. I wanted to hear about their trip to visit Donnel's family in the Peaks, but even more I wanted to be around the mess when Zachariah came in for his later seating after seeing, and smelling, his room. They changed from their road clothes and the three of us were off.

"He was shocked!" Donnel said. "Completely baffled. Couldn't understand one bit!"

"The baths, even here, are private!" Pimly protested. "How was I to know?"

The meal had been stew. Hearty with thick broth and an abundance of potatoes, alongside brown rye bread. A simple meal, not the usual dinner for the Academy's kitchens, but not at all upsetting to me. I could already hear the protests from noble students as they waited just outside the doors of the mess. Our seating had only a few minutes left, and Pimly had tried to get us up and moving out of the room twice already to not run up against the time limit, but I still had a show I was hoping to see.

"Pim, I would have thought you would train on customs before leaving Nelemor," I said.

"I did," he said. "To the best of our knowledge anyway. While most of the outer villages have had contact with the other kingdoms over the years, the Elven Council is only now breaking out of their isolationist policies."

"But the players," I said. "The traveling troupes that come from your lands. I remember elven

troupes doing plays in Dorchester's square even when I was small."

"It wasn't a closed border," Pimly said. "We had to trade for things we couldn't make ourselves. It only got more popular with dwarven arms trade after the invention of the rifled barrel. The travelers and traders have always been a more progressive movement than the council."

"Aye," Donnel chimed in. "Our convoys went to you, not often the other way around."

Over at the serving counter, Abel caught my eye with a wave and gave me a pointed look then tapped on his wrist where a watch might go. I nodded, then started to stack my plates to return them. I moved slowly, but I started to give up. He might not even come down, might head to an inn or tavern to drink away the anger and have a more personalized meal. He might've just stayed in his rooms and screamed until some steward figured out how to fix the smell.

". . . and that idiot Netyoive refuses to believe there was a thief and prankster in my rooms!" Zachariah whined.

He walked past the steward at the doorway just as we were depositing dirty plates in a large tub near the serving line. He didn't even notice us as we made a wide arc back through the tables to the entryway. I didn't gloat, didn't try and let him see me and start to think. Partly, I didn't want to run afoul of the Chancellor or risk getting Tariel in trouble as well as we used his key. But mainly, I didn't want to be like the Ments. They had struck from the shadows at my family just as I had at Zachariah, but he had gloated in the Silver Hare and done it while staring at me. I don't know if that made me better than him, or just made me feel better, but I floated back to our rooms after that.

Elated, I suggested we welcome the new term with a trip to one of Donnel and Pimly's favorite

taverns on the other side of the Rift. We invited Lania, who had said yes before I even got the sentence out, Emoria and the dwarven women that roomed with her after cursory protests from Pimly, and Otro even came along after I told him we were going to the other side of the Rift and were unlikely to run into the noble students. I spent half the small number of marks I had saved over the previous term to keep my friends in drinks until they started asking after the more expensive bottles from their respective homes. Eventually, after an hour or two of prodding after what caused the good mood and exchanging mischievous smiles across the table with Emoria I relented and nodded for her to tell the story. She left out Taniel's unknowing involvement, and we laughed and told stories well into the night.

Over the midwinter break I had discovered more about Idas than the months combined, but it had also brought a melancholy that I hadn't felt since I had boarded the dark interior of Bertrand's wagon months before. I missed Wilt terribly, but was more excited for him after my conversations with Otro. I missed Dorchester — my friends and my father. Often, in the mornings, I still woke confused at why there was no clattering from him making a plate of breakfast for me even though I had seldom eaten them. But these people filled some of the holes my forced flight had put in me, and it felt genuinely good to find friends in a city that seemed intent on squashing me when I had arrived.

## 16.

Two weeks slipped by before I had a chance to make the trip to the low ward, or any trip at all outside of fast-walking through the halls and steward's passages between classes. All of my courses had ramped up after the Midwinter break, pushing us hard to prepare for the end of year exams. I started to lose track of Pimly, Donnel, and Emoria as their practice flights became more and more common, but after a particularly daring test flight where they were taken on the path they would have to fly for graduation for the first time all three had shown up at my workshop asking for specific design changes to their rigs before graduation.

Most of my time was spent with Lania and Master Alduin as we worked on the latter's various projects and Lania and myself worked on final presentations for his class. We'd spend an hour in my workshop talking out and improving design choices, then move over to hers and repeat the process. We'd go for hours at a time, burning down our shared supply of candles and eventually falling into the kind of pointless conversations that pop up between friends. She would talk about girls around the university that she thought attractive, and I would try to keep her from asking about any sort of romantic interest I had in any of the students.

Partly, it was because she seemed to know everyone and I didn't know a single student's name that wasn't in one of my courses outside of my friends. The other part was that I felt a bit embarrassed by my feelings when I eventually did think about them. Annie and I had been building toward. . . something. I didn't know what it was, or what it would have been if I had to leave, and I wasn't sure the next time I'd get to see her. She could have started dating one of the other boys around our age in Dorchester — Flip Mahan would inherit his grandfather's farm eventually and

Breadir Tommel would be taking over the Silver Hare when his mother was ready to retire. Even if I came back to Dorchester after The Legion, I would have nothing there. I'd be forced to either work in the factory or become a handyman in the outskirts and struggle to get by. These thoughts started to spiral. I wondered if I'd be stuck in the Legions or get to fly. Wondered if my father was keeping the path to sobriety he seemed to have started on. Wondered if Bertrand had passed back through yet and if he and Ros had been able to spend time together. So instead I pushed the thoughts of home away and dove deeper into the work while I waited for a moment I could try and break out of this path.

Nelemday of the second week after Midwinter became my moment. No off-day flights for my friends while we waited for classes to start again the following week and my own work on AWT-0 far enough along that I didn't worry about the random check in's that Alduin preferred. As we finished off a dinner of ham steaks and fried potatoes I hung back while Donnel and Pimly went to return their plates, instead turning toward the table in the corner that Emoria preferred to sit at. As I approached one of the dwarves saw me and laughed quietly, standing and bringing the other two dwarven women with her.

"I think it's time I return the favor of a mysterious trip," I said.

Her eyebrows arched inquisitively, but she accepted and asked if she'd need to change. Her regular outfits were nowhere near as formal as her brother's, but even still the jewelry that hung from her ears and wrists would mark us as purses. Half an hour later we strolled onto the easternmost bridge across The Rift under the tepid light of a sliver moon. We both wore the clothes of the working class, my jacket possibly making me a target for cutters but the comfort and familiarity of the garment was too much to give up. Emoria's hair was pulled back, and with a flat-



cap in the style preferred by wagoners atop her head her ears were less pronounced. Her form was still tall and lithe, there was no way to hide that, but with the cap and the low light she wasn't immediately identifiable as an elf. Idas was home to humans, dwarves, and elves alike but, much like Pimly when we had come deeper into the low ward, Emoria didn't want to take chances walking down the dim streets.

We wound through the streets of The Vista before entering into The Hollows, the buildings pressing in on us like an embrace. Silversticks littered the roads, some few groups patrolling together but mostly guards standing at the doorways of Guild member owned shops. They acted less like a police force in this district, more like an occupying force. We passed the Golden Key by, fast paced music meant to dance to walking along with us for a street, and made our way deeper into the Hollows. The storefronts, the obvious guild ones anyway, dissipated and with them went the silvers. For a street or two we walked in a relative bubble of solitude, soft lights escaping out of second story windows our only guide through the meandering streets, before seeming to enter a different world. It was only a few streets of difference between the relative prosperity of the part of the Hollows that was regularly travelled, but by the time we neared the outer wall of Idas the streets were again filled — this time by beggars and small groups of distinctly rough looking men and women. Not the kind of rough exterior one gets working long days in the Rift, the kind they became was formed by a life on the street fighting for every scrap you had.

There was a strange nobility to the street crews in the city and a respect for them held by many. Even Otro, noble in many of his attitudes even if he was only recently raised to the status, seemed to hold at least the kid thieves I was looking for in esteem. Some of the local toughs in the street angled their way closer to us, orbiting our path but never stepping into it, and became a sort of tense escort on our way to the hideout. Emoria looped her right arm through my left, my hand in

my jacket pocket, whether out of fear or an intelligent way to blend in I had no idea. My heart started to beat faster, the blood feeling like it was settling into my cheeks and turning them red, and as the toughs grew closer so did she.

As we grew closer, street by street, the age of the onlookers dropped dramatically. Children, too alert and not nearly thin enough to be truly starving, watched us from perches on top of rooftops that grew more squat the deeper into the district we went. They huddled under blankets on the street, not asking after half marks like the beggars of the streets before — just watching, waiting.

Our circling carrions dispersed slowly, then all at once when we stepped into a street with homes only on the side we were entering from. The wall of Idas stood unyielding on the other side of the street, a small patch of grass and trees between the road at the wall. The only defensive emplacement that humanity has ever built that has yet to be beaten, the 70-foot tall walls tower over every building of the lower ward. The only structures in the city, probably in all of Idacia, that stood taller were the Crystal Tower and the new Cloud Towers in the Upper Ward where wealthy Guild Members and House Heads lived in upscale penthouses. As we turned left to move along the wall Emoria fell away, taking her arm back from its intertwined place in the crook of my own.

“Where exactly are you taking me?” Emoria said.

I debated keeping her in suspense as she had done to me, but even if they were actually children going to meet a criminal organization seemed a leap more intense than playing a fairly harmless prank on Zachariah Ment. Silvers were more intimidating than Taniel on his worst day, though another trip to the Chancellors office still scared me straight most days on the campus.

“A group of street kids has made a hideout along the wall, another few hundred feet I think,”

I said. “I need to talk with one of them.”

“Okay,” she said hesitantly. “I guess you technically answered the question. But I’m going to need a bit more.”

Emoria, surprisingly, did not think the idea as crazy as Donnel and Pimly had. She complained that I hadn’t told her she’d need to be intimidating tonight, that she would have worn a different outfit, and laughed for a solid minute after hearing the story of my first day in the city — but the idea of trying to have The Star acquire the plans for a striker suit so I could fly in the graduation ceremony and earn my license seemed to interest her greatly. Even so, some of the warmth she had started to show me after our sally into the noble dorms fell away and her demeanor started to grow more intense. It was similar to the day spent in the chemistry lab, Emoria in an intense focus on her objective. Something about the suits unnerved her, made her anxious to learn their secrets. I couldn’t blame her, the suit and the ability to fly the reason we were on the escapade through the Hollows in the first place.

I had studied Otro’s map for days, making sure I knew how far down the wall to start looking for the hideout, but had not brought it in case I was searched going in. I didn’t think the conversation would go poorly, but if it did I didn’t want to have to explain it or risk it blowing back on Otro when he needed to spend so much of his time in this district. I had learned from the mysterious man my first night hunting for The Star that first impressions, a feeling in the other person that you knew what you were talking about and operated in their circle, was essential down here. The map would have complicated it, better to say simply that I have friends that clued me in to their location.

Emoria stoic at my side, I scanned both sides of the road regularly as we walked toward the

Wall Park at the easternmost edge of the city. The map had marked the wall side of the road, but without any buildings or even the room to try and build one on that side I was nervous Otro had sent me on a useless search.

“Help!” A young girl’s voice screeched from a small copse of trees on the wall side of the road.

Before I could stop her, Emoria was dashing into the brush while digging through a pocket for something. I followed, dashing into near total darkness of the night under the trees.

“Help!” Echoed again through the trees.

“Where are you?” Emoria yelled out, spinning around in a circle trying to trace the direction of the voice.

“Right here,” a new girl’s voice said behind me. “Nobody has to get hurt purse. Drop your jackets and coins on the ground and you can go.”

I spun a slow circle, my arms raised away from my body, and saw the small forms in the shadows of deeper darkness cast by the trees. At least a dozen children, small pieces of metal piping or chunks sharpened into knives glinting in their hands. Most of them did their best to appear intimidating, and the weapons certainly helped, but a few cowered back from us. The closer ring, six or seven larger children, probably older than the rest, closed tighter around us.

“Ey,” the girl that seemed in charge said. “Jackets and coins in the dirt.”

“I just want to talk,” I said.

“Purses don’t talk” another figure, a boy this time, said.

“Purses give us their shit else they get pricked and we take it. Hear?” another said.

“Not a purse,” I said. “Not quite a cutter, hear?”

I reached into my jacket, slowly and only with my right hand, and nobody protested. I had let the local lexicon in, tried to emulate the way I heard people talking in the low ward. It had bought me a few moments, at the very least. I pulled out The Star’s calling card and displayed it toward the girl that seemed to be in charge.

“What’s he got?” One of the smaller, more nervous kids in the back said.

“Calling card!” Another said. “Ada’s I think.”

“Ey!” The leader shouted to their crew. “Shut it!”

The leader came out of the shadows that puddled around the base of the tree — a short human with short, chopped hair sticking out at odd angles from the flat cap they wore. The child plucked the card out of my hand and turned it over in their own, taking in the worn edges and creases from folding and unfolding. For a few moments they simply inspected, everyone around holding their breath. Tension fell like a blanket over the crowd of children, Emoria, and myself. And then the leader let out a single giggle, and another, and then a flood of laughter that only a child can bring erupted from the kid.

“You certainly are a purse,” the kid said. “And not a very well off one, from what I remember. Did the baker freak when he realized you didn’t have any money? Gods I love toying with him. He gets all red and all yelly and then gives me bread without ever realizing I’m the one making him look funny.”

The small kid turned and started to walk further into the trees, her crew losing interest and following just as fast. After a few steps, Emoria and myself still rooted in place between the trees,

the leader turned back around to address us.

“You coming?” She said. “Said you wanted to talk, then you don’t come talk. Gowns are cracked.”

She turned again, and after a moment of hesitation looking at Emoria a nod from my friend sent me off following the strange kid.

## 17.

The crew of children walked us through the small copse of trees to the base of Idas's wall. Above it stretched toward the stars, but at its roots two of the large stones that made up the wall had been removed, a rough doorframe without a door in their place. The kids went through the small passageway easily, though I had to crouch to enter and Emoria nearly had to crawl on her hands and knees.

Inside, the black of the night outside was replaced by a cacophony of color. Lanterns with colored glass, like the lights traveling troupes would use to stage plays or decorate the festivals, hung from a dozen different pegs, support beams, and oddly shaped outcroppings in the stone of the wall. The interior of the wall wasn't totally hollow, which made sense even though it wasn't what I had expected. Instead, it seemed that whoever had built it had left the scaffolding and construction platforms they used in place, adding support beams off of them to buttress the massive wall. In either direction the interior space of the wall faded into total darkness after hundreds of feet, but the space in-between was a strange mixture of shadow, darkness, and bold color.

Hammocks like the ones Wilt had talked about sailors using on their ships hung between support beams climbing dozens of feet into the air. While only a handful of children had been outside, there had to be almost forty of them strewn around the space. Most of the pack from outside split in different directions, climbing up and under and around the old construction platforms and support beams to their personal spaces. We followed the leader from the group to the right. After a few moments, she sped up and leaped toward an overhanging support beam, pulling themselves up to the next level of walkways. I followed suit, the jump easier for my taller frame, and was left impressed with the kid's strength after needing to struggle to get myself over

the edge onto the platform. On top, we hopped to two different platforms before arriving at one that had walls for privacy.

A door on wheels slid to the side to reveal a more personalized room. A hammock still for sleep, but the kid had acquired a desk that was littered now with amateur maps and strewn with letters. The far wall had a bookshelf that was overflowing onto the floor. I was stunned, this kid owned more stuff than I did, and very nearly missed the painted gold and white star on the left wall — half obscured by the hammock.

“You’re The Star?” I said as the child slid the door back closed and took a seat in a suspiciously well made desk chair.

Emoria and I took seats on basic wooden benches opposite our host.

“The one who left that card in my pocket?” I continued.

“Starboy,” she said matter-of-factly.

She was still young enough to get away with the ploy based on looks but if she spoke the allusion fell away. Starboy must have read the confusion between appearance and name on my face, because she continued.

“Girls don’t last on the street,” she said, keeping her tone and adding a lazy shrug to the effect. “Too many growns. Too many touchy silvers. Easier to not be one.”

“That makes sense,” I said.

“I know it does,” Starboy replied. “So, whatcha want? You can’t have your marks back, I spent em.”



Starboy seemed incapable of sitting still. She opened a drawer in the desk, pulled out a sucking candy on a stick, and popped it into their mouth after making sure to put the wrapper in the neatly kept trash bin.

“I don’t care about the marks,” I said.

“In that case, got any to spare?” She said.

“No I,” I started, frustrated with them. “I mean I don’t care about you taking the marks. It’s forgotten. But I’m certain you’ve got more than I do at this point.”

I gestured around the room, trying to pay a compliment.

“Nah,” she said. “I got all this stuff just sitting on the street. People throw out perfectly good furniture all the time, even down here. Just gotta know how to fix it up bit.”

I made a mental note of that. I could use a shelf so I didn’t have to keep my books in stacks on my dresser.

“I need your skills instead,” I said. “I need the plans to a Striker suit.”

“Oh you’re cracked,” Starboy said. “Mouse said you were for walkin up when you knew we were watching but maybe you didn’t even know.”

She got up again, walking to the other side of the room and searching through a cabinet, then returned with a small tin of cookies that she proceeded to ravage.

“You might be the most interesting human I’ve ever met,” Emoria said.

“I’m not a grown yet,” she said. “I get to be interesting. I get to live here.”

“How did this place start?” Emoria asked.

“Dunno,” Starboy shrugged. “Long time back a kid, well sorta a grown but mostly a kid, wearing a cape climbed up on the roof Mouse and me were livin. Said he wanted to helpmate sure none of the other grownns were 167utting on us. Showed us the hole. He tried to name us but didn’t really stick. ‘Orphans’. The grownns all gotta have names for their crews, hear?”

“Hear,” I said. “Back to the suit. . .”

“How am I supposed to get plans for something like that purse?”

“I uh. . .” I stammered. “I’m not sure.”

“There’s two groups know how to make them things,” she said. “The King’s family, and the Merchant Guild. Street kid rule number one — avoid the silvers. Street kid rule number two — only take purses from nobles. They’ve got enough different ones they don’t even notice.”

“We really need to get our hands on those plans,” Emoria said. “Aimon can build one if they do, maybe even build one for you too. You can sell it, get out of this hideout.”

“I like the hole,” she said angrily. “We all like it. That’s why we don’t wanna be grown and have to leave.”

“Then you can buy all the food you’d ever need,” Emoria pleaded.

“I do like food,” Starboy replied. “But there’s just no chance of getting the plans. They’re locked up tighter than the ponces that try and get us to go to Communion.”

The kid, though the more she talked the less she seemed like a child, went still for the first time since I had first seen her for a moment.

“But,” she said. “We might be able to get a suit itself.”

Starboy, seeing stunned reactions on our faces, pulled her chair closer to the desk and started rummaging through the sheets of paper maps on top of it. I looked to Emoria, hoping my friend had a better handle on this conversation than I did. She didn’t show confusion in her face, it was more like hunger.

“Ah!” Starboy said. “This one.”

She stood and pulled a short table between our seats, then laid the map out on it in front of us. It was hand drawn, but in great detail. It depicted the high ward — the streets filled with expensive luxury shops leading to the high ward’s own warehouse district. Various shops were marked with different combinations of lines. Some parallel, some intersecting at either the top or bottom end of another line, some just single lines on their own. Over one warehouse, the furthest east and closest to the Guild’s central office in one of the towers, three boxes had been drawn on top of each other.

“What do the symbols mean?” I asked.

“Horizontal is how much we can pull from the building,” Starboy said. “Vertical is danger.”

There were no buildings on the map with more vertical lines than the warehouse that seemed to demand my attention.

“Why not just write about the different places?” Emoria asked.

“Maps can’t read or write,” Starboy said. “Most of us can piece some words together, but Maps never learned.”

“Maps is?” I asked.

“Our mapmaker?” Starboy said. “I thought that would be obvious.”

It was, if your brain was ready to accept that word as a name. These kids were growing on me, quickly. But still, part of me screamed at the wrongness of this route. Thieves weren't tolerated in the Outskirts in Dorchester, our position already tenuous. But here, it made a wicked sort of sense. The disparity of wealth in this city made Dorchester look like a utopia, so why shouldn't these kids take some of it back? Why shouldn't I do the same to chase a dream that had spent a decade in dormancy.

“We can get a suit there?” I asked.

“Probably,” Starboy said, not explaining further.

“And what do you want to help us?” Emoria said.

“You help me get my crews across the Rift,” Starboy replied. “And I'll get you your suit.”

“One of the men I talked to said your group didn't hit buildings, just cutpurses,” I said. “What changed?”

“Purses getting lighter down here,” she replied with a shrug. “Gotta find heavier ones somewhere.”

“You really think we can steal from somewhere in the high ward?” I asked. “There's so many silvers down here, how many do they have patrolling there?”

“Gods,” Starboy laughed. “You're lucky you have a pass across or you'd be laughed out of every meeting you had about this. There are no silvers in the high ward, they already keep everyone they don't want there out. Well not none, but not enough to worry us. They'll be busy with the rest

of my crews, and it'd take hours to bring up enough from the low ward."

"There can't be that few," I said.

"Why would they need them purse?" Starboy asks. "Everyone that lives up there is rich already, so nobody needs to steal to eat. Everybody that owns stuff is already in the Guild, and they don't hurt each other openly. And if there are silvers, that means the people up there would think there is the possibility of danger. So what would be the point?"

It made sense. A wicked sort, but sense nonetheless. The silvers already didn't act like a policing force in the low ward, why would they need to protect their businesses in the high ward?

"So," Starboy said, reaching her hand out for a shake. "Do we have a deal?"

I nodded, and reached to shake.

"Adaya Starr," the girl said with a smile Zannitos would be proud of. "Pleasure to be in business with you."

## 18.

Adaya asked for two weeks to plan the heist. We had the time, barely, with just about two months before graduation. I'd still get the time to practice in secret. I returned to life at Idas Academy, a deep anxiety about what was to come settling itself into my chest and growing heavier by the day. To make matters worse, Emoria withdrew from me. We interacted briefly passing each other in the mess or the hall, but she continually made excuses not to stick around. She had increased practices for flight, sure, but Pim and Donne both did as well and made time — though not as much as I would've liked.

I found solace in Lania's company over the week. We worked like mad on our final design projects for Alduin, and when we weren't in the workshops or the mess hall we often found excuses to sit at the top of the ramparts of Idas Academy and watch flight training high above.

"They really are wondrous," Lania said. "Makes me wonder if you're really on the right path and I'm not. You'll get to work on those, be a part of the ground crews."

High above us painted striker rigs weaved their aerial dances. They worked on maneuvers in their flights of five, flying in V formations with two pilots on either side of their flight leader, before crashing into another flight in mock combat. Light lances ignited in the hands of the pilots, this far away it was almost impossible to make out the differences in paint to find out who was who, but I knew my friends fought up there in the sky.

"They are," I said. "It'd be exciting to be in a ground crew, but I feel like I'm always going to wish I was getting into them instead of preparing them for others."

"I'd love to go up," she said. "Just once."

As they clashed and split into dueling pairs the individual pilots became more pronounced. I found Pimly, his rig painted a light shade of green, and Donnel, who's rig was the silver of his clan's crest, fighting back to back with each other. They moved in tandem — Pimly, who preferred his lance longer to give him room, pushing his opponent back before Donnel flared his jump jets and rocketed around Pimly to take the opponent into closer, more brutal combat that Donnel's hammer-shaped lance worked well in. Pimly spun at the same moment that Donnel rocketed away, surprising the pilot that Donnel had been brawling with the precision of his attack. It took a few more minutes to break the defenses of the last three pilots in the other flight, but my friends had already won the day with that maneuver. The twin lance gambit, popularized by none other than King Atticus I and his Thunder cohort, executed to perfection. I whooped in excitement for my friends.

“That was slick,” Lania said. “Donnel and Pimly?”

I nodded and continued to scan the other group of two flights looking for Emoria's slate paint job and Zachariah's maroon.. Hovering back from the fight I saw the Chancellor's purple rig and Edward Dornan's red — both with rings of gold at their shoulders to mark them as flight leads for an entire cohort of fifteen pilots. They each had their helmet's removed and held them under their arms as they watched. Zachariah exchanged a set of strikes with a pilot I didn't recognize, and who was obviously outclassed. The poor student held on for the first few, but his defense collapsed under Zachariah's heavy strikes and after a strike to the helmet, no damage actually done with the lances on their practice mode, Zachariah's opponent was out of the game.

Less than twenty minutes later the pilots were landing in their hangar at the top of the crystal tower, and a few minutes after that Lania and I greeted Donnel and Pimly as they came out the

door, the two pilots of the Shield Cohort standing like statues on either side of the door.

“You two were incredible!” I said. “Twin lance gambit? You’re getting fancy now.”

“Not as fun as Hammer and Anvil!” Donnel said. “Pimly makes a great hammer.”

“And you a great anvil,” Pimly said, laughter escaping my typically stoic friend.

“Aimon,” Donnel said. “You remember saying you would help with modifications to the suits yes?”

“I’d love to,” I said. “Lania?”

“Are you kidding me?” She said. “Of course I will. What do you need?”

Donnel wanted his foot pedals, which controlled thrust for each of the jump jets, moved up the leg of his suit slightly. His shorter frame had been accommodated by the school and his rig altered, but not very well apparently. Pimly wanted to be able to remove his gauntlets while keeping them close enough to put back on, but wouldn’t explain why. Lania, tools always close at hand, took a measurement of Donnel’s lower body and then asked one of the pilots guarding the door if she could measure their suit. Surprisingly, after explaining why, the pilot allowed it. She bid us goodbye and, excited about the prospect of working on a rig, headed for her workshop to start sketching.

Donnel, Pimly, and I made our way back toward the suite. I figured I’d let Lania use up her excitement, and with only a few days before the date we had set with Amaya I needed to ask my friends for help.

“I found The Star,” I said, the door to the room closing behind us.



“What?” Pimly said. “By yourself?”

“I got a bit of help,” I said. “Your sister went to pay them a visit with me.”

“You brought Emoria into this?” He said, a bit of uncharacteristic anger seeping into his voice.

“I know” I said. “But Pim, are you sure you two are related? She brought me along on an adventure first, sneaking through the castle.”

“My sister is,” he started. “Unconventional.”

“What did the star person say?” Donnel asked.

“She can’t get a set of the plans,” I said. “But she thinks we can do one better. I’m going to need help from you two.”

I laid out the plan, then went through it again it again. They would have the easiest jobs of the heist, but still I hated that I might be getting my friends into trouble. Watching practice flights with Lania had cemented the course of action though. I had to be in the graduation tests for pilot track, I had to be able to fly, and that meant I needed a suit.

I left Donnel and Pimly after dinner to head up towards the workshops. Lania had been in the mess for dinner, though her eyes had been drooping and she had nearly nodded off and fallen face first into her meal. I sent her back to her room for sleep and told her I’d continue the work. I approached the door to Lania’s workshop, her spare key in my hand like mine was in her dresser in case we ever needed to borrow tools or supplies, and found her door wide open with her automatic lanterns on.

“Master Alduin,” I greeted the aging machinist.

“Ah,” he said after turning to see me. “Good evening Mister Solan. I see my assistants have found a new project?”

He gestured toward the wall Lania liked to tack up her sketches. The first stages of the modifications from the suit were emblazoned on the wall in front of him, and I became suddenly nervous we wouldn’t be allowed. I was glad we had this excuse now, if he had been inspecting my workshop and seen the baseless attempts I had made at sketching suits without anything to base them on he might have been suspicious.

“Ha!” He chuckled. “Don’t worry. I like the initiative that the two of you show. You’re probably not technically supposed to work on your friends’ suits, but I’ll smooth it over with the Chancellor if anything comes up. Just make sure you’re right, and that you don’t kill one of those students with something faulty.”

“I will sir,” I said.

I wondered how he knew what we were using it for, and then realized that Lania had written ‘shorty sized’ next to her diagram for Donnel’s modifications. She liked teasing him about his height, but it didn’t seem to bother my dwarven friend. Alduin seemed to be in thought, looking at the designs. I wondered...

“Master Alduin,” I found myself saying. “Did you ever want to fly them instead of fixing them?”

“I think everybody that has ever been in a ground crew would tell you that they wished they could fly,” he said. “Until they see the aftermath of the first actual fight. Against the Hobbolds

we'd lose a Striker or two, but generally the problem fighting them was that we didn't have enough pilots, not that we would lose too many."

He stepped away from one drawing and focused on the sketches for Pimly's removable gauntlets.

"But when the Houses fight each other it is brutal," he said. "Pilots coming back with an arm sheered off by a light lance, or limping back with a massive cauterized hole through their armor and the stomach underneath. As much as the suits are protection, a lot of the time they work just as well as a coffin."

The Master Machinist, his typical jovial nature replaced by something more solid — more knowing, looked toward me.

"I just want you to know what you're getting yourself into Aimon," he said. "The exemption is a tempting way out of your service, but there's not a lot of Legion engineers that end up on the wrong end of a light lance, or a war club for that matter."

Had Lania told him? Or had the whip smart man just figured it out searching through my workshop?

"The gauntlets are smart," he said on his way out the door. "Pass the design along after you figure it out."

I tried for a long time after he left to sit down and continue Lania's work, but I couldn't get the echo of Alduin's words to leave my brain. They reminded me of Bertrand, who would have told me straight off if I brought my plans to him how idiotic I was. Both of these men who had seen war advised me against becoming a pilot. But as much as the idea of killing someone turned my

stomach I thought of the Legion pilots who had saved my father and I, even if they couldn't save my mother. They were heroes, pilots all across Idacia saved people every single day. And as a pilot, especially if I won the graduation and could become a minor noble, I could save my home. I would outrank the Ments in social standing and I would have a flight of my friends, if they wanted to join me, to back me up.

On top of all that, I'd get to be the one soaring through the air. To have, as a people, conquered one of nature's rules and taken to the skies not participating seemed a great offense. The plan would work. Amaya was smarter than her years, raised on and by the streets of this city. If anyone could design a heist of this level I would have to assume it would be her.

## 19.

“How much longer?” Pimly asked nervously.

We sat in three groups in an open air I in the high quarter. It was dusk, the last light of the day fading quickly over the horizon as it chased the sun. Pimly, Donnel, and I at one table with Emoria, Amaya, and Mouse at another. Two streets down the pair of bored Silversticks stood watch at the front door of the large warehouse and in the backdrop The Needle, the first of the new towers to be built in the high ward and the current headquarters of the Merchant Guild, stood like a tall sentry over the small shipping district. Most of the shipping in Idas was handled in the low ward — most thought these warehouses only supplied the expensive shops of the city’s wealthiest class. They were mostly right except, as Amaya’s best scout Maps found out, for a single warehouse that held the Guild’s current stock of Striker suits.

Amaya had broken her crew into six different groups for today. It was, according to her, the biggest coordinated move by the city’s underworld since a crew called The Ghosts had managed to steal an entire quarter’s wages meant to make its way to the Dornan front in Hobbold territory by impersonating the Silversticks that were hired to transport it more than a decade ago. Five different low security shops hit simultaneously at seventh bell. That had been ten minutes ago.

“As soon as we see that they know,” I said.

I took another sip of the cooling coffee in my mug and from further down the street saw a Silverstick officer, silver knots on the shoulders of his uniform marking him as a superior, running toward the pair of guards. A few moments later they stiffened, seeing their superior coming toward them, and after a brief exchange one of the guards left with the officer.

Amaya looked toward me and nodded sharply. Donnel, Pimly, and myself stood to leave and made our way toward the alley across the street. Out of sight of the guards and patrons behind us, we turned the corner of the alley and started to run back out into the street right in front of the guard. He drew his baton instinctively, but returned it to his belt as we drew close. We sucked air like we had run a farther distance, our clothes the rich fabric of the wealthy, though my sleeves and pant legs were rolled up because Pimly was so much taller than me. I hoped he wouldn't see through the ruse.

“Our master's shop,” I huffed out between sucking breaths. “Thieves. They're taking the safe with them. You have to help!”

The silver hesitated, but looked off in the direction that Pimly pointed behind me. Mouse popped out from behind one building, looking toward us, and then with all of the power in her small lungs yelled.

“Silvers!”

She ducked back behind a building, and the Silverstick was hooked.

“Take me there,” he said, bravado and confidence in his position as the hero of the story.

“You two take him,” I said. “I have to catch my breath.”

I doubled over, putting my hands on my knees.

“Don't let anyone in those gates except for another Silverstick,” the guard said before taking off. “There's supposed to be more here in ten minutes.”

Shit. Donnel gave me a concerned look before taking off with Pim and the guard. They would

bring him to an already emptied storefront, then disappear when he went to investigate. But our timetable had just become much tighter.

Amaya and Emoria approached soon after. Emoria bent down behind the barrier the guard had been standing behind and went to work on the gate's lock.

"Ten minutes till backup," I said to Amaya.

"Godsdamnit," She said. "We've got to move quick. Mouse said it's at the back of the warehouse, near the freight doors."

A soft click came from the lock, and Emoria pushed the gate open. We went through, a few onlookers from the I noticing us and pointing. Emoria locked the gate behind us and we moved into the building.

Inside the warehouse was filled to the brim with all kinds of industrial product. Steel sheets, machine parts, pallets of hardened glass. Five rows of shelving with goods stacked high on each. We moved quickly down the middle aisle, Emoria and Amaya leading the way toward the far side of the large building. You could fit the mess hall from the Academy in the room four times over. As we drew close both of my companions stopped abruptly and crouched low to the ground to move against one of the rows of shelving. I followed and, drawing close, whispered to them.

"Guard?" I asked.

"One," Emoria said. "Sitting at a table and reading."

"What do we do?" I asked Amaya.

"Plan is already cooked," she said. "We don't have time to take the suit out quietly. Not before

the rest of the silvers show up.”

“You said it’d be an hour,” I hissed.

“Yeah well,” she said. “Most silvers are incompetent. They’re grown. Figured they’d all be.”

“So what’s the plan?” Emoria said, looking back at us.

Nobody said anything. No concrete idea came to my mind. We couldn’t sneak around him. There might even be a second lock that he had the key for. And the backup was closing in.

I gave up on waiting for a plan. Still crouched slightly, I dashed out of our hiding spot and moved on a line toward the distracted guard.

“Aimon!” Emoria hissed.

Thirty feet. Twenty. When I was ten feet away the guard noticed me and started to stand, his left hand going down to his waist. That’s when I realized how big of a mistake I had made. He drew a pistol from a holster on his hip. Not an old flintlock like father’s — one of the new semi-automatic sidearms.

“Stop!” He yelled

I reacted the only way I could think of. The fire I had felt in the Silver Hare with Zachariah was ignited by the guard drawing his gun up to me in slow motion. I grabbed the closest thing to me, a chair made of some lightweight material. I planted my foot and spun, trying to give the chair momentum, before launching it toward the guard. Two shots erupted from the pistol, the sound amplified and echoed by the metal walls loud enough to set my ears ringing. I didn’t feel anything hit me, didn’t know where his bullets went, but the chair hit the guard center mass and he went



down. Moments later I was on him, fists flying toward the downed mans face. He stopped squirming under me, and Emoria's strong arms pulled me off of him.

"Aimon!" She yelled tersely.

The ringing subsided slightly. The fire cooled from a bonfire to a campfire. My heart slowed from a gallop to a fast trot.

"Shit shit shit," Amaya said, leaning down to check the pulse of the guard. "What is your Godsdamned problem?"

"He was going to kill me," I said. "Going to ruin the plan."

"And the plans not ruined now?" She yelled.

"Is he going to be okay?" I asked.

"He'll live," she said. "Don't know about us though."

How long had it been? Ten minutes since Donnel and Pimly took off? The silvers wouldn't immediately have assumed a break-in, the gate was locked. But the people at the I had seen us, and the gunshot would have been heard outside. A large crate against the wall stood separate from the rest, a thick metal lock on its front. I saw the guard's chest moving up and down. His face, though covered in blood, looked almost peaceful. I took a key ring off his belt, one large key with a few smaller ones. Out of my pocket I pulled a full fuel cell.

A sharp crash echoed through the large room from where we had entered. Footsteps, lots of them, followed.

"Emoria," I said, tossing her the key and fuel cell. "Go for the crate. Amaya find us some rope

and tie me and you together on our belts.”

They both rushed off and I searched for the pistol the guard had. I found it under the nearby table where it had slid as the guard hit the ground. The legion instructor at the Academy said they held twelve bullets at once — ten left.

I tipped over a table to hide behind, Amaya scrambling over to me, a length of metal chain in hand. The footsteps grew closer as silvers closed in on us. The pistol was heavier than I thought. It felt strange to hold, to know that I could pull the trigger and end somebody's life. I really didn't want to kill anyone.

I popped above my makeshift cover and fired twice, aiming a few feet over the head of the closest silvers who were halfway up the warehouse toward us. All of them scattered, and I ducked back down behind the table before bullets from their side slammed into the metal on the other side or ricocheted off. I crawled a few feet to my right, leaned out from the side of the desk, and fired twice more. Six left.

Another hail of gunfire came from the silvers.

“Aimon, left side!” Amaya yelled over the uproar of gunfire.

I slid to her side of the table, felt her attaching the clip of the chain to my belt and wrapping it around me awkwardly to clip it back into itself. I squeezed the trigger three times, leaning just out of cover on the left side. A few seconds later, I went back above the top of the table, fired my last three bullets in fast succession down the left, center, and far right rows of shelving.

“Emoria!” I yelled.

No response. My heart raced. We were out of options.

“Come out,” a silver yelled. “Drop the weapons and come out. You don’t have to die today!”

“Oh don’t worry,” Emoria’s amplified voice screamed from behind me. “We won’t be!”

Emoria, clad in the exoskeleton that had let humanity survive the Hobbold Wars and the wrath of the king of the gods, burst out of the crate with her jump jets flared. Even in the narrow confines of the warehouse, she danced in flight. She spun quick circles over our head and Amaya, having figured out my plan, held up the chain for Emoria to see. Emoria burst from her circle pattern, dashing toward the silvers and for a moment I thought she’d go in to fight them. She’d have won, easily. Instead, she extended her light lance as far as it would go and flew parallel to the end of the shelves, only a meter off the ground. She used the light lance to cut the legs off the shelving units. For a moment, nothing happened as Emoria went back toward the ceiling of the warehouse. But a deep groan came as the shelves sagged, then collapsed into large heaps in front of the silvers. The debris blocked their path forward, as well as any sightline to shoot at us. Emoria flew back toward us, grabbing the chain that Amaya held upward, and towed us into the air. She slashed a large square in the ceiling, and before any of the silvers could fire at us in the air we launched into the night sky — the sounds of gunfire dissipating behind us.

I spun wildly on the end of the chain, my heart felt like it wanted to jump out of my chest and take my stomach with it. The first stars of the night winked in and out behind the clouds and spun in circles as I did. Amaya grabbed my arm, righting my spin, and pulled it up toward the chain that hung from Emoria’s metal fist. Amaya tried to say something, her words ripped away by the wind, and then pointed toward her hand that gripped the chain holding her upright.

With my spin righted my body seemed to come back under my control. Below us, the high ward stretched in relative calm down toward the Academy. The small forest around the Academy

that made the buffer between the high ward and low glowed with an ethereal light, the lanterns in front of buildings like the bathhouse and library casting a warm glow through the trees. Further into the low ward the bustle of shift change filled the streets. Second shifters headed to their homes, some stopping off at a restaurant or tavern on the way. Thirds weaved through crowds toward the massive elevators that would ferry them down into the Rift to resume the industrial heartbeat of the city. My knuckles may have been white as I gripped the chain, but I had never felt so free in my life. Emoria banked to the right, then started to descend into the easternmost edge of the low ward. Here, a row of older buildings sat between the shipping district where I had first entered the city and the eastern wall of Idas. We were far from any of the gatehouses on the wall, no worry of silvers seeing us drop down except from the ground. Strikers were a normal sight in the city and while they didn't typically land in the low ward it wasn't entirely unheard of. The buildings we dropped toward looked to be mainly offices for the shipping district, we could very well be a pilot coming to check on his business.

On the ground back in the high ward, Amaya's crews would be bringing the goods they had taken to a middleman who would resell them outside of the city. With his caravan license, he'd be able to easily make his way out of the city with all of the evidence. They'd link back up with Donnel and Pimly outside of the inn where the caravaneer was staying and make their way back to the low ward in two groups. We, on the other hand, were headed for the home of a wealthy elven friend of Emoria's where she promised I could keep the suit until graduation. Donnel and Pimly were suppose to meet Emoria and I at the eastern bridge in an hour, but hopefully sooner. The quicker we could make it back to our rooms the better. The kids would disappear into the Hollows to lay low.

Emoria swooped low over the safe house, slowing to a point I was convinced she would stall,

and dropped us a few feet down to the flat rooftop before she headed back into the sky to circle once more and finally land herself.

Amaya let out a loud whoop, and her joy was infectious. I laughed along with her, celebrating the victory and ignoring the near disaster. Emoria popped her helmet off, but instead of joy her face was marked by sorrow. She had been crying under the metal helmet, and she wouldn't look at me.

A trapdoor on the ceiling burst open, and in moments a half dozen masked assailants armed with recurve bows and repeating rifles were arrayed in a half circle in front of us. All of them were elves, the masks doing nothing to conceal their pointed ears and lithe frames. My hands went up into the air instinctually with the weapons pointed at me, Amaya's as well. While I should have felt fear a strange, heavy handed blanket of calm seeped through my body. It was unnatural. It felt the same as a body warming from the inside out after a winter day spent outside and finally drinking a cup of something warm. My heart started to race, then slowed as the calm pushed harder on the rest of my emotions. Like something was actively fighting my brain to control my emotional reaction. Or someone. Taniel had mentioned another type of Elven magic — mentalists. Elementalists, like Taniel himself, could control some or all of the elements in the external world. Mentalists, then, must be focused on the interior.

“You're a mentalist,” I said to Emoria.

She nodded in response, finally meeting my eyes. There was pain in hers for a brief moment before she steeled herself and stood taller. The blanket of calm didn't lift, but it stopped moving deeper into me.

“That's why I felt fear when I was around you at first?” I asked.

“Yes,” she said. “It’s a defense mechanism.”

“What is this?” I asked.

“I need the suit Aimon,” she said. “My people need the suit.”

“You’re going to get your own!” I said. “In a month, you and your brother will be the first Elven pilots.”

“But if we take one of those your King and nobility will know Nelemor took them to study,” she said. “We need to be able to make our own. The Dwarves need to be able to make their own. That’s the only way to force recognition. We take the only thing your kind understands — strength.”

“That’s why you needed to figure out how the fuel worked,” I said.

“Yes,” she said. “I’ve been taking shavings of the tower so we could make our own, for a little bit at least.”

The tower? The Crystal Tower? Idacia’s home, made by her power. Of course.

“And so what about me?” I asked. “What about Amaya?”

“Amaya knows how the game is played,” Emoria said.

“Then explain it to me Godsdamnit!” I yelled. “Explain how this is anything other than you betraying someone who thought they were your friend. Explain how it was anything other than using me and Donnel and your brother and the kids to do your work for you? Gods. Pim? Is he in on this?”

*He's not my brother. Emoria's voice said, though her lips didn't move. But yes, he knew the plan. He didn't like it, but his mother was the one who approached me to go to The Academy in place of her daughter. I was raised in a troupe, traveling the roads of Amorset, before they were killed for raising what few bows we had against a group of Tok's soldiers who were taking our food. I wanted there to be two suits there, but we ran out of time. I'm sorry.*

“I can't,” Emoria said out loud. “You have to go. If you tell anyone about this, The Guild will try you as well and you will be found guilty. The suit will already be gone. You will not come out of it okay.”

The two voices of Emoria confused me. I didn't know if the one in my head was real, or if my brain had made it. But it was too detailed, so was this more of her magic?

“It was all fake then?” I asked.

“Not all of it,” she said sadly. “But enough of it. You are good Aimon, but too many of your people are not.”

Through all of that conversation, none of the masked elves had moved — their bows and rifles trained on us the entire time. At a nod from Emoria, two surged forward and moved us toward the trap door. They shuffled us through the building quickly, moving down flights of stairs before pushing us out the front door and slamming it behind us.

“Can't trust grownns,” Amaya said. “Shoulda listened to me.”

“You're right,” I said. “I should've.”

Emoria's hunger for the suit made so much more sense. Her dedication to discovering what powered the suits, the desire to get the plans. It was all there, all right in front of me, and I hadn't

seen any of the signs until it was too late. In a month I graduated from Idas Academy. I'd spend twenty years in the Legion and hope my family and friends were still around when I was done.

I'd never get to fly again.

I met with Donnel and Pimly at the bridge and brushed off their questions about Emoria by saying she had opted to spend the night with her friend in the low ward. We tried to move past the silvers at the bridge quickly, but there were almost a dozen blocking entry. Once they saw us there was no turning back, so we pressed on toward them hoping our papers would get us past.

"Why are you lot out tonight?" The silver officer asked.

"Just taking in the city while we can before we graduate sir," I said.

"Not getting into any trouble?" He said

"No sir," I replied. Then, playing up my fear like a good noble would. "Is there trouble about?"

"Aye," he said, pulling close. "Mixed group of thieves — humans, dwarves, and elves."

"Notun?" A familiar voice called from behind. "Thank the gods you lot are out in force. Bad day in Idas."

Otro pulled up behind us, apron from the tavern slung over his shoulder.

"Shit," Donnel said under his breath, covering it up with a cough.

"Lord Carrack," the silver said, straightening his posture and taking a step back. "Something happen over at the Key?"

"Just rumors of something happening up top," Otro said smoothly. "Tipp closed up early, just



like your captain asked. What's the hold up with my friends here?"

"Your friends?" The silver asked.

"Roommates actually," Otro said. "They were down at the Key enjoying themselves before we shut down. I sent them on ahead since I had to clean up."

"We stopped off for one more at the Riverside," I said, thinking of one of the taverns between near this bridge.

The silver eyed our papers one more time, but eventually relented and let us cross The Rift. Halfway down, out of earshot of the silvers, I let out a deep breathe I hadn't realized I had been holding in.

"Thanks Otro," I said. "Don't think they were going to let us pass."

"Oh I think they were going to take you in," he said. "Not just let you pass. Notun's an angry one, doesn't like Dwarves."

"Hmph," Donnel let out. "Feeling is mutual."

We walked the rest of the way back to our rooms in relative silence. I told Donnel that night about Otro helping me to find Amaya, but there was still animosity between them even after that. I stayed awake in bed for a long time that night staring at the ceiling in the dim moonlight that snuck through the curtains. When I eventually fell to sleep, I dreamt of Dorchester. Not my home as I knew it, but the version that was to be. Factories along the outskirts pouring their fumes into our homes. Shuffling citizens, heads to the ground as they walked from their homes to their shifts and back. A new tower hangar on the Ment estate, a flight of Strikers under Zachariah's command.

I couldn't stop the dream, couldn't pull myself out like some nightmares. And eventually I resigned that I would live in it, join the walk to the factory myself.

## 20.

The next weeks in the city passed in a haze. Emoria retreated further, so much so that in the final weeks of the school term I didn't see her outside of the mess hall. I had no real interest in seeing her, outside of trying to get answers, anyway but the loss of friendship still hurt. Worse, Donnel and Pimly were gone more and more often, and near the end of the term left every day for two weeks with the rest of the pilot track students to practice on the course they would use for graduation tests near the Attas Mountains.

After Emoria's betrayal, I withdrew just as much as she did. I only saw Lania around the workshop when we planned Donnel and Pimly's suit modifications, but my heart wasn't in the work anymore most days. The mechanics of the suits were still fascinating, but every time we started to sketch or debate ideas the idea that I wouldn't get to fly one myself took over. The idea of the exemption, even though it had always been a far off hope, had given me enough buoyancy not to drown in the dread of twenty years with the Legion. It was better than twenty with Dornan, or however long I would have survived as a front line soldier, but it was still a jail without a cell.

On the night before graduation exams Donnel, Pimly, Lania, and I gathered in my workshop. Donnel and Pimly had, after having it approved by the Chancellor, flown their suits into the room using the large window and we had borrowed rigging from Master Alduin's workshop to hoist the heavy suits high enough for us to work on them. It had been a pain to disassemble the rigging and carry the heavy pieces down to the workshop before putting them back together, but it was worth it to keep the suits still and be able to move them up and down to get at the feet of Donnel's suit without sitting on the ground.

Donnel and Pimly brought outside food for in their thanks, and we all talked about the upcoming tests while Lania and I worked, Pimly and Donnel pitching in to bring us tools and ask questions about the mechanics of the suits.

Lania focused on Pimly's gauntlets, having been the one to think of a carbon weave string that would keep the gauntlets close to Pimly's hands. She planned to put a reel device, activated by a button she was placing on the exterior of his forearm, that would bring the gauntlets back up to connect with his forearm plating when he wanted them back on.

"The first test is a flight course," Pimly was explaining. "We flew it five times, each slightly different. It dips in and out of the Attas range, quite fun to fly really."

"Aye," Donnel said. "I've been thinking of making one to practice back in the Peaks."

"Even though you won't be able to take the suit back there?" Pimly asked.

"We will eventually," Donnel said. "We join with house Atticus and continue to push for reform, yes?"

"That is the plan," Pimly said.

I was removing the outer plating from the shins of Donnel's suit, and the turn to politics brought back Emoria's words on the rooftop. I had told Donnel and Pimly about the betrayal, there was no way to keep it secret. Pimly said he had argued against the plan, which Emoria had said as well. I understood his need to keep the secret — Gods I understood Emoria's reasoning — but it still hurt.

"First test?" Lania asked. "You lot have more than one?"

"Three," Donnel said. "But all part of one, sort of."

“The second is a duel against another student,” Pimly added.

Inside Donnel’s suit, underneath of the pedals that controlled his speed, I found a strange kink in the design of the suit. The fuel lines were not as efficient as they could be, weaving between a line that I thought was coolant. They didn’t need to be, the fuel lines wouldn’t be getting any meaningful cooling from the other pipe, and they shouldn’t need it anyway. The coolant was for the engines in the feet, not the fuel line itself. I didn’t really want to test the theory with my friend anyway, there was always the chance that I was wrong, so I went to work on the pedals. Examining them, I felt a small burst of happiness in the design. Lania and I had come up with a backup, in case the designer of the suits had actually been idiotic enough to not make them adaptable to different heights, but it involved a very inelegant solution of blocks of wood used as makeshift stilts. Instead, I found that the pedals and the metal base they were connected to, which was what the pilot actually stood on, only using their toes to apply pressure to the pedals unless they wanted a full burn that would eventually cause the jump jets to degrade, could be moved up and down according to the pilots height.

“They really did try to make it as hard as possible for you Donnel,” I said. “Who’s the head of the ground crew in the Tower Hanger?”

“Daedelun Rommel,” he replied. “What do you mean? Tried to make it hard for me?”

“The pedals are adjustable,” I said. “It would have been idiotic for them not to be, but we couldn’t know without looking inside. He could have adjusted them for you any time you wanted.”

“Bondumir’s Hammer,” Donnel said, disdain dripping from his voice. “Lord Rommel and his children lay another insult on my Clan.”

The air of anger and betrayal melted into the room, and we drew quiet for a few minutes before Lania broke the silence with a crackling bite of the fried cutlet sandwich. A single chuckle escaped Pimly's mouth at the absurd volume the bite made in the silent room, then I felt one coming for me as well. The four of us fell into a fit, each person's laughter feeding the others.

"That had to have been the most stereotypically Dwarven sentence I've ever heard a Dwarf say," Pimly laughed. "And I've met your father."

"Clan Krize has a way with words," Donnel replied. "It is why we win high chieftain votes."

"Not the decades of artificed weaponry in the armories?" Pimly asked.

"Those help," Donnel chuckled out.

"Donnel come get in the suit so I can see how high to move this up," I said.

He did, climbing in and balancing on his right foot with the left pedal removed. I placed it into one of the slots further up the leg, and he moved his leg to rest above it to test the height.

"What's the last test?" I asked. "Flight, duel, and what?"

"They split us into two teams, two flights a piece," Donnel said above me. "We vote on a commander and do a mock battle to capture an old outpost in the mountains from the Unity War."

I nodded that I had the measurement, and he climbed out of the open suit.

"And the winning commander gets his own flight?" I asked.

"Yes," Donnel said. "And becomes a minor noble, if they aren't one already."

"What happens if one of you is the winning commander?" I asked.

“We do not know,” Pimly said. “It hasn’t happened before. Your King won’t make a decision until he knows he has to.”

If things were as tense as the Chancellor thought, that made sense. King Atticus III was a reformer, was pushing for a united Amorset, but he wouldn’t push the other Houses unless he needed to.

I replaced the other pedal in Donnel’s suit and re-attached the plating in front of the delicate machinery. If you were fighting a pilot, that seemed to me to be a good place to be targeting. Even if it was far from a killing blow, a light lance through the shin or foot wouldn’t even hit the pilot, the precise machinery there kept the suit in flight. Good information to know, though I wasn’t going to get to use it.

Donnel climbed into the suit to test the fit, and a wide smile creped onto my friend’s face.

“Try and outfly me now lordlings,” he said.

He had an affinity for the expression, even if it technically applied to Pimly as well.

A half hour later Lania had Pimly’s removable gauntlets ready to go, and his test went just as smoothly. He could pop them off mid flight with one touch on the button, then the reel would pull them back with the next touch.

“Pimly,” I said. “I hope this isn’t a bad question, but are you an elementalist?”

“I have reached an understanding of air,” he said after nodding. “Most in my family have been full elementalists, but I don’t think I will be able to reach that level.”

He didn't seem like he wanted to continue, so we started to clean. Lania left eventually, heading back to her rooms or maybe up to the rampart to watch them fly back to the hangar. Donnel and Pimly climbed into their suits but, seeing Pimly hanging back a bit, Donnel told us he'd see us back in the rooms and dropped out the window. He ignited his jump jets halfway down the wall, and I was thankful he didn't leave scorch marks on my floor, even if it would only be my floor for another day.

"It's the reason they went with this path," he said. "My mother and Emoria. Well, Emoria I think just wanted to hurt humanity, but my mother is scared of losing Nelemor. The magic is retreating. It is slow, happening over generations, but it is happening. Nelaeryn used to commune with our people, but has been distancing herself more like your Goddess."

"Gods Pim," I said. "How bad is it?"

"Now?" He said. "Not terrible. My generation has fewer full elementalists and a scarce number of mentalists. That's part of why Emoria was chosen, she is probably the most powerful mentalist in two generations. Her father was on the council before he left to travel the world. She could communicate back to my mother."

"So she can speak in. . ." I said, stumbling on the irrationality of the idea. "She can speak in other people's minds?"

"She can," he said. "And influence emotion, though she is quite heavy handed in that. It works on humans, they don't have experience with it or stories, but she is quite poor at not being noticed by other Elves."

He started to walk toward the window, but paused.



“I’m truly sorry,” he said. “You have been a great friend to me Aimon. It pains me that my family has hurt you; that I did not tell you. But my people are in danger.”

“I understand Pim,” I said. “It hurts, but I do understand you. Even Emoria’s actions make sense, even more now that you tell me this. But my home suffers now because of it.”

“I will do all I can to help you,” he said. “I owe you that much.”

He dropped out of the window, then rocketed up over the ramparts back toward the Crystal Tower and I relaxed for the first time the whole night. I hated that my heart still beat faster when I thought about her. I had always kept my circle of trust small and had been reminded why, but still I couldn’t not feel love for the people that had helped me survive a year in this school.

We all woke early the next day. Breakfast was served an hour earlier than normal, and within ten minutes the entire mess had cleared as students scarfed their food before running to prepare for their exams. My preparation was done. No pre-flight rituals like the pilots, no last second studying like the historians and politikers. My test was a series of three war games against three different students. Everyone had to win at least one of their matches to graduate, and the only preparation I needed had been done throughout the year of studying in the library. I thought through historical battles, their defensive emplacements, the ways that they were broken as I walked toward the central courtyard. All of the students would watch a procession of the twenty pilot track students as they walked in pairs through the main entrance to Idas Academy and into the Crystal tower before they left for their tests.

In the courtyard the population of students were milling about in small groups. It was packed, the school seeming to be filled to capacity. I spotted Lania, Donnel, and Pimly near the front entrance, but on my way there was waylaid by my past.

“Aimon,” Zachariah’s voice called, dripping with false benevolence. “I forgot, I’ve got a letter for you from Dorchester. Brought it back after break.”

He handed over the letter, seal obviously broken and paper folded. The fire started in my stomach, the Godsdamned nerve of this man. He smirked at me, then turned and walked back into the crowd. Panic rising at what my family and friends might have said that was left unanswered, I walked out of the courtyard trying to find a place of my own. The hallways were packed full of students and stewards coming to watch the ceremony. I pushed against the flood of bodies, accidentally knocked books and bags out of arms in my haste. Finally, I found a steward’s staircase and went inside. The door closing behind me, the noise reduced to a murmur through the thick walls.

My eyes tried to move so fast through the letter that I had to make a conscious effort to slow down, to read the words on the page and not fly over them. It was from Father, the attention to detail that had persisted even through the worst of his obsession with drink showing itself in his careful lines and precise handwriting. He wrote slow, painfully so in times that the shop had been overcrowded with customers, and had a habit of throwing out letters half written because of a slip of the hand. I laughed to myself, vision growing blurry with tears, as I imagined how many crumpled pieces of paper sat at the bottom of a trash bin wherever he had written the letter.

While he had written it, most of it was about the rest of our strange extended family. Jarrick and Natalia had received letters from Wilt talking about life in Riridre. He had convinced the

master shipwright to let him try his new design for moveable sails and was working with a team to outfit one of their port-hoppers, small ships meant for speed that merchants used to quickly distribute perishable goods to coastal towns and fishing villages, with the new sails for tests. I had known my best friend would succeed, even in the best school in the kingdom I hadn't met anyone as smart or dedicated as Wilt.

Bertrand had come through just before father had sent the letter with Zachariah, and Annie had decided to branch out by asking Bertrand and his fellow caravaneers if they would sell her clothes in the cities they visited. They had agreed, of course, and in Annie's way she had taken the money they paid for the clothes to purchase enough down to make winter clothes for some of the faltering families of the Outskirts. A pang of regret for not saying a better goodbye to Annie bubbled up from my stomach — distance, time, and the events of the last year complicating what once seemed like it might have been.

Bertrand was headed for the Hobbold front to offload the grain from Dorchester's last fall harvest and pick up iron ore for the steel mills in The Rift. Ros was, of course, still behind the counter of the bakery. Father had recently fixed two of her ovens that had went haywire and was eating a bough-berry pastry as a reward while writing.

The workshop was gone, Malwich having taken over the space while the construction of the factory was planned. Father apologized for turning my room into a small workspace for himself, but he was staying afloat. The farmers didn't trust Malwich, and the Outskirts would never turn away from him. He joked about sleeping better, no longer needing to wake up early to make me breakfast.

They all wanted to know how the capital was treating me, how many people I had met at the Academy and if the school had been able to teach me anything. I wanted so badly to tell them, to sit in my room right then and write a response then walk down to the shipping district and find a caravan heading North. Better yet, just pack my things and hop on a wagon heading to Dorchester. But it would only end badly, chains on wrists and a trial for desertion. I could send the letter tomorrow, with any luck. I'd be moving into the Legion camp outside of the city in the morning, and could stop by the shipping district on my way out of town.

Cheers echoed through the walls around me. The ceremony was finishing. I took one last look at the letter, holding it away from my body so that a stray tear didn't mar the paper, before folding it and tucking it into my jacket's pocket. The same pocket with Adaya's calling card — I should have gone to check on the kids but hadn't been able to bring myself to go down to the low ward since the night of Emoria's betrayal.

The hallways outside the steward's staircase were emptying quickly, students rushing to their exams. I made my way down the hallway back toward my rooms, and found the lecture room that had been turned into a space for our war games. There were 12 students present, those of us on the scholarship track focusing in military engineering. Seven of the students, including myself, were sponsored by the Legion. The rest would be taking their knowledge to their different houses.

The grizzled Legionnaire that had been our instructor, his uniform freshly pressed, explained the rules of the final exams to us once more before announcing the pairings for the three rounds. I actually enjoyed the games quite a lot, we had been practicing over the previous weeks in preparation for the exams. Through the practice rounds I had found I was oddly skilled in the martial theory that composed them. That day, I was not.

In all three rounds I would be matched against noble students. All three were members of Zachariah's circle, cousins and youngest children of Houses Rommel and Tok. My first opponent idly asked about correspondence from home, said how excited he was to see his family the following day when he returned home, and Zachariah's plan finally made more sense. Even realizing that this was intentional, that he was trying to get me to fail, I felt my cheeks going hot as the anger intensified. They hadn't only withheld the only communication I had received from Dorchester, they had done it to try and ruin me.

I fell into my opponents trap within minutes of starting the game, pushing my only flight of Strikers into what I thought would be a bold raid on his supply stores and instead finding a unit of rig hunters, specially trained infantry that all of the houses and the Legion itself employed to counter Strikers by using harpoons and net-cannons to bring the suits to the ground. Air superiority lost, I managed to hang on under his assault for a few more minutes but was the first student eliminated in the first round. In the second I didn't fare much better. Hesitant after the resounding loss, I tried to hold back and ended up reactionary. I fell for a feint with her strikers, and brought my rig hunter squad out of position and lost it to a better equipped unit of riflemen she had hidden in a gully. I tried to react by forcing a duel of strikers, which would have given me a chance to win with dice throws, but lost track of her rig hunters and lost quickly after that.

My back was against the wall. Win and graduate, lose and not make my certifications. I would be relegated to a further apprenticeship with a ground crew, lose any chance of being selected for the Idas garrison. I'd end up at a way stop outpost between cities, or worse yet at one of the Legion's strategic depots doing mind numbing upkeep on reserve suits.

As the third round started, the sounds of three dozen jump jets rattled the walls of the Academy. The pilots were taking off for their graduation course, the King and his honor guard going with them so he could observe the exams. Most of the House Lords would be there as well, traveling with their own flights to watch their relatives graduation and scout the new crop of pilots for any that they could bring into their fold. In front of me, my opponent made his opening gambit by pushing into a siege posture around my emplacements. He was too bold, thinking I would be rattled in my precarious position. I readied to flank him with the two of riflemen I had positioned at the edges of my defensive line, ready to push him back onto the defensive.

*In your workshop.* Emoria's voice said in my head. I looked around, confused for a moment at why she would be in the room here and not with the pilots.

*Move your ass Aimon.* She said, more forcefully. *We're heading to the course. You have to go now.*

On the table, my opponent was sending in a flight to cut a hole in my defenses. I hadn't made a move, and he thought I was stunned by his gambit. I looked to the instructor, who had a pained look to give back to me, and then I ran. Out the door, into the completely empty main hall. The instructor called after me, but I couldn't be bothered with the war games. There was no winning there, even if I had pushed my opponent back and graduated I would be in for twenty years. Twenty years without seeing my family or Annie or Wilt. Twenty years without Donnel and Pimly. Twenty years without Emoria. If there was a chance, however small, that she had decided to help me I was seizing it. She had broken my trust once, but I believed in the person I had grown to know before that moment. I reached for the hope.

I climbed the stairs two at a time, sprinting up the flights before dashing into the hallway of workshops and heading for the door at the end of the hall. I unlocked the door, and was greeted by a last chance to seize a different path.

The striker suit we had stolen was up on the rigging leftover from our late night modifications of Donnel and Pimly's suits. I wanted to climb right in. Wanted to flare my jump jets and hope that Zachariah's helmet was off so I could see his face when I showed up. But I had no practice in the rig. I would fail their tests if I didn't change the variables, and in an effort to distract myself from the despair the previous night my hands had found purpose. I rushed to my workbench and opened the top drawer to pull out two straight fuel lines. It was a simple modification — just removing the current lines and fitting the new ones in the new gap left in the coolant lines — but if I was right I'd have an advantage over every other rig in the sky. There was no time to test it, and ten minutes later I pulled the breastplate of the suit closed and attached the helmet over my face. The room in front of me darkened slightly, the tinted glass of the helmet meant to stop a pilot from losing whatever they were tracking if they needed to look toward the sun.

*Emoria* I thought. I didn't know if it would work. *How do I fly this thing?*

*I didn't think you would trust me* she said. *You know the basics, I can walk you through the rest on your way out here. But you're going to have to flare to catch up.*

I moved my leg, the hydraulics in the suit moving to assist me, and took my first step as a Striker Pilot. I moved to the window, already opened to the morning air, and dropped out. I fell toward the ground. Thirty feet, then fifteen.

Then I soared. And I fell.

I flared the jets again, adrenaline pumping after a near collision with the ground. I righted myself in the sky, heart pumping, and kept my foot on the pedal this time. Gods this was harder than they made it seem from the ground. I wobbled in the air, struggling to match the pressure of my left and right feet.

*Calm yourself* Emoria said. *I can feel the panic. Breathe Aimon.*

I tried to breathe deeply, the smell of oiled steel and grease a welcome reminder of home. I matched pressure in my feet, steadied my flight.

*Good.* Emoria said. *Now a little pressure at a time, match with both of your pedals, until you feel like you can flare.*

I sped up. I soared over the eastern wall of Idas so low that the sentries might have felt the wake of my suit cutting through the wind.

*Your shoulders are how you steer. Where they point, you go.*

I tested it, climbing higher and higher by angling my upper body to the sky. Growing slightly more comfortable, I added pressure to the foot pedals again. I gained speed, felt the added pressure in the engines below my feet. They didn't rattle or wheeze, the modification was holding.

*Let it loose.*

I took another deep breathe in, breathed it out through my nose, put the pedals to the platform, and leaped into extreme speed. The trees blurred into a singular entity below me, the grass seemed to ripple like a fast moving river. Mount Attis, the site for the tests, which had been barely visible from Idas grew quickly in front of me. The size of a bough-berry, the size of a pebble, then the size of a thumb. I saw the other strikers in front of me, all of them the size of bugs but growing



quickly. A second group of around fifteen moved to join them from the North, the red painted suits of Edward Dornan's Flash Cohort, the only other House that would be watching it seemed. Two of the pilots peeled off from the main group in wide arcs before coming back at me, the sun glinting off their purple painted suits — Thunder Cohort.

I couldn't stop to explain to them, or risk them not letting me continue forward. I stopped flaring the jump jets and slowed. I was about three miles behind the main group, the two that had broken off coming back toward me on an intercept angle. Their job was to protect the King, and an unrecognized rig flaring toward him was a threat. I waited. They drew to a half mile, then a quarter, and then I flared again and rocketed past their intercept. They soared past each other, and I rocketed back toward the main group as they reached their staging area in the sky for the tests. In front of me, the Thunder Cohort strikers arrayed in a half circle around King Atticus III and the rest of the two groups. I saw Emoria's slate grey suit approach the Chancellor, and after a moment she turned to the King. Light lances ignited, growing to their pilots preferred shape, and I pulled up to an ungraceful stop before they impaled me.

“Declare yourself pilot!” King Atticus III bellowed out of his suit's speakers.

I popped the release of my helmet, hovering uneasily and trying to keep equal pressure on the pedals. My hair matted to my head with sweat from the adrenaline, I hold my helmet under one arm and raise the other in surrender.

“My name is Aimon Solan my liege,” I said. “And I claim Oliph's exemption.”

## 21.

“You?” Edward Dornan said through his speakers. “Your family is penniless, where did you get that suit?”

The King angled his head, expecting an answer to the question as well.

“I . . .” I hesitated, unsure of what to say. “Would rather wait to explain that till after the tests my lord. I would hate to delay the ceremonies back in Idas.”

King Atticus nodded and the Chancellor moved toward me, parting the Thunder Cohort pilots who turned off their light lances and returned the hilts to their place at their hips, the metal sticking together with powerful magnets. I looked down and noticed my own light lance on my hip, good to know.

“Are you aware of what your tests will be?” The Chancellor said, removing her helmet to look at me directly.

“I do Chancellor,” I replied.

“Then lets get on with it,” she said, turning back to the group. “As Mr. Solan said, the rest of the students will be waiting for us.”

Edward Dornan stared at me through his helmet. A few feet away, I could see the whites of his eyes pouring into me. He turned, removing his helmet and moving his men away from the main group to converse with them separately. Two of the Thunder Cohort pilots moved away from the group and hovered in place in a line with each-other. In the distance a large ring, easily fifty feet

in diameter, was attached to wooden poles that jutted out from Mount Attis. I saw another in Attis, the seat of house Atticus, at the base of the mountain.

“You’ve all,” The Chancellor started. “Or most of you, have been training on this course for weeks. It is slightly different than any of the permutations you have seen, but the idea is the same. There are seven rings, beginning with the one you can see on the mountain and ending with the ring in the city. Each pilot must go through the rings, and we have observers placed throughout the course to ensure there is no cheating. The first three students that pass back between these two pilots will be given extra consideration as commanders of the cohorts for the final test, but everyone that completes the course in under three minutes will move on to the next test. It will begin on my mark. Best of luck to you all.”

The Chancellor and the King moved higher into the sky, along with most of the purple-clad pilots. I moved forward to the rest of the students — Donnel and Pimly hanging back for me to catch up to them. Otro, his suit mostly grey but with accents of bright orange, waved in my direction before moving to the start line.

“How?” Donnel demanded.

“Emoria brought it back,” I said, anxiety building inside me. “Gods. How am I going to do this?”

“Just stay on our tails.” Pimly said. “You have three minutes, it’s plenty of time as long as you don’t crash into the mountain or the buildings.”

Donnel brought his gauntleted hand onto my shoulder in support for a moment then turned to the start line, the students arraying themselves in a line between the two pilots that marked our starting and finishing line.

*Slag that Emoria said. The first three rings have been the same every time, the supports are too expensive to continually change. It's a straight shot through the first two, then a slight right past Attis minor. Right after the third circle there's a hard bank right toward the city. When I tell you, cut thrust on your right jet and squeeze your right hand for your flaps on that side, you'll rocket past the competition.*

I looked toward her slate grey suit, but she simply stared forward. Two options, take the easy route with Donnel and Pim and pass the test or trust Emoria again. Had she earned that back? She wouldn't gain anything by lying would she?

"To your marks," The Chancellor called from above.

I fastened my helmet back on, readied myself in the line of students. Donnel and Pimly on my left, a student I didn't know on my right before Zachariah's red suit. He stared at me too, the same hate as Dornan in his eyes.

"Set," the Chancellor called. "Go!"

I didn't flare my jets, but I came as close as I could without giving away my modification of the suit. All twenty one students shot forward at max speed toward the ring a mile away. We wouldn't all be able to go through simultaneously, it would be a game of nerve to see who would break off. Half a mile away, two students broke and pulled back, the main group growing tighter. We were nearly shoulder to shoulder, Zachariah inching closer to me. At a quarter mile another

student's nerve broke, and he pulled higher, falling slightly behind in the process. It would still be too many of us to fit through at once, but I wasn't going to be the one to break. If I didn't pass, I was in the same position as losing the last war game. But if I didn't win, then Zachariah might. Memories of the dark nights in the Godwoods as a child painted my thoughts, holding Wilt in place as long as Zachariah was still in the game. Standing like a statue when he was the one trying to scare us away. I didn't lose to him then, I wasn't going to now.

We burst through the first ring, one student nearly running straight into the edge and stopping hard by flipping their body and using the jets as a brake. They became the last in the line, the students who had pulled back previously rocketing past them. We reoriented slightly, the second ring down and to our right just a hair, but Zachariah went the other way, slamming his shoulder into mine and throwing me off course while he ricocheted back into the group.

"Godsdamnit," I muttered, angling my shoulders back toward the group and falling in a dozen feet behind them.

The plumage from their jump jets warmed the visor of my helmet, but it wouldn't do damage unless I got closer. We all passed through the second ring, about half of the students still in the main group at the front of the pack jostling for position. It got more chippy in the main group as we banked right toward the third, students pushing themselves into each other to try and gain separation from the group. Pimly, Zachariah, and Otro led the way, inching themselves in front. Emoria seemed to slow heading into the turn after the third, a half mile away now. She drew almost even with me, a second behind the main pack.

*Ready?* She said in my head.

*On you.* I replied, our tense re-alliance cemented.

I was committed now. All or nothing. My right hand tensed, ready to curl into a fist. My heart pumped fast, excitement and anxiety mixing into a potent combination. Just as we passed through the ring, the main group angling themselves in a wider arc around the smaller second mountain that hid in Mount Attis's shadow, we made our move.

*Now!*

I squeezed my right fist, flaps of high tensile steel extended from the right side of my suit and caught the wind. I flared my left jump jet, while taking all pressure off my right and we whipped around the mountain before closing our flaps and righting our turn. The rest of the pack came up behind us, Emoria and myself leading Zachariah and then the rest of the students by a full length of our suits. We rocketed toward the city, skimming low over the buildings as onlookers cheered from rooftops. The fourth and fifth rings were close together, requiring us to wobble right and then left quickly after to make it through the rings on opposite sides of the central road through the city. The sixth was at the top of a watchtower at the southern edge of the city, and we dropped low to the ground to pass through the smaller final ring in the test before banking up and to our right hard. In mile back to the finish line we flared, though I kept from revealing the extra level of power I had in my jets. Zachariah pushed further in front of the rest of the pack, Donnel and Pimly trailing behind him, but had no chance to catch Emoria and I who passed through the finish line first and second, Zachariah getting a point in his column toward commander at third.

Twenty of the students passed the test, the student who had nearly collided with the first ring coming in five seconds too late and removing themselves from contention for a license. They kept flying back toward Idas, no interest in watching the rest of the tests.

After the flight test we went to the ground where a water station had been set up.

“Cracked!” Donnel bellowed with a laugh when he landed and removed his helmet.

He pulled me into a fast embrace, our metallic bodies colliding together.

“You are absolutely cracked Aimon!” He said. “Air-braking on your first day? I would have called you a liar if you told me that story and I had not seen it!”

Pimly added his enthusiasm to the group, and Emoria gave me a steel eyed look from behind them. Don’t tell my secret it seemed to say — though Pimly already knew.

We had a short rest to catch our breaths and drink water before the Chancellor activated her jets and hovered over us.

“The second test is the duel,” she said. “There is no dueling field, the sky is your domain if you receive your license and so it shall be in your test to achieve them. Your pairings are split by the teams for the mock combat, which, as the decision rotates between the Great Houses, was decided by our Lord Dornan. This is another opportunity to improve your stock in front of those that will be selecting you for your flight assignments. All students whose duels last at least sixty seconds will receive their license, the winners of each duel will receive consideration as commander in the final test. Best of luck to you all.”

She went through the pairings one by one, and with each that was announced the oddity of the decisions grew deeper along side my nervousness. Every noble student that was sponsored by Dornan’s faction of the government was paired against a non-landed pilot or one of Atticus or Narren’s family members. Last a minute, and I’m a pilot. The dream is complete. But win, and I’d have two considerations for commander. I’d be selected, and get a chance to win the year.

I was announced last, and by the time she said it the pairing was no surprise.

“And our two students of Dorchester,” The Chancellor said. “Zachariah Ment and Aimon Solan. Mr. Ment, as the highest ranked duelist in the class you have your choice of when to fight.”

“How about we give them a show Aimon?” He said, his hand going to my shoulder in faux friendship. “We’ll start it off.”

A cheer went up from Zachariah’s noble friends, and my break was over.

“He fights like a brute,” Pimly said, pulling me off to the side. “Heavy strikes with a short, broad light lance. He can’t actually hurt you, but if he hits an extremity you must stop using it immediately or you will be disqualified.”

We began on the ground roughly one hundred feet from each other, the rest of the students joining the observers in the sky. Even at this distance, we could engage each other in seconds if we both flared. My helmet seemed to amplify the pumping of blood in my ears, threatened to drown out the Chancellor’s count down.

“. . .Two, one,” She said, voice amplified over the cheering that came from the onlookers. “Go!”

Zachariah flared his jets and charged me, his light lance igniting into the shape Pimly had predicted. Only two options, into the sky or straight at him — but an extended fight would only help him with his training far outweighing my own and only one option would be a fast end. I wasn’t playing for time.

I pushed my jets right to the edge of flaring, matching the speed of his unmodified suit. Moments before we impacted he flipped, using the jets to break his speed enough to plant a foot



in the ground for more power on his swing. But instead of matching and trying to go inside the guard of his heavy swing, I flared my right jet and ignited my own lance. My trajectory slightly altered, I avoided his strike by an inch and lashed out with my own light lance in the direction of the blur that was his suit at my high speed. I felt a connection, heard an angry roar from Zachariah's speakers, and felt a crashing blow in my left arm which held my light lance sending lightning bolts of pain up my arm and blurring my vision momentarily as I swam in the pain.

The speed and control of his attack was unbelievable. He had pulled himself out of the heavy strike right at the last moment before his light lance impacted the ground, pulling it into an arc and slashing toward my lance arm as I struck him. We were both down an arm, but it was nowhere near an equal exchange. He had taken my light lance with his strike, as I was not allowed to use my left arm in any way including, I assumed, to move the lance to my right. I flipped to brake, dug my feet into the ground and skidded to a halt, two long streaks torn into the grass below us. We faced each other, barely twenty feet between us.

"It's over Solan," he gloated, the speakers in his helmet amplifying his voice. "Run and last your minute, take the shame that that brings. Or give up."

His light lance, shape unwieldy now that he had only a single arm to hold it in, reformed into a shorter, thinner shape. It had only been a few seconds, the only way to get a license was to do as he said. At least it would be, without changing the game. He tensed, ready to rocket forward and put me away, but I needed him angrier.

"Does anyone else smell fish?" I yelled through my speakers. "Gods Ment, if I can smell it out here I can't imagine what you're going through in there."

He roared, and I flared from the ground bursting upward in a long arc back toward Mount Attis. He would put me away in seconds on the ground, and I only had one card left to play. I just hoped the mod would hold. I kept flaring my jets, pedals all the way down to the platforms they sat on, and he matched me. He wouldn't be able to catch up, the extra speed would keep me pulling away, but I hoped he was seeing red enough to keep the chase. I peered turned into a wide bank around the mountain, angling my body to make sure he was still following. I let up slightly, let him inch his way closer, before flaring once again and keeping him at bay. As we circled the mountain, I felt a rattle in my left jump jet. Not concerning, not yet. I needed more.

I brought myself low to the ground, skimming only a few feet over the grassy plain outside of the city. The rattle grew heavier, the right jump jet started to match it. His would be shaking violently, the inefficient fuel line struggling to keep up with the flow of fuel he was trying to push into his jets. Just a little more. I skimmed the river, water spraying in the quick current up into my visor as the wind tunnel around me touched it. And finally then cut power to my right jet and popped my flaps open on that side for a hard turn before flaring again to rocket past him going the other direction, just out of the range of his shorter light lance. I glimpsed a green flag in the hand of the Chancellor, the signal that sixty seconds had passed as I turned.

He tried to match me, and as I turned I saw what I had been waiting for. His right jump jet sputtered then died, and Zachariah was thrown to the ground at high speed by the still functioning left jump jet. He hit hard, the last jet dying as his foot let off the pedal too late, and went end over end before coming to a stop face down in the mud of the riverbank. I cut my flare, and came back to the suit. His speakers still on, a moan escaped him as he tried to climb to his knees. I cut my jets completely, falling the five feet to the ground, and kicked him with the power of a hydraulic metal leg square in his stomach to send him back to the ground. I took his light lance in my right arm,

ignited it, and tapped him once on the crown of his helmet before discarding the weapon to the mud. Above me my friends, the rest of the non-landed students, and even some of Atticus and Narren's relatives whooped in joy.

## 22.

I stumbled to the water station, my friends dropping to the ground to celebrate. The first to me was Emoria, her helmet already off, and she threw her arms around me in embrace.

“Just what he deserved,” she whispered in my ear.

I felt my cheeks blush instantaneously, felt her squeeze tight, the mechanical power of her suit threatening to dent my own. I didn’t want her to let go.

“You’ve just won commander,” Pimly said, a smile spreading across his face. “Congratulations my friend.”

“And you probably gave him some new bruises!” Donnel said. “About time! I was missing getting to see the previous ones!”

A series of impacts behind us interrupted the conversation. Thump thump thump. Thump thump thump. Thump.

Seven purple clad Strikers, the one at the front of the formation with golden rings circling his upper arms. The Thunder Cohort, and King Atticus III arrayed in a wedge formation. Only the King removed his helmet, and I saw the man that ruled the Kingdom I had lived in my entire life for the first time. He was more than I expected, a titan of a man with strong features on a devilishly handsome face. He, just as Edward Dornan had in the tribunal back in Dorchester, seemed to radiate power.

“That was quite the display pilot,” he said.

Pilot.

I was a Striker pilot.

“Thank you sir,” I stammered. “My liege. Thank you my liege.”

“Sir is fine when I’m in the suit young man,” he said. “My sister in law has been telling me your story since you arrived and worried my men. It’s quite the tale.”

“It’s been quite the year sir,” I said, feeling slightly more comfortable with the man in front of me’s informal attitude. “Doesn’t feel like it’s only been a year since I left home.”

“Well,” he said. “Win once more and you get to bring whatever parts of your home you’d like to your new lands.”

“I wish I’d be allowed to take my home back instead sir,” I said, all the venom I could muster put into the words.

He looked at me thoughtfully for a moment before speaking again.

“Even if it were possible,” he said. “It would not be wise for you to become Edward’s Vassal at this point. He doesn’t like you much son.”

I bit back a condemnation of Lord Dornan, barely. Not trusting my tongue, I nodded in acceptance of his words.

“But, you need not worry about that yet,” he said. “Rest during the next duels, the last test will be a challenge.”

He extended a hand to me, and I went to shake it. Instead, he pulled me close.

“You will start on the river side,” he whispered.

The King winked as he pulled away and, donning his helmet topped by a golden crown, took to the sky with his soldiers in tow. The final two, before taking off, nodded their respect and I returned it in kind.

The rest of the duels were more traditional than mine had been. Emoria dispatched the youngest daughter of Anlan Tok with ease. Pimly went for almost four minutes trading sets of precision attacks with a daughter of a minor house under Rommel's patronage. And Donnel, though it nearly came to a mechanized wrestling match after five minutes of trading blows, lost to Otro who seemed to be a deadly combatant even if he wasn't the best in the air.

After my friends had finished, I watched as Edward Dornan gave Zachariah one of his Lightning Cohort suits to use in the final test. In the end, Emoria's opponent and a non-landed student were disqualified after not reaching the minute mark. Eighteen pilots left. The duels finished, the Chancellor called us into the air for her final instructions. Zachariah's team unanimously voted for his ascension to commander. Emoria and I both had two marks of merit, but she voted for my command and I was selected, eight votes to my one for her.

"Again, as it is his year to oversee the tests Lord Dornan has placed Zachariah Ment's flight on defense," the chancellor said. "They will begin the final test in the outpost on the side of Mount Attis. Aimon, your team will begin at the bank of the river."

We were given ten minutes to devise a plan and a full year of studying finally paid off as I laid out our battle plan. No rig hunters to worry about here, no defensive emplacements, and no hidden bands of riflemen. Just nine pilots on one side and nine pilots on the other.

Too far from each team to use the speakers, the Chancellor held her green flag in the air, looking to both sides. My friends on every side of me, legs tensed to launch ourselves forward. The chancellor dropped the flag, and we were off. We started as a line of nine, and halfway across the field divided into sets of three. Donnel led one of the sub-flights, Pimly the other. I had wanted to give Emoria her own command, but she had said flatly that she was going with me.

Donnel and Pimly's groups flared, six of Zachariah's pilots matching them to meet in a crash of metal. Each group exchanged blows, the rules for extremities hit the same as the duel. Emoria, Tanlin Atticus, a nephew of the king and the son of the Chancellor, and myself hanging back just as Zachariah did behind his line with two other pilots.

One of Donnel's pilots nearly fell to Otro, but Donnel called for a perfectly timed slide and swapped places, his heavy hammer shaped light lance making contact with the center of Otro's orange suit and knocking him out of the game. Donnel pressed his advantage, pushing his group toward the backs of their compatriots slightly before Zachariah was forced to send his two reinforcements to turn the tide back. Donnel's group fell into a defensive posture just as Pimly's scored it's first elimination and took one of their own, a daughter of Lord Naren falling out of the fight.

"Tanlin," I yelled. "Go!"

Tanlin burst forward to buttress Pimly's defense. The next elimination might shatter the lines, but I just needed a second longer. In the city to our right, the noon bell echoed up into the sky. Zachariah turned for a moment, looking toward the city and mountain. Now.

Emoria knew my mind, flaring with me to spring the hidden spear gambit.

"Now!" I yelled over the din of battle.

Donnel swept his hammer sideways into the center of their line at the same time Pimly slid right, pressing his side of the line back with a flurry of quick strikes and opening up a small gap in their line. Emoria and I threw ourselves through it, Emoria peeling off to slash at the jets of three enemies and turning the tide in one swing of her light lance. It was over, four pilots left on their side to my eight. I kept flaring, Zachariah turning back toward me with his lance igniting.

I crashed into him and felt a searing pain in my left shoulder. The pain ripped upward, and I felt my flesh burn. There was a charred hole in my suit — in me.

I roared in pain and anger, dispelled the fear that I was moments from death. Zachariah spun, bringing his light lance back to cut off my head. I threw my own up, deflecting the strike and pushing him back slightly. Behind Zachariah, the Kingdom shattered before my very eyes.

Two dozen Striker pilots poured out from behind Mount Attis

"Thunder Cohort to me!" The King bellowed from above.

The sounds of fighting behind me stopped as students turned to stare at the onrushing professional warriors. Behind his visor, Zachariah smiled.

"I'm glad you could join us today Aimon," he said.



I flipped and flared, moving as fast as I could away from Zachariah.

“To me!” I yelled out my speakers as I moved back through the line of my friends. Zachariah didn’t give chase, instead he killed two of my flight without them even realizing they were in danger. Tanlin Atticus fell toward the ground, along with another I couldn’t recognize. My mind raced; my heart thundered in my chest. Something I couldn’t describe happened then, like an added awareness of those around me. I felt Pimly on my left, more than knew he was there. I felt the heartbeat in Donnel’s chest on top of my own.

*Emoria?* I thought.

*We are connected now* she said in my mind.

*Bondumir* Donnel thought. *What is this?*

*I’ll explain later* Emoria thought. *For now, we survive.*

The rest of my pilots scattered, heading for the safety of the Thunder Cohort above or for Idas. Below, I saw an orange suit approaching. No light lance ignited, Otro held up both of his hands.

“I didn’t know!” He said, fear in his voice. “I swear it Aimon I didn’t know.”

“I believe you Otro,” I said. “Are you with us?”

“Gods I don’t think I have a choice,” he said.

“Now he’s with us?” Donnel asked bitterly.

“Later Donnel,” I demanded.

An awareness of Otro was added to my mind. Finished with the defenseless, Zachariah turned toward us with a flight of Flash Cohort killers behind him. Above the Thunder Cohort held off twice their number of various flights. The King was a blur of death, dispatching two pilots in rapid succession with a flurry of precision strikes. The Chancellor held her own next to him, her control of her suit masterful. Last chance to run, but then they'd be overwhelmed.

*Toggle your lances* I thought. *We need teeth. Donnel and Pimly, twin lance. Otro and Emoria with me.*

I toggled my lance, no longer in training mode it would slice through armor like Zachariah's had when he pushed it through my shoulder. Zachariah's flight of five met head on with mine. Donnel and Pimly maneuvered their two opponents slightly away from our group of three, trying to pull them into an opening for their gambit. I pressed Zachariah, Emoria and Otro protecting my sides. My shoulder shot pain through my body, but I pressed on. He was slower than before, body pained from the fall in the duel. I took advantage, and my lack of experience played to my benefit. I didn't know how to make the typical strikes of the various styles that pilots used, and so my attack was chaotic. The fire of rage pumped in my stomach, fueling the onslaught. I struck high, then slashed low. I cut at his edges, scoring a hit on his right arm that sliced away some of the armor of the suit, hit him again on the left. He hit me too — a jab in my left thigh, that sent matching pain back up my body.

He was defending his core, and I didn't know how to properly defend. I fainted high, then pulled out of it and cut my jump jets just long enough to drop two feet in the air and slash across his left jump jet, sending sparks flying in every direction. He wobbled and dropped to the ground,

unable to keep in the air on only one jump jet. Our other two opponents fled, and a wave of adrenaline started to fade leaving me exhausted.

Donnel and Pimly sprung their gambit, switching just like I had seen them do in the sky above Idas Academy and attacking each other's opponent. The switch in fighting style was too much for one as Donnel overpowered him and put his light lance through the other pilot's chest. The corpse fell away, and part of my mind tore away.

The last Flash cohort pilot's light lance was sticking out the other side of Pimly's throat and was retracting, my friend falling away from us to the ground.

"Pimly!" I screamed, my throat going raw and the taste of blood rolling down it.

Emoria grabbed my arm to keep me from flaring toward where he fell. Otro beheaded the last Flash Cohort pilot near us, and Emoria flared her own jets to pull me back toward the retreating Thunder Cohort, their number down to four. Pimly impacted the ground, a small dust cloud erupting where he landed.

Dozens of bodies littered the ground around him. Most wore Dornan red, but too many were the fallen bodies of students and rigs painted purple. The tear of Pimly's consciousness being ripped away from ours burned worse than the two holes in my body, it made them dull in comparison. My quiet friend. From living to the clutches of Zannitos in an instant.

I stopped resisting Emoria's pull, let her drag me toward the King and his pilots. Reinforcements clad in purple burst up from the city below, the seat of House Atticus itself, currently ruled by the King's brother after his ascension. On the ramparts rig hunters prepared harpoons and nets for any pilots that came in their range. A horn echoed across the battlefield, and

I searched for its source. Edward Dornan, back behind the lines of pilots, stared back at me with the horn in his hand. His pilots dropped to the ground, each of them collecting one of the suits that had fallen. Some still lived, struggled against those that came for them or were finished off before being lifted. I saw a flight of pilots helping Zachariah back into the air, one of them grabbing Pimly's rig and taking to the sky. They pulled back to hover over the mountain, collecting themselves before flying north back toward Dorchester.

This would be the first war between all of the Great Houses in a century, the first since the Unity War, and my home with its brand-new Striker Factory would be their seat of power.