

THE WAY BACK

A lush, dark forest scene with a glowing circular portal made of light and vines. The path leads through the forest towards the portal. The lighting is warm and golden, creating a magical atmosphere. The forest is dense with trees and foliage, and the path is rocky and mossy.

Johann Joubert

Dedication

To my family who endure my arms-length relationship with the real world. May we live in interesting times and may we have the wisdom to appreciate every moment. The beautiful, the terrible and the wonderful. And to all authors, the grand and the novice for blessing the world with their stories.

“Fantasy is hardly an escape from reality. It’s a way of understanding it.” Lloyd Alexander

Chapter 1.

The Return to Meridia.

James screamed, pounding his fists against the moist earth. His face twisted into a mask of pain and anger. He was back in Meridia. Back where it all started. He tried to focus his thoughts, but they kept drifting back to Seraphina as she turned to face the darkness that surrounded her. He shifted his balance and sat down, feeling overwhelmed. His heart pounded like a storm unleashed.

Gradually, the fog lifted from his thoughts. A single question confronted his mind, "How do I get back?" He had no idea where to start. The majestic gate through which he had once entered the garden was gone. In its place was an ordinary cluster of trees, indistinguishable from any other garden in Meridia.

He tried to focus his thoughts and tried to force himself to calmness. He reached for the familiar voice of Eli, but was met with silence. Fear rushed back to the surface.

“I need a plan,” James thought.

He looked at his wrist. He was right back where – and when – it all started. As if waking from a dream, he shook his head.

“Where to begin?” James thought.

He grabbed the gear that he had brought with him on the morning when he discovered the majestic portal and turned homeward. The weight of uncertainty pressed heavily on him, but he knew he would never give up. He would find his way back. Back to the garden. Back to Eli. Back to Seraphina.

He hesitated for a moment before he opened the door to his home.

"Home," he whispered.

The word sounded awkward in his ears. He entered into the familiar atmosphere. For years, this had been his safe harbour from the harsh and brutal rhythm of the city. The scent of coffee still lingered in the air, intertwined with the natural odours of the array of plants that adorned his house. It all seemed peculiar and out of place, as if he were merely a spectator in another man's life. He knew that here, only a moment had passed, even though he had spent weeks, if not months, in the garden. It was like stepping back into the current after having relaxed on the river's riparian meadow while the sun slowly set. In the distance, he could hear the ringing of a bell. It was a stark reminder

of Meridia's clockwork precision. He glanced at his wristwatch. Old habits. Habits he hated. Habits that confined and enslaved. The games of the rich and powerful, enslaving the many to serve their needs.

Fatigue rushed in to envelop him. He fell onto the couch in a heap of misery and desperation. A moment later, James was asleep.

"There it is again," Elara said aloud, her voice echoing slightly in the twilight as the evening cool settled in. The villagers looked at her with expressions mingled with curiosity and bewilderment. She paid them no heed; she wasn't speaking to them. In fact, she wasn't really speaking to anyone—she was merely labelling things as they were, or as they might be.

Speaking aloud helped her make sense of the world; it also added to the aura of mystery that cloaked her. She had mastered the art of shifting between being a spokesperson for the unseen and maintaining absolute silence, as the situation demanded. As a Seer, mystery was, in many ways, her trade. She dealt in the art of the possible, living most of her life in that slender thread stretched between 'now' and 'then', between 'what is' and 'what could be'.

Her journey had begun years ago on a day shadowed by the calamity of a barbarian horde descending upon her village.

She still didn't know what their motive was or where they came from. There were whispers of such marauders in the distant Far South, though mostly relegated to the stuff of legends and fireside tales. There was something odd about the horde though, something Elara could not place. Something 'unconventional', as if their very existence confronted the laws of the physical world, but she was nothing more than a child then, and what could children know of such things? To a child who only knows butterflies, the spider is a nightmare. To a child that only knows peace, blood-thirsty marauders would be utterly infernal.

Some nights, the events of that horror would replay in Elara's mind, a perpetual nightmare from which there was no escape.

The men of the village, young and old, were slaughtered without mercy, their bodies sprawled across the earth, their severed heads staring blankly skyward, crimson halos marking their rapid departure from this world.

The women and girls suffered a fate far more grievous. It was a night she wished she could obliterate from memory. By the mercy or the mockery of the gods, she alone escaped. On a lonely hillside, struggling to maintain her sanity, she witnessed the remnants of her village - those who survived the initial onslaught - tied to poles and burned alive against the rabid discord of chanting men, if they were men at all. Death, when it came, was a mercy - a mercy that eluded her. Sometimes, she prayed to join them, to be freed from the chains of memory. Those prayers were yet unanswered.

Elara was born in Lunumbria, a remote village south of Meridia. South of the wall. South of the barrier. For reasons lost to time, this barrier allowed only natural entities to pass through; animals, people, plants – these could pass from the one side to the other, however, any manmade device of reasonable sophistication, could not. Plain coins in a pouch could pass, but a pitchfork could not. It wasn't clear who or what had set this barrier in place and how it determined what was allowed or not, but it had kept the north and south free of any notable conflict for eons.

Only at sunset, during the last precious minutes of daylight, could the barrier be seen as a glimmering veil stretching upwards from the earth into the heavens. There had been many attempts to find ways around the restrictive properties of the barrier, for the north was technologically advanced and a battle on the south would normally have been swift and easy. By the standards of the north, the south was primitive and simple.

In time, the leaders from the north had erected a great towering wall adjacent to the barrier, to demarcate it clearly. Now, there were sections in the wall that had been repurposed into bordered zones to control passage between the regions. Around these gateways, a unique blend of northern and southern cultures had emerged, though the further one ventured from the wall, the more distinct and polarized the regions became. The gateways were governed by an authority that reported only unto themselves, with no specific allegiance to either the rulers

of the north or the tribes of the south. To pass through the gate, you required a form of identification which was verified on entry or exit from a specific region.

Meridia marked the pinnacle of northern advancement and stood at the northmost tip of the region. To the south, the trappings of modern societal structures dwindled the further you travelled, giving way to ragged landscapes, small warring clans and fishing villages, hugging the shores at the Sea of Storms.

Lunumbria was in the eastern region of the South, a two-day journey by horse. It was a simple place of simple joys. Though Elara spent only a few years there before that horrific night, she remembered the village with affection. Lunumbria was nestled in a valley, guarded by forests of ancient trees, sentinels against the ravages of time. By day, the sun cast a warm glow over cobblestone paths winding through rows of quaint stone cottages crowned with thatched roofs. The morning air was often thick with the fragrance of wildflowers and fresh earth.

The village was a haven for a peculiar people: Seers. The elders of the village possessed the enigmatic ability to glimpse the future. They trafficked not only in goods, but also in the intangibles – secrets, suggestions and visions. The markets traded in equal parts of herbs and potions and mystical trinkets.

Across the broader lands, Seers were often met with scepticism or outright disdain, regarded by many as mere

charlatans preying on the gullible and desperate. Indeed, the world was not without its share of false prophets, those sinister figures who moved in the shadows, covered their faces with deep hoods, and who exploited hope for a handful of coins.

Yet Lunumbria stood apart as a genuine haven of mysticism. Here, the Seers were not mere fortune tellers but scholars of fate, premonitions ranged from absolutes to vague possibilities. Either way, knowing the future, even a vague possibility of the future, is a powerful catalyst and a rare commodity.

Lunumbria's Seers were as simple in their daily lives as they were profound in their insights. They lived intimately with nature, embracing its rhythms and secrets, their existences intertwined with the land that sustained them. This desire to understand the true nature of things automatically extended into the spiritual realm, lending them an aura of mystique. The world has much to say to those who would listen, and Seers, above all else, listened really well.

For those in search of answers, wisdom, or a glimpse beyond the veil of the now, Lunumbria was the center of the universe. The village thrived with a constant flow of seekers and scholars, with visitors often outnumbering residents. This influx ensured a bustling economy from dawn till dusk, particularly vibrant on market days when the air buzzed with the laughter of children, the rattle of wooden carts, and the calls of distant livestock.

In Lunumbria, social strata dissolved in the communal pursuit of knowledge and exchange. The wealthy, the

needy, and the modest mingled without distinction. This was a place where everyone, regardless of origin or fortune, had both something to offer and something to gain. The elders of Lunumbria called it, “The Equilibrium.”

Rooted in ancient traditions that stretched back to forgotten epochs, “The Equilibrium” had evolved into an unwritten but sacrosanct ethical code, guiding all community interactions. It was a moral compass that ensured fairness and mutual respect, governing everything from trade to social conduct. Violations of this code, especially those driven by selfish desires for personal gain, were met with stern disapproval. In severe cases, such transgressions could even lead to banishment from the village.

At night, the village transformed; bathed in moonlight, the cobblestones shimmered, enhancing the mystique of the place. The daytime bustle yielded to a serene calm, punctuated only by the soft hooting of an owl or the whisper of leaves in the gentle night breeze.

In the surrounding fields, fireflies undulated above the lush greenery, their light a captivating display that lured the village youth out of their homes to weave their own tales of fantasy and heroism. It was on such a night that Elara, daughter of the formidable seer Elora, suffered a vision of the brutal raid on their village. She tried to warn the elders, but her premonition was dismissed as a child’s overactive imagination, brought about by the otherworldly tales of visitors, recounted over too much ale. After all, such gifts

required years of nurturing and Elara was deemed far too young to have such a vivid image of things to come.

“Had they only listened,” she murmured a thousand times since then. But they didn’t, and that was the end of it. She was left to grapple with the memories of that night and the loss she felt every day thereafter.

The world had lost a marvellous place as Lunumbria was reduced to ashes. She stayed on that hilltop, hungry and hopeless until the final ashes settled back on the scorched earth and left nothing more than eerie silence and crows, scavenging between the rubble. A village and a people, wiped from existence in a moment of senseless rage. It was the paradoxical irony of the Seers. They could predict the future of others as long as they themselves, were not part of that future. Perhaps that was why Elara could see the events of that night before they happened and the others could not – she was not fated to meet the same end.

Elara stared into the fire, lost in a trance as the flames performed their dance. Around her, children danced and sang. Their mirth was beautiful to behold and their innocence, something she wished she could reclaim. Their songs pulled her back from her dark brooding. She sighed in resignation. She knew better than to dwell on impossibilities and events of the past. For all her talent, the past was written in ink. There was no going back. Some things cannot be unseen, and some roads can only be travelled forward.

She had arrived in this village - a place not unlike Lunumbria in its simplistic beauty - just a week ago. She felt drawn here, as if guided by an unseen hand. The villagers had initially been wary, but soon opened their homes and their hearts to her.

Since that dreadful night, Elara had refined and perfected her gift, learning to interpret the subtle cues of the world around her with mesmerizing precision and learning all she could about ailments and herbal remedies. The way she saw it, the world needed healing.

She harboured no grand plan for her life other than a profound desire to atone for what she perceived as her 'failure' that night. She often told herself that there was nothing more she could have done, but those words rung hollow and if anything, reignited her pain. And so, she travelled wherever her instincts led, trying to do some good in the world. "Maybe," she often thought, "her small acts of random kindness could balance the scale of the screams that still echoed through her dreams. Maybe."

Now, twice in as many days, she had heard a name whispered in her mind. "James," the voice said, "Find James."

During her week in the village, she had used her knowledge of herbs and potions to break the fever of two children who otherwise might not have survived. She had also eased the burden of an old man plagued by anxiety and a nervous twitch. Her interventions were grounded in medicinal knowledge rather than mysticism, yet to the villagers, she had performed miracles.

Normally, she would stay a little longer and enjoy the hospitality on offer, but she knew better than to ignore her gift. Sometimes her visions were just impressions of possibilities, but this was something else. The voice in her mind was as clear as day. It wasn't a suggestion, but an instruction.

“Trust your gut,” her mother had always said.

Resolved, Elara decided that come morning, she would embark on a quest to find this mysterious ‘James’. She caught glimpses of a city in her mind. Meridia. She disliked the North. She disliked cities – the large buzz of people, the neon lights, the skyscrapers and cars. She preferred the South, which was in many ways, a different world, but if that's where her journey takes her, then so be it.

Chapter 2.

Lysandra.

The public library of Meridia, with its towering columns and vaulted ceilings, stood as a quiet sentinel over a bygone era where every artisan was also an artist.

In the centre of the atrium, stood a commanding stone statue of a woman, elegantly balancing a wooden beam across her shoulders. On each end of the beam hung a bucket, one inscribed with 'Knowledge', the other with 'Wisdom'. It was a heavy weight to bear. At the base of the statue, a bronze plaque bore the inscription, "Educating the mind without educating the heart is no education at all."

Inside, the vast halls echoed softly with the sound of shuffling footsteps on marble floors, the air heavy with the scent of aged paper and binding glue.

Sunlight filtered through stained glass windows, casting a kaleidoscope of patterns across the rows of weathered books that lined the labyrinthine shelves.

Among the stacks, a few solitary figures wandered, their silhouettes flickering in and out of the dimly lit alcoves. An elderly gentleman in a tweed jacket, caressed the spines of ancient tomes as if greeting old friends. His eyes, hidden behind thick-rimmed glasses, sparkled with the joy of a man looking into the eyes of a long-lost lover.

A young woman with a tattered backpack sat cross-legged in a quiet corner, her digital tablet discarded beside her as she lost herself in a frayed volume with leather edges. Her fingers traced the yellowed pages delicately, her expression one of wanderlust and desire.

Nearby, a child, no older than eight, pulled a hefty, illustrated copy of fairy tales from a lower shelf. The book was almost as big as he was, but his determination was absolute. He hauled the tome to a large reading table, his small frame dwarfed by the ornate wood, yet his eyes were alight with the promise of adventure. His mother, a middle-aged woman with hair haphazardly secured atop her head with a pencil, watched him with a mix of affection and mild anxiety. Her movements were quick and slightly erratic, betraying her nervous nature as she occasionally adjusted her glasses and checked on her son.

In stark contrast, a young woman with striking bright orange hair that cascaded freely over her shoulders, glided through the library with an air of serene confidence. Her eyes were a smouldering light blue, an ocean of knowledge that drew you in, like the song of a siren to a drowning man. She seemed simultaneously at home and out of place. Soft

freckles danced around her face as she smiled at the visitors. Lysandra knew every inch of this library. It was her world and her charge.

She approached the boy, bending slightly to match his height, and whispered something into his ear. His soft giggle broke the quiet of the library, his eyes lighting up with admiration as he looked up at her. The mother smiled. For the slightest moment, the deep etched line of worry that had found a permanent residence on her brow, disappeared. For a second she looked ten years younger and then the world and worries rushed back in, herding her back into the prison of her anxiety.

The large doors of the library were now merely ornamental. Perhaps, in times gone by, they served a more functional purpose. Lysandra had often wondered if the library was originally designed for another purpose. In truth, the building resembled a fortress or a church.

“Purpose changes over time, for buildings and people,” was the best that Lysandra could come up with over the years. Now, the doors were a beautiful feature to an architectural marvel, with a ready story to those who would pause and listen. Very few did, as the relentless pace of the modern world prioritized efficiency over the luxury of admiration.

Embedded within these imposing doors was a smaller, more practical entrance, which suddenly swung open. A chill wind, carrying the promise of rain, swept into the hall,

disturbing the pious tranquillity. The sky outside was a tapestry of grey, heavy with impending rain.

A solitary figure stepped through the doorway, his demeanour one of palpable anxiety and desperation. Lysandra observed in silent curiosity as the man paused momentarily in front of the statue. He seemed lost, with life seeping from him with every passing second.

Something about the man called to her. She felt a compelling urge to approach him, to reassure him that "it will all be okay." Yet, she held back, rooted in place by wisdom beyond her years. Her time at the library had taught her a lot about people. Some venture into her halls for knowledge or wisdom, while others roamed this hallowed sanctuary simply to escape the world. Either way, in order to receive something, one must first seek it. She had learned that help falls on deaf ears if the listener is not ready to receive it.

"Just because you have a voice, it doesn't mean you have an audience, my dear," an old and wise patron had once said to her when they discussed the oddity of human nature.

No matter how she yearned to help, people must first seek help before she would offer it. It was even more so for people who seemed unhappy. Paradoxical as it might seem, certain people are content in their misery, for it gives them an excuse to behave in a certain way. These people do not really want to be cheered up or helped, for then they may need to step out into the light and deal with the real world, where they do not have the luxury to meander

through fields of self-indulgence. Lysandra continued to follow the young man with her eyes, wishing that he would approach her.

He might still turn around, leave this sanctuary and seek solace elsewhere - perhaps at the nearest pub, drowning his sorrows and the ghosts that haunted him in a sea of oblivion.

James lumbered towards Lysandra with a mixture of desperation and caution. The woman seemed young and inexperienced. Her orange hair hung to her shoulders and her pale blue eyes held the gaze of someone who was still waking up to the world, flawless in their mirthful youth. He paused for a moment, wondering about the wisdom of his decision to come here. Seeing no other alternative, he met her gaze.

“I need help,” James whispered, his voice barely audible as he teetered on the edge of despair. His eyes were red and swollen, his expression strained as though holding back a torrent of silent screams.

Lysandra offered a reassuring smile. She found that smiling always helped.

“Of course,” she replied with a gentle warmth, “I am Lysandra and this,” moving her arms in an arc, gesturing to the library, “this is my realm. If the answer you seek is here, I will help you find it.”

She smiled again and a weight seemed to lift off the young man’s shoulders. James felt suddenly lightheaded and sat

down on the nearest chair. He didn't know what he had expected. He had hoped to find help here, but expectation and hope were often at odds. The offer of help, even without any certainty, washed over him like a giant wave, crashing onto the shore. Collecting his thoughts, he listened to the soft scrape of a chair as Lysandra drew nearer, settling patiently across from him.

"Perhaps she is older than she looks," James mused inwardly, recognising the unexpected wisdom of her patience.

"I need to tell you a story," James began, his voice low and uncertain.

"At times, you may think me insane, and time alone, will tell if I am." A dry chuckle escaped him, hollow and humourless.

"I'm not sure what I seek, but perhaps the story will guide us, at least to a starting point," he added.

"I have time," Lysandra assured him gently, taking his hands in hers. Her touch was small and warm, a comforting presence that sent a ripple of tranquillity through him. He inhaled deeply, steadied by her gaze.

"There was a gate..." he started.

As night enveloped the library, which had long since closed its doors to the public, the tale unfolded. Lysandra occasionally had to pause their conversation to attend to lingering visitors, but soon, they were alone. The rain was now falling steadily outside and the streets had gone completely quiet. The soft glow from the chandeliers added to the allure of James's recollection. At times, she held him as he broke down in tears, overcome by emotion. At other times, she squeezed his hands as she shared in his pain or inhaled in childlike wonder, opening her eyes to reveal a galaxy of blue, as she was swept along by the wonder. Not once did she give even the slightest indication that she found the story far-fetched or fantastical. When James recounted the grim tale of Varrick's death, Lysandra wept openly and it was James's turn to console her.

In an instant, Lysandra had nestled her way James's his heart. He felt an overwhelming fraternal sense to protect her from the cruelty of the world.

"...and here I am," James concluded.

"Here you are," Lysandra echoed, gently squeezing his hands in hers. She smiled.

After brief silence, James pressed for a response.

"And?" James prompted.

Lysandra paused, weighing her words carefully.

"I don't know. People normally come here with simpler questions, or questions with simpler answers. Yours is

altogether different. There might be...” Her voice trailed off as her gaze drifted to some distant point, lost in thought.

“What?” James prodded, his voice tinged with quiet desperation.

“I need food,” Lysandra responded with a broad friendly smile. Always smiling.

“Come,” she urged, standing up decisively without waiting for his agreement, “I know a quaint little place not far from here. They serve the best pizza!”

James could see that there was no point in objecting. If she had the answer he was looking for, he would follow her to the ends of the earth.

“Oh, before I forget,” Lysandra quipped as she locked the library door and reached for her raincoat, “you’re buying!”

For the first time since his return to Meridia, a genuine smile broke through the gloom on James’s face.

The pizza didn’t disappoint, and neither did the company. Lysandra was a refreshing presence; she viewed the world in full colour, saw it for all the wonder and beauty it holds, and her optimism pulled James closer, offering him a flicker of hope amidst the shadows that loomed over his thoughts.

James had resolved to let the conversation unfold naturally. Initially, it was light-hearted, centred around recent events at the library. It was evident that for Lysandra, this was more

than a job. As she neared the end of another captivating tale, James couldn't help interrupting, driven by curiosity.

"You're not from here, are you?" James enquired.

For the first time since their meeting, the mirth that seemed to perpetually surround Lysandra withdrew, replaced by layers of shadows. For a brief moment, she stared at a spot on the table, letting the rush of memories engulf her. Then she looked up, her gaze meeting James's. Her blue eyes no longer resembled the calm opaque waters that beckoned you in, instead, they imprisoned a storm, raging and warring against the forces that would hold it in check.

"No," Lysandra said dryly, "I'm not from here."

James waited patiently, holding her gaze, attempting to comfort her raging storm with the calm composure of dry land, allowing her the time to look back at those things that haunt us. Those things behind us that we tell ourselves don't exist and don't matter, even though they do – even though they cast long shadows at day's end when the sun sets at our back. It is then that the monsters we allowed to live, cast long shadows on the road ahead.

"There's no telling where we end up. One day, you're planning a future. You have it all planned out like sorting the pieces of a puzzle before you start to build it. You know, colour by colour?" Lysandra gave James a quizzical look and when he nodded, she continued, "We're still planning our future and the next moment, we're plunged into a dream. Only, I think it's not a dream, is it?" Lysandra

enquired; her voice tinged with melancholy. It was a rhetorical question, so James remained quiet and stoic.

“I was born on an island called ‘*Isola di Verità*,’ south of the border. The island was rich with history, secrets and myths, The village itself was a labyrinth of canals and alleyways, with hundreds of bridges over the water and colourful houses arrayed next to cobblestone streets.”

James listened intently, captivated as Lysandra’s story unfolded, seeing the storm in her eyes stir with each word.

“Like most other adults in the village, my parents were “*Custodes Veritatis*,” Lysandra said, “Guardians of the truth.”

James raised his eyebrow questioningly.

Lysandra explained, “I often wondered just how many valuable secrets the world could hold. Secrets that inspired entire societies to protect them. Secrets that some people dedicate their lives to. Secrets that some people die for..” Lysandra let her voice trail off and stared at a different spot on the table.

“My parents died when I was seventeen,” she said to the spot, not taking her eyes off it.

“The circumstances of their death remain...a mystery. For months, I withdrew from the world, letting it trudge forward in its merciless march while I simply refused to participate. I tried to make sense of it, but there was no sense to be made. It’s really quite simple, I think – now that I’ve spent so much time trying to puzzle it together. We’re somewhere,

then we're here and then we go somewhere else. I've read several fascinating books on this. We think this life is it, but it's not. I think this is just a "go-between", you know? A fish that knows only one river, might think the river the world, never knowing or imagining the ocean."

A sudden outburst from a nearby table briefly interrupted them - a couple arguing heatedly. The woman stormed out with a cascade of curses, followed clumsily by her intoxicated partner.

When the couple had gone, Lysandra continued.

"I grew up surrounded by books, maps and stories. Every artifact in our home had notes from my parents, hints at their peculiar discoveries. Initially, I ignored them, but curiosity eventually took over. I began piecing together their research, a seemingly unrelated collection of parchments and maps, and a pattern began to emerge."

"Dates, names, places - there were plenty. I organized everything chronologically, trying to uncover any thread of meaning in their life's work," Lysandra contemplated, taking an absent-minded sip from her cup.

James cleared his throat quietly, "And did you figure it out?"

"It led me here, to Meridia," Lysandra revealed, "because this city holds the largest historical archives in the world."

"And more," she added with a hesitant glance, "I think you might just be a piece of my puzzle."

Their eyes met and James could see the storm was ending.

“You may just be right,” James said.

Chapter 3.

Graffiti.

Kae stepped back, removing the mask from his face to survey his work. He wasn't often granted the opportunity to admire his creations just as they were completed. These moments were rare treasures for him. More commonly, his work remained unfinished as he was forced to dash away from the city guard or from a threatening citizen.

The artwork was breathtaking. Hours earlier, the side of the building had been a nondescript blend of dirty grey and off-green, the paint peeling in large chunks, exposing the worn bricks beneath. Time had collaborated with the elements in a relentless assault.

Now, the wall was transformed into a mural pulsating with colour and life. Kae had never seen anything like it before, let alone created its likeness. At the bottom right of the wall, he noticed a large "E".

"That's odd," he mumbled to himself, but then, there have been many oddities in Kae's life of late.

From the moment Kae could wield a spray can, he had been tagging walls across the city. It was one of his earliest and most vivid memories—holding a spray can, the hiss of paint, the colour spreading over dull concrete. There was something within him that cried for release, a force that demanded freedom.

He viewed graffiti as an extension of himself. He did not think of his art as being any more rebellious than a swift thunderstorm in the middle of summer. It was the very nature of the unexpected storm that made it beautiful. He felt the same way about his art. He was not rebelling, but contributing. His art brought the forgotten back to life, breathing new air into ancient bones, long forgotten, although it wasn't always so.

Born into a working-class family in the eastern quarters near the industrial zone, his early works had screamed rebellion against the rigid lines and relentless routine of Meridia. Both his parents toiled in factories, their lives a cycle of endless labour just to scrape by. Since he could first grip a pen, their tiny apartment had transformed into a gallery of his work. A gallery and a prison.

He and his father never played with a ball in the streets. His mother, coming home from the factory long after dark and tired to the bone, never told him fairytales while preparing dinner. They were like ships passing in the night, and he resented Meridia for their absence. As a boy, he was small and timid, an easy target for bigger boys desperate to prove their own worth through domination. They, too, were

victims of crushed dreams, seeking validation in the subjugation of others.

Kae channelled the mix of pain, hate, hope, and desire that stirred within him into his art. His expression on the walls became his voice, his rebellion, his claim to space in a city that gave little and demanded everything in return. But as Kae's notoriety grew and his street credit surged, his name began to echo ominously among the local city guards.

Kay thought back to the night when everything changed.

"Kae, they're here!" Simmons's voice pierced the night, frantic. Rapid footsteps echoed through the narrow alleyways.

With a flicker of anger, Kae tossed aside his can and darted into the shadows. This wasn't the first time they had fled from the city guard, nor would it be the last. Kae and his crew had clearly made an impression; for the third time that week, they were sprinting to evade the city's enforcers.

Kae's escape was cut short when his head slammed against the tarred road, a high-pitched ringing filled his ears. Blood flowed from his broken nose, and tears blurred his vision. It was an ambush; he had run directly into a trap set by guards lurking in the shadows. As he rounded a

corner, he was met with a brutal strike that felt like a bat across his face.

"I should be dead," he thought numbly as he attempted to rise, tasting the iron in his mouth, only to be forced back down by a heavy boot pressing on his chest. His body went limp under the weight.

"I've seen worse, but only just," Simmons muttered with a sinister chuckle that carried no trace of humour. The tremor in his voice betrayed the truth. He wasn't sure how much. Across from him, Kae lay motionless, beaten beyond recognition. His body remained where it had landed after the guards had thrown him unceremoniously through the cell door. For weeks, the so-called 'City's Finest' had held them in what was euphemistically called a 'Detention Centre'. This was not a place of justice. The things that happened in these cells, were given a wide berth by the upright citizens of Meridia.

"Hey, you okay?" Simmons prodded, his voice laced with worry that Kae might not have made it.

Desperate moments passed.

"I'll kill them all, I swear," Simmons hissed under his breath, "If they don't..."

Kae managed a feeble grunt; it was a soft, desperate sound; a prayer for death to hasten its final embrace.

“You’re alive!” Simmons whispered, relief washing over his bruised face as it contorted into a grimace that resembled a smile. In Kae, Simmons had found a friend and a brother, an inspiration and a beacon of hope.

“It’ll take more than a couple of...” Kae’s voice trailed off as darkness claimed him once more.

The days blurred together, each as grim as the last, until sanity - or something like it - prevailed, and they were released.

“We’d better not catch you vandalizing our city again!” the head guard threatened as they shuffled past him out of the Detention Centre.

The men didn’t flinch. Kae, who once might have met the guard's gaze with disdain or indifference, now felt a deep-seated hatred. If anything, the guard had transformed his indifference into something far darker, smouldering below the surface.

Simmons, who often masked his trauma with dark humour, had suffered worse than Kae, perhaps due to his defiant nature. Or maybe the guards simply took perverse pleasure in breaking men who clung desperately to life. Emerging from the Detention Centre, Simmons was a shell of his former self. Kae had heard the term "dead man walking," but it wasn't until he saw Simmons in better light that he truly understood the phrase.

A fortnight later, Kae found Simmons hanging from scaffolding, his feet swaying inches above the solid ground.

Nearby, an old chair lay toppled, the instrument of his final work.

“I’m sorry,” Kae whispered, his gaze fixed on his friend’s lifeless form as the city buzzed to life around them, indifferent to the death of a man who was like a brother to him, “I’m so sorry.”

That was two years ago.

Since then, Kae had evolved into something entirely new. The tragic death of Simmons catalyzed a profound transformation, compelling Kae to ensure his friend’s untimely exit from this world would not be in vain.

“This one’s for you, my friend. May you find peace besides these green pastures,” Kae murmured, his voice a soft echo in the quiet of the night. With a final glance at his latest creation, he slipped into the shadows, letting the darkness envelop him as he made his way home.

Chapter 4.

Discovery.

For the third consecutive day, James and Lysandra delved into the resources of the library. They had exhausted most of the conventional literature on magic portals to worlds between worlds. In fact, most conventional works were complete fiction. By midday, James looked distraught. There had been no clear breakthrough of any kind and the heap of manuscripts was now sprawled across several tables. Two frequent visitors to the library, intrigued by their activity, had even join in, searching for anything loosely related to magical portals.

“I think we’re going about this the wrong way,” Lysandra conceded by as lunchtime approached.

“What other option to we have?” James enquired, his voice tinged with desperation.

“Lunch. We need lunch,” Lysandra declared firmly.

Despite the situation, James couldn't suppress a smile. He was amazed at how much Lysandra was able to eat, while maintaining her slender form.

"It must be youth, or you have some divine way of burning calories," he teased, "you eat more than any person I know!"

Lysandra simply smiled in response.

"So, it's settled," she proclaimed with a regal air, "To lunch!"

The library was a labyrinth to James and he knew he would make no progress without her, so he accepted the respite from the endless scuffling through manuscripts.

"We're taking the scenic route today," Lysandra announced, maintaining her authoritative tone. James knew better than to object and fell into step beside her.

The day was beautiful, marked by clear skies and a gentle breeze.

"So, what do you think we should do differently?" James prodded.

"We're looking for something unconventional, right?" Lysandra posed the question.

"You could say so," James responded, hesitantly eager to hear her thoughts.

"Then we shouldn't be searching in conventional places. I think it's time we look elsewhere," Lysandra suggested mysteriously, squinting for effect.

“You mean somewhere other than the library?” James asked, worried they might need to start from scratch.

“Yes and no,” Lysandra clarified, “we need to take our search below the library.”

James looked at her, puzzled, as she anticipated.

“The richest archives are actually in the basement of the library, a full seven levels of archives!” Lysandra announced.

James could hardly believe it. The public area of the library already encompassed an entire city block; the notion of seven more levels was staggering.

“Of course, most of what is generally accessible to the public, is also available in digital format. I’ve been doing those checks online at night, helping us narrow down our searches. The archives below the library are much older and very delicate. Many of those archives have never been digitalised and only the original texts exist. At least there is a rough index!” Lysandra sighed with exaggerated relief. Under her breath, she muttered, “One that I created!” She winked at James.

James chuckled. He was amazed at how she navigated the library with such ease. He had surmised through their time together that she was actually several years older than he initially thought. She had been working at the library for nearly six years and would be turning twenty-nine next Spring.

The years following her parents' passing were spent piecing together their research and traveling between libraries across the north and south. She had uncovered some uncomfortable truths, but until she had all the knowledge and evidence she sought, she held her discovery tucked away.

Her typically mirthful expression momentarily clouded over.

“Below the library is where you find the truths that get people killed,” Lysandra murmured softly, alluding to her parents.

“So, you’ve—” James began, but Lysandra cut him off.

“Yes, I’ve spent considerable time down there. I might be one of the few who have ventured that deep, apart from the maintenance staff. Most people don’t care for the truth,” she explained.

“Ask the average person on the street if they prefer the truth or something beautiful and they will say ‘I want the truth’, but they would not be truthful in saying so. Nor would they know the truth, even if it were to run around the streets naked with a poster around its neck, shouting ‘I am the truth!’ No, people want beautiful answers, neatly wrapped. Most people want to believe that if you cast a beautiful net, you will only catch beautiful things,” Lysandra mused.

“And ‘below the library’ is generally where truth seeks refuge and solitude,” Lysandra concluded. He deduced that she had gone down there to search for answers to her

parent's passing and perhaps continue their research. He didn't want to push the subject – in her own time, she will reveal what she feels she must.

James had never ventured into this part of the city. For all its modern marvel, Meridia had grown haphazardly over centuries, layering the new atop the old like a complex tapestry. The library was nestled in 'Old Town', so named for the large, historic buildings, looming like sentinels of a bygone era. Their aged facades were etched with the passage of time, standing in stark contrast to the sleek modern minimalism of nearby districts. Tall, ornate structures lined the cobblestone streets, their aged bricks softened by ivy that climbed eagerly upwards, as if trying to reclaim the structures. Old Town was generally quieter than the bustling city centre; the air was cooler and the softest sounds, carried ominously through the streets against the distant hum of the Industrial Area.

There was no clear boundary between the two areas, but rather a gradual change; the way the sound carried, the murmuring of passersby and the thickening rumble of traffic. Old Town's charm gradually faded until in a moment, the buildings were large, inornate, functional structures. Rolling garage doors marked entrances to underground parking and windows were suddenly shielded by thick metal burglar bars. Angry cats prowled and stray dogs ventured into unforgiving alleyways, their paths ending at barbed wire fences for no apparent reason.

As James and Lysandra turned a corner, they stopped in their tracks. Before them was the most stunning mural they had ever seen.

The building it adorned was grey and abandoned, but the mural itself depicted an untamed, rural landscape with undulating green hills that seemed to stretch endlessly. The scene was viewed from the edge of a forest, following a river that snaked through the hills. In the distance, atop a hill, stood a fortress or palace. Dark figures swirled menacingly above the castle, adding a sense of impending doom to the otherwise idyllic landscape.

James turned his attention to the signature - a solitary letter: "E."

He blinked, as if to clear a vision.

"Could it be?" Lysandra asked.

"I don't know what to say," James responded, awe and disbelief widening his eyes, "I've tried speaking to Eli like I did in the garden and I've expected him to respond, but I've only been confronted with silence. But this..." His voice trailed off in disbelief.

Lysandra pulled out her phone. "Let's take some pictures to study later," she suggested as a group of unruly youth appeared on the far end of the street.

They lingered a moment longer before continuing to the café in silence, choosing a route that avoided unnecessary contact with the young men, who seemed the type that wore trouble like a crown. Each of them was lost in their

own thoughts about the war-torn world depicted in the mural. In James's mind, there was no doubt. The mural was the spitting image of The Garden, inspired by Eli.

James and Lysandra were alone in the large tomb-like room, but James still felt compelled to speak no louder than a whisper. It felt more appropriate, amidst the ancient tomes on display, as if their mere existence demanded respect.

“What do you make of this?” James whispered, holding an ancient volume.

Lysandra set down the book she had been paging through and approached James. The number of volumes here was significantly less than in the public area, with most manuscripts having earned their own exhibition. Along the walls were countless scrolls, horizontally stacked in wooden racks.

Lysandra gently took the tome from James. It looked ancient; the pages, preserved through a process of waxing, were worn and faded, but the text was still clear, written with ornate letters and elaborate decorations.

“You're right, Lysandra confirmed. Listen to this, 'I had discovered a place that exists between places, where time was its own master. There is so much to say, and I find I lack the words to fully describe it. This place, this garden, seems to do as it pleases, refusing to abide by the rules we have always considered absolute.'”

Lysandra carefully flipped the tome over to look at the title.

“The Adventures of Thomas Fray,” she read aloud, her face took on a curious expression.

“Thomas Fray,” she repeated, “Why does that name sound so familiar?”

A moment later, recognition dawned on her, and her eyes lit up.

“It can’t be!” she exclaimed. James wasn’t sure what to say, but it was clear that the name sparked a memory. He gave her space to piece together her thoughts.

Lysandra lay down the volume as gently as her excitement afforded and rushed over to the circular staircase that would take her further into the belly of the library.

“Wait here!” she called over her shoulder as she disappeared from sight.

Left alone, James picked up the volume again, starting from the beginning.

James, having nothing else to do until Lysandra reappeared, picked up the volume again and started at the beginning.

Thomas Fray was a colourful character, an educated man, and an academic of sorts. He had lived decades ago, leading a simple life on a small estate outside of town. His wife had died of fever just as they were beginning to build their life together. In reflection, Thomas realized that until her death, his life had been pleasurable, plain, and

predictable. Afterwards, he was a man searching for a purpose, only to discover that he needed to piece himself together. For a while, he sought solace in all the wrong places. He took to the bottle, as so many who are lost, often do. It didn't stop there, of course. It never does. Soon, his children abandoned him, and his estate fell into ruin. Forced to sell his family's property, he moved into a rented room in the poor quarters. One night, while trudging through the streets, barely able to stay upright, bottle in hand, he crossed paths with a group of young men—men who had returned from a war where they'd seen and done things that no man should ever endure. Pain and fear had taken root in their minds, becoming the only things they knew.

The local constable found Thomas the next morning, beaten and bloodied, barely alive.

Near-death experiences change a man.

"I discover myself on the verge of a usual mistake," Thomas wrote, "The answers I sought were not fermented or distilled. That was too easy, and the cost was too high. I realised then, that the cost of the bottle was not the coins on the counter, but the life you were living. The prisoner is a man who thinks that something or someone will come and save him. As I lay in that alley, blood in my hair and the stench of alcohol and piss surrounding me, I discovered that I was that prisoner. I refused to remain so."

Thomas expanded his search, favouring cold rain and worn shoes over old habits, as he travelled the world.

“I had discovered a new joy; a game of sorts. Life and I, it seemed, were playing a game of hide and seek,” Thomas journalled.

“The world is full of magical things, patiently waiting for our senses to grow sharper,” he wrote.

As Lysandra reappeared, James looked up.

“And?” he asked.

Lysandra paused for a moment, searching James’s eyes as if trying to glimpse the man behind them.

Slowly, with a trembling hand, she handed him a page.

Chapter 5.

Vigilante.

“I want no mistakes tonight!” the captain barked, his voice cutting through the night air like the edge of a blade. His cold, calculating eyes swept over the assembled men. He continued pacing, the ground resisting under the weight of his towering frame. Broad shoulders strained against the fabric of his uniform. His face resembled old leather that had survived the seasons, with the scars to show. A greying beard framed his square jaw, the only hint of his advancing age, while his bald head gleamed under the light as he moved. Everything about him screamed authority, a man forged in violence, who could snap anyone in half without hesitation.

“Darian and those like him, taint my streets. They defile the very essence of what Meridia stands for!”

He paused for effect, letting his silence stir something primal in his soldiers. The tension snapped when the men roared their reply.

“Discipline, Order, Peace,” shouted the men of the night watch.

Ronan joined in, looking blankly ahead, ever the obedient soldier, but the trained eye may have noticed his fists clenching to reveal white and angry knuckles as he joined in the creed of his squad.

He knew better than to blindly believe the captain’s accusations about this, ‘Ill-begotten son of a bitch!’

He had no doubts about Darian being a rogue, a thief and a miscreant, but to have made it onto ‘The Captain’s shit-list,’ Darian had crossed some powerful people.

The city watch was all Ronan had ever known. His father had been a decorated officer, and the weight of his legacy followed Ronan through the corridors of the barracks, where plaques and pictures immortalized his lineage. From an early age, Ronan was moulded into a soldier, trained in combat, discipline, and obedience. Honor, duty, and loyalty were the pillars of his childhood. As soon as he came of age, joining Meridia's military felt less like a choice and more like a destiny fulfilled. He quickly rose through the ranks, his skill and dedication earning him respect and trust. He did not disappoint, tracing the path his father had paved for him with precision and pride.

But as he ascended, a quiet unease began to stir inside of him. Something didn’t feel right. The deeper he immersed himself in the ranks, the more the ideals that once inspired

him to serve began to erode. There was a tension, subtle at first, a contradiction between what he'd been taught and what he now witnessed. A man can only know peace when what he says and what he does are aligned. Peace eluded him. The honour and duty that were supposed to guide his every action seemed twisted, used for purposes he couldn't yet articulate. That was two years ago. Everything changed in the blink of an eye.

“Ronan, around the back,” the officer had ordered, his voice sharp, devoid of hesitation.

Ronan moved quietly into position, his boots pressing soundlessly against the cracked pavement of the industrial zone. For weeks, they'd been tracking the movements of a group of young men - graffiti artists who had become bolder with each passing night, their resistance splashed in vibrant colours across the city's walls. The authorities couldn't allow it. Flames turn into fires if left untended.

Ronan heightened his senses, closing his eyes. He often felt that sight was a distraction, overbearing the other senses and leaving him exposed.

The Industrial Zone of Meridia stood in stark contrast to the city's historic charm and bustling districts. It was a sprawling, grim labyrinth of steel and concrete, a place where function reigned supreme. The air smelled of metal and oil, thick with the haze of smog that hung low over the streets, casting the world in a muted, greyish hue, like mist rolling in from the ocean. Towering, boxy buildings

dominated the landscape, their windows covered by rusted metal bars, while rolling garage doors revealed glimpses of the bustling factories within. The constant hum of machinery echoed off the walls, accompanied by the distant clatter of heavy equipment and the occasional hiss of steam vents. Sounds moved differently here, and the air was thick and cold. He closed his uniform about him and opened his eyes.

The officer had positioned himself across from the doorway, giving Ronan a curt nod before vanishing into the shadows. Ronan held his ground, eyes adjusting to the darkness, his muscles tensed but ready. In the distance, he could hear at least two distinct voices. One of them, he imagined, belonged to Kae, their target - a notorious graffiti artist who had made a name for himself defying Meridia's rigid order.

A shout pierced the quiet, "Kae, they're here!"

A figure burst through the doorway – young and agile, his grey tank top clinging to his frame as he bolted toward the exit. In one swift, brutal motion, the officer swung a bat, catching the young man across the face with a sickening thud. Ronan froze. His heart pounded as the young man crumpled to the ground, gasping for air, blood spilling from his shattered nose. This wasn't what they had planned. They were supposed to gather intelligence, not bludgeon young men to death.

Ronan's gaze flicked to the captain, standing in the shadows, watching with a twisted smile that sent a shiver down Ronan's spine. It was the same sinister smile the

captain wore tonight, barking orders with the same hunger for power, the same wild obsession in his eyes.

“I’m sorry,” Ronan had whispered to the young man, as other officers grabbed him by the arms and half-dragged, half-carried his limp form into the darkness.

That night changed Ronan. After showering far longer than usual, trying to scrub away the guilt that clung to his skin. When he finally stepped out, steam swirled around him like an infernal haze, and he wiped a streak across the fogged mirror, revealing his own reflection. For what felt like an eternity, he just stood there, hands pressed against the cool glass, staring at the reflection of a man he barely recognized. His thoughts churned in turmoil, swinging between anger, shame, and a deep, gnawing regret. Doubt coiled its bony fingers tighter around his throat, suffocating the lie that had once fuelled his conviction. The mist slowly crept back, veiling the mirror, but before his image vanished entirely, Ronan whispered, barely audible, “Never again.”

He would fight back. He would find a way to redeem himself for standing by without standing up. The weight of his passive compliance bore down on him, his silent acceptance having served as a tacit endorsement. No more.

“Keep your enemies close,” he swore to himself that night.

Now, standing among his fellow soldiers, fists clenched, Ronan knew exactly who his enemy was - one of them, at least.

For months, Ronan had watched the captain with a growing suspicion. It was too convenient how certain names were always targeted, and how, at the end of it all, the same men always profited. The captain, with his clean uniform and his high-and-mighty speeches, was as crooked as the criminals he hunted. There were many evil men in Meridia - evil men and 'blind eyes.' To enjoy the attention of the captain meant that Darian, for reasons yet unknown, was no longer playing by the rules.

A faint smirk curled at the corner of Ronan's mouth. Darian. The name was whispered in the darkest corners of Meridia. Some spoke of him like a ghost, a shadow that crept through the underworld. Others, with a reverent tone, as though he were something more, waving their hands in superstition to ward off whatever fate befalls those who utter his name.

Ronan had seen Darian's work, or at least the events attributed to the ghost. The man wasn't just a thief - he was an artist in his own right, a mastermind who knew how to make an impact without leaving so much as a trace. It was this very absence of evidence or ego that tagged his work. His influence threaded through the city's underbelly like a web, invisible but undeniable. His work carried a level of perfection - order, even.

“If Darian was in fact, no longer playing by the rules, then I must find him,” Ronan thought. His mind raced back to Kae, wondering if the young man had survived the night. He glanced towards the captain, his eyes ablaze.

“The enemy of my enemy,” he thought.

“We reconvene at twenty-one hundred. Be ready. Be alert!” the captain barked as a final command before dismissing the men with a sharp wave.

Ronan glanced down at his wristwatch, the seconds ticking away like a countdown to chaos.

“I’ve got two hours,” he muttered under his breath. “Two hours to stop the city watch from capturing Darian and to secure an ally who’d just as soon slit my throat as help me fight the evil that surrounds us.”

“I need a hobby!” he chuckled to himself as he disappeared around the corner.

Chapter 6.

Discovery.

Elara strained her eyes, peering through the mist that clung stubbornly to the streets. She had always disliked cities. Cities change people. They offer so much distraction that people are quick to sacrifice their purpose and dreams in favour of cheap tricks and hollow entertainment. She had always thought that the absence of silence had something to do with it. Cities never truly sleep. There was something to be said for quiet places, intentional solitude and the calm – or the rage – of nature. Spend too much time in a city, and you eventually lose yourself. Some would argue that they find themselves – there, amidst the maze and madness of human industriousness. “Perhaps a version of themselves,” she thought, “but certainly not the best version.”

It was still early morning, the sun barely beginning to burn away the mist. Soon, light would spill into the streets and alleys, casting long shadows over this human chessboard

where a single move, right or wrong, could shape your future. Lately, her mind had been wandering in circles, with each new orbit around the thought, taking her deeper and deeper into the abyss. There was a question tugging at her mind – a question with uncomfortable answers: If we were entrusted as the custodians for the world, why were we failing so miserably?

As she travelled north - toward what many saw as the height of human progress - she couldn't shake the paradox. The further we advanced, the further we strayed from our purpose. In the South, primitive though it might seem, people lived in balance, in harmony with their surroundings. Here in the North, the price of progress was discord.

The city was stirring to life, with the nocturnal inhabitants slipping away into the shadows as the working men and women took their place.

The streets buzzed with activity - neon billboards flashing, horns blaring, steam hissing from the manholes. Most of the people were neatly dressed, trudging onward, deep in conversation with themselves, their hollow eyes seeing only what was right in front of them.

Here and there, in stark contrast, she would spot single figures who looked upwards every now and again, taking in the world around them. An elderly lady caught her eye, smiling at a young girl hurried along by a hurried mother as

they waited at the crosswalk. The little girl smiled back, surprised that someone had noticed her.

“Such a fragile thing,” Elara thought, “Joy; it asks so little.”

She closed her eyes briefly, letting her senses roam through the streets like tendrils, searching.

“Where are you, James?” the thought fluttered in her mind with a sense of quiet urgency.

Her senses extended outward, stretching for miles, searching, touching, sifting through the endless hum of the city to find one man among millions.

She heard the quiet cooing of pigeons followed by flutter of wings, the sharp argument between a man and woman while their children recoiled under the bed in the next room. Two doors down, lovers lost themselves in each other’s arms, indifferent to the passing of time. She paused at a bakery, taking in the sweet scent of freshly baked bread tugging at her empty stomach - a reminder that she hadn’t eaten a proper meal in over a week. But still, she pressed on, pushing her awareness further. Finally, she found it - the quiet rustle of pages and two voices speaking softly, with the weight of desperation lingering on their words.

“James,” she whispered, a faint smile tugging at her lips.

She opened her eyes and began walking purposefully. The path had revealed itself in her mind, clear as day. She knew exactly where she needed to go. The scent of fresh bread

from the bakery beckoned, a small comfort amidst her mission. Soon, she would find James.

Elara paused in front of a plain door, cut into the much larger, ornate entrance to the library. She chewed on a warm piece of bread, taking a moment to appreciate the intricate designs of the original entrance, while sipping the last of her coffee.

At what point, she wondered, did we stop building beautiful things? The practical, ordinary door felt disappointing by comparison to the craftsmanship that once was. Shrugging off the thought, she swallowed her last bite and stepped through the door.

“Forgiveness is the strangest thing,” James said, glancing up from the manuscript he was holding to meet Lysandra’s eyes. “It’s the key to the prison in which we lock ourselves, yet many of us would rather stay trapped than set ourselves free.”

“I already like you,” Elara interjected, striding confidently toward the table where James and Lysandra sat.

Both of them looked up, startled.

“You must be James,” Elara said with a smile, stretching out her hand in greeting.

“Uh,” James stammered, rising from his chair, “Yes, I am.” He hesitated for a moment before reaching out and shaking her hand. “And this is Lysandra.”

Elara turned her attention to Lysandra, her gaze appraising. “Now, you are something to behold,” she remarked, studying Lysandra’s features.

Lysandra blushed, remaining silent under the scrutiny.

“Elara,” she introduced herself, “My name is Elara, and I’ve travelled across this godforsaken city to find you both.” Her eyes flicked back to James, waiting for his reaction.

“You’re late,” James replied, a grin tugging at the corner of his lips.

Elara blinked, surprised. That wasn’t the response she had anticipated.

“We’ve been expecting you,” Lysandra added with a gentle smile.

“Well,” Elara laughed, pulling up a chair, “that’s new. What did I miss?”

For the better part of the morning, James, Lysandra, and Elara exchanged stories.

“Amazing,” Elara remarked, listening as James described the graffiti.

“We’ve now counted twelve, scattered throughout the city, all with a similar theme,” James explained. “In one of them, we saw what we believed to be a sign of your coming. We didn’t know for sure, of course, but we felt it was likely that we’d meet you - or someone like you - eventually.”

“Then how am I late?” Elara enquired.

“It just felt like the right thing to say at the time,” Lysandra giggled.

“I’d love to see these artworks,” Elara said, intrigued.

“I’m sure we can take you to see them. In the meantime, we’ve taken several photos,” Lysandra offered, handing Elara a file.

“We’re trying, of course, to track down the artist himself, but he’s not an easy man to find,” commented James.

As Elara paged through the file, Lysandra continued, “It’s been six weeks since James and I met.” She glanced at James, and they exchanged a smile.

“We’ve combed through every relevant archive in this library and searched the internet extensively. Everything we’ve found that seems connected to The Garden, is in that

file. I also called on a friend with...let's call it 'advanced skills' to find things that are not generally 'in the public domain';" Lysandra added, a hint of pride in her voice.

As Elara turned another page, she suddenly froze. She felt eyes on her - someone watching from the shadows. She closed her eyes briefly and let her senses stretch out, like a wave rushing towards shore.

"What's wrong?" James asked, sensing the shift.

"We're not alone," Elara whispered, her voice taut with alertness.

Lysandra's blue eyes widened in panic, while James scanned the dark corners of the library. The stained-glass windows cast a dim, ethereal light across the endless rows of books, leaving deep shadows between the shelves.

In a single fluid motion, Elara turned, now kneeling with a throwing knife in her hand, where moments earlier there had been none. She didn't hesitate. The blade flew through the air, disappearing into the shadows. James and Lysandra looked on in disbelief, their breaths caught in their throats.

A dull thud followed as the knife struck. The shadows shifted, and a figure emerged, cloaked in a deep hood, holding a large book with Elara's knife embedded in the cover. He dropped the book to the floor, sending odd echoes through the library.

“I mean you no harm,” the figure said, his voice calm.

“And yet,” Elara hissed, eyes narrowing.

“If I had wanted you dead, you’d be dead,” the man replied with unsettling confidence.

“Honest intentions don’t hide in dark corners,” Elara countered. James noticed another throwing knife had materialized in her hand.

“You’re right,” the man conceded with a smirk. “But I had to be sure.”

“Sure of what?” Elara demanded, her stance unwavering, her eyes narrowing as she examined the man before her.

“That I wasn’t breaking my contract with very powerful men, for having become a sentimental fool,” the man shrugged.

“Even men such as I have boundaries,” Darian continued. His eyes briefly flickered in the direction of Lysandra, and Elara needed no further explanation. That small movement had revealed a great deal more than his words.

He stepped forward, peeling back his hood to reveal sharp, weathered features, like stone worn by years of storms. “They call me Darian,” he said calmly.

“While I generally prefer to give execution a wide berth, some men do not take ‘no’ for an answer. One such man, wanted these two dead. I was contracted to hasten their journey to the next life, several days ago. I take a lot of pride

in what I do, and I have an immaculate reputation to uphold. They should be dead.”

A wave of shock passed over James and Lysandra’s faces, disbelief hanging heavy in the air.

“Dead?” James echoed. Darian waved away the question as if it were unimportant.

“You’re a mercenary,” Elara’s tone was cold and deliberate.

“Among other things,” Darian replied evenly, “I prefer to think of myself as someone who ‘facilitates’ the change in ownership of high value assets among unwilling participants to others, but, I do what must be done, what most men lack the conviction or skill to do themselves,” replied Darian.

“So, a mercenary and a thief,” Elara concluded. Darian briefly tilted his head in acknowledgement.

“And yet, here we are,” Elara replied icily, her knuckles still white as she gripped the throwing knife, ready to strike at the slightest provocation. Behind her, Lysandra was curled into James’s embrace, her breaths coming in short, rapid bursts, seeking solace in the fold of his arms.

“Yes,” Darian said with a nod. “Here we are.” His voice dropped and he took a calculated step forward.

“They’re alive - for now – and as a consequence, I am, no doubt, a wanted man. Either you get the job done or you become the job. As we speak, my ‘employers’ would already be contemplating my end, some of them quite

excitedly I might imagine. In my line of work, you outlive your usefulness. Eventually.”

“Why?” James prodded again, his voice almost failing him. “Why have us killed? We’re two ordinary people minding our own business.”

“Apparently not,” Darian replied, “I don’t ask questions. Questions get you killed, but it seems your ‘research’ is frowned upon.”

Elara scrutinized him for a long moment, surveying his every word and gesture, testing for any hidden deception. Eventually, she slowly lowered her blade.

“Since you mean us no harm, you might as well join us at the table,” Elara said, her tone lighter but still sharp. She had used her Sight to peer into Darian’s heart during their brief exchange, had glimpsed the horrors he had endured - the pain that had nearly consumed him. Yet, amidst the darkness, there remained a glimmer of light. It was that tiny spark, that faint hope, that had saved James and Lysandra from certain death for somewhere, in the embers of his being, he silently believed he held the making of something better than a great man – he believed that if awarded a change, he could become a good man.

James and Lysandra both looked ready to protest, confusion and alarm plain on their faces. But before they could speak, Elara turned to them, her voice a calming but firm whisper. “I know you hardly know me,” she began, “but

trust me when I say that this man is more than he seems. He is part of your story - part of our story - and whether we like it or not, he has a role to play in what's coming."

She glanced between them, her gaze steady. "Time will reveal how it all unfolds, but for now, we need him."

She turned to Darian once more, her gaze still sharp. "Welcome to the future," she said, offering a faint smile, though her eyes remained vigilant.

Darian simply nodded in acknowledgment, his expression unreadable.

James and Lysandra exchanged bewildered looks, still struggling to process what had just transpired. But sensing the shift in the atmosphere, they allowed Elara to take the lead.

Elara turned to Lysandra and met her gaze. "The ocean is a beautiful and terrible thing," she said softly, her voice full of meaning. Lysandra had no idea what this meant, but simply nodded.

Then, shifting her focus back to Darian, she added, "There will be a time for difficult decisions, where the fate of more than one world will be balanced on a single choice. I trust you'll make the right one when that time comes." Darian's gaze locked with Elara's for a moment, and he felt a shiver run down his spine. Not knowing how to respond to her prophecy, he nodded and pulled up a chair.

"The day is still young," Elara said, breaking the silence with a lighter tone, sensing the need to release some of the

weight that had settled over them. She gestured toward the files on the table and the situation at large.

“And there is much to uncover.”

Chapter 7.

The Diner.

Darian weighed the knife in his hand. It was slightly back-heavy, the ragged edge uneven, but it would do the job if it had to. Messy, sure - not his usual style – but it would be quick and fatal. Given his reputation and street credit, the delay would be quickly forgiven. He would claw his life back. He cut the steak, the knife sliding through the meat easily.

His gaze shifted around the table, landing on James and Lysandra. They looked so innocent, as if the world had not managed to find an entrance through which to creep into their souls. They seemed too alive, too carefree and too joyful to have existed in the same world as he did. He paused.

“But they didn’t, did they?” Darian mused. They might have shared the same space or walked the same streets, but his life, from the very first breath, shared absolutely no similarities with theirs. Their stories flowed out of them

effortlessly, like some charming anecdote you tell at a cocktail party where everyone is pretending to have a good time. Darian could picture it - James and Lysandra at a gathering of the pious, finger food and champagne in hand, while a quartet played some dull melody in the corner of a marble-floored room. All of them going through the motions, laughing on cue, keeping up appearances. He forced a smile when Lysandra giggled, but it didn't reach his eyes. He feigned a smile when he heard Lysandra giggle.

The story had faded into the background for him, drowned out by the dark cloud of contemplation that loomed overhead. He was weighing the wisdom of his choices, second-guessing every step that brought him here.

Bravery and stupidity often shared the same stage, differentiated only by the outcome. If things went well, they'd call him brave. If not? A fool. That's how the world worked - judging actions through the lens of hindsight, the luxury of distance by those who lacked the courage to be in the arena.

"Time will tell," he muttered under his breath.

"What was that?" Elara's voice cut through the fog of his thoughts.

Darian blinked, surprised he'd spoken aloud. He looked up and found her gaze locked on him, unsettling and unrelenting. Unlike James and Lysandra, there was something far deeper in Elara's eyes. Her presence was... weighty. She wasn't like the others, not by a long shot. He

prided himself on reading people in seconds, but Elara defied immediate comprehension.

He shrugged it off, waving a hand dismissively. "Nothing of consequence," he said casually, though the tension in his voice lingered.

Elara's eyes narrowed slightly, not fully convinced. Darian shifted in his seat, glancing down at her knife. She still held it - gripped in a way that suggested she wasn't just familiar with the weapon, but perhaps even skilled with it. A small flicker of amusement crossed his mind: she was just as guarded as he was, and for good reason, considering the circumstances of their meeting.

When James and Lysandra's conversation slowed, Elara stepped in. Darian had anticipated this - he knew it would come. He made a slight exaggeration at setting his knife down slowly and reached for his napkin, wiping his mouth with deliberate calm. He glanced at Elara, waiting to see if she'd mirror the gesture. She didn't. Her grip on her blade remained firm, her eyes never leaving his.

"Fair enough," he thought. "Trust must be earned."

"...Apart from the obvious, we don't know anything about you," Elara said, her voice direct but not harsh. "Mind adding some colour to the outlines?"

Darian considered this for a moment, letting the weight of her question settle. Where to begin? His life wasn't one story - it was a collection of fractured moments, each one

propelling him further from anything good, closer to the darkness that had shaped him. Disappointment stacked on disappointment until the pain became something you lived with, something that steered your every move.

You fight it at first, believing that things will get better, that the storm will pass and that any moment, the sun will break through the dark clouds. But eventually, you stop fighting, because the sunlight doesn't come. You fall in love with the voice inside your head – the narrator who convinces you that the whole world is conspiring against you, that your misery is somehow poetic and that it makes you special. Then one day, you simply embrace your suffering like you would an old friend, because it's all you have left in the world.

“We get what we think we deserve,” Darian mused, his voice low, almost to himself.

As if sensing his uncertainty, Lysandra gently put her hand on his, piercing into his soul with those pale blue eyes. His lips went dry, and his heart suddenly raced faster and louder than it should. He was no stranger to beautiful women. He's had his fair share of tumbles; some he wished he would forget, and others that he had hoped would last forever, but Lysandra was something altogether different. Her simple touch sparked something in him that he didn't think was there. Hope.

“Start at the beginning,” she said softly, her voice as calm as a still lake on a starry night.

Darian swallowed, feeling his throat constrict. He hadn't told anyone his story - not in years and never fully. And yet, here he was, sitting at this table with the most unlikely companions, feeling outright vulnerable under Lysandra's gaze. He wasn't sure whether this moment marked an end or a beginning.

His early years were unremarkable, in the sense that they were marked by cruelty and neglect, like so many others. His parents were a distant memory, barely more than shadows at the edge of his consciousness. His first clear memory was of his tiny hand clenched tightly in the rough, calloused grip of Hilario. It was morning, late autumn. He remembered the nauseating scent of a hangover, fighting with the smell of cheap perfume, clinging to the ragged cloak that covered the man. It betrayed the events of the night before. Heavy, sluggish footsteps echoed through the empty streets before the mist cleared out.

"Do you know what Hilario means?" Darian asked rhetorically, his voice carrying a hint of bitterness.

It was tragically ironic. The name meant "happy," and yet Hilario was anything but. A cruel, wicked man, his sole purpose was to gather urchins and deliver them to Timsah - The Crocodile. Whether they arrived whole or in pieces didn't matter much to him.

Timsah was another beast entirely - one more befitting to his name. Like Hilario, he harboured the rage of an insecure man, and he unleashed that rage on defenceless 'nobodies' as he called them. Darian had the scars - physical and otherwise - as evidence of the man's brutality,

the mark running down the side of his face being one of the many lingering reminders of those early days.

Timsah was a walking contradiction; he wore a simple white tunic and sandals as he strolled through the streets of Meridia, smiling and bidding everyone well. A holy man to some, a demon to the rest, but it was all Darian had known – a world that was shiny on top and infernal below. He soon learned that pleasing Timsah, meant more food, a mattress and fewer beatings - and so that is what he did – he survived.

“The same burdens that crushed the other boys,” he began, “pushed me to excel.”

The table fell silent as Darian recounted his rise within the ranks of Timsah and Hilario’s operation.

“In time, I started seeing cracks in their relationship. Their only bond was easy money and blood on their hands... and, of course, ego. Men like that either think too highly of themselves or too little. Either way, it stems from the same inflated sense of self. I used that. I had to.”

Darian’s voice grew darker. “I’d seen too many kids suffer things no one should ever have to endure. In the end, it was simple—start a rumour here, plant misinformation here and there, and I watched as they destroyed each other.”

James, Lysandra, and Elara listened in silence.

“They were found at the docks one morning,” Darian said, his eyes finding Lysandra’s.

“I’ll spare you the details, but I felt that – in the end, I imagine they experienced the climax of misery they had bestowed on so many innocent young lives,” Darian concluded, “Poetic justice.”

“I’m sorry,” Elara said, realising that he omitted the details of his role in the death of the men.

“Why?” snapped Darian.

“Because you loved them,” Elara replied, her voice calm but firm. “For all the pain and misery they put you through, in the end, our hearts tend to betray us.”

“I didn’t love them!” Darian retorted, his voice rising. “They got what they deserved. If anything, they deserved worse.”

But even as he said it, he knew she was right. There was a twisted kind of love buried deep in the darkness. Perhaps it was the need to prove himself to them, to say, “I’m worthy of love.”

“Anyway,” Darian said, eager to change the direction of the conversation, “after that, I went out on my own. Saw to it that the kids had a safe haven they could return to and I became a hand for hire, having earned a reputation for ‘doing what needs to be done’.”

Darian waved his hand as if to dismiss his history.

“And that brings us here,” he said, taking on a serious tone and turning his attention to James and Lysandra.

“Can you please explain – simply – what you’re up to and why this would attract the attention of the most powerful man in Meridia?” Darian enquired.

James’s eyes widened in shock. “You don’t mean—”

“Yes,” Darian cut him off. “Your execution was a direct order from The Peacekeeper.”

James looked dumbfounded. “I thought he was a myth.”

“Oh, he’s real,” Darian said gravely. “And for an order to come directly from him, you’ve crossed a line. A big one.”

“I don’t see how what we’re doing would concern him,” Lysandra said, her voice full of disbelief.

“Walk me through it,” Darian replied, leaning forward. “Let’s piece it together.”

Elara’s gaze shifted to James, waiting.

After a moment, James spoke. “There’s this girl...”

Darian’s expression flickered with amusement. He chuckled, the sound unexpected, almost boyish. The group joined in, laughing together for the first time.

“Isn’t there always?” Darian muttered.

“And a man,” Lysandra added, laughing.

Darian grinned. “I already like this story. I can see why The Peacekeeper’s upset.”

“The thing is,” James whispered, leaning closer, “they’re not from this world.”

The colour drained from Darian’s face. The lightness vanished, replaced by deep, ominous shadows. He instinctively reached for his hood, pulling it low over his head.

“We need to leave. Now,” Darian said, his voice sharp and urgent, “Right now!”

“What did I say?” asked James, confused.

“Too much,” Darian replied, rising quickly from the table.

Elara, even without applying her Sight, saw something that few might ever have seen in Darian’s eyes; fear. She followed his lead, putting down the knife that she had – until a moment ago – still unconsciously been clasping in her hand.

The bell above the door chimed, signalling a patron entering the diner, and the door creaked on its hinges. Heavy footsteps crossed over the threshold, casting a long shadow across the floor. The tall man with his thick leather coat, paused in the doorway to take stock of his surroundings. This was all Darian needed. He dashed forward, grabbed the steak knife into his hand and took on a defensive position. James and Lysandra, for the second time in one day, seemed overcome by confusion and anxiety, moving rapidly backward, half falling over chairs to create distance between themselves, the man in the doorway and Darian.

The man's gaze shifted towards Darian and he drew a blunt metal rod from his side.

"If you want to live to see another sunrise," Darian hissed, "you'll turn around and report that there was no-one here." Darian slowly started moving in an arch, closing the distance between himself and the imposing figure in uniform.

"I mean you no harm, Darian," the large man said.

"So, you just happen to know my name then," snapped Darian, "Quite the coincidence."

"I know exactly who you are, and you're right – this is not a coincidence. But unless you come with me right now, you'll be dead within the hour. All of you," replied the man.

Elara studied the two men from a short distance away. She too, had manifested her throwing knife from thin air – like she had earlier in the day.

"Darian," she said - it wasn't a question, but a command, "drop your knife." A strange humming sound filled the air, and Darian could feel the hair on his arms rise.

The man in the doorway, for no reason Darian could find or understand, dropped his baton and brought his hands to the sides of his head as if trying to hold back a tidal wave. An expression of extreme pain, exploded across his face. An instant later, the man fell to his hands and knees, panting like a rabid dog. Two painful breaths later, he collapsed face forward onto the diner floor, laying there like a corpse, oddly positioned in a large heap.

Darian shot a questioning look at Elara.

“Later,” she dismissed his question, “Like you said, we need to go.”

Darian was about to step over the man and out the door, with James and Lysandra in tow, when Elara spoke.

“For the second time today, I’m going to ask you to trust me,” she said, making eye contact with each of them for a short moment.

“I’m not going to like this next part,” Darian shrugged.

As if reading Elara’s mind, he looked down towards the oversized man and sighed.

“We have to take him with us,” he mumbled under his breath.

“Yes, we have to take him with us,” echoed Elara.

James looked at Lysandra, making no attempt at hiding his utter confusion and disbelief.

“Can this day get any weirder?” he asked.

It was Elara who responded, “There’s time yet,” she said, smirking as if she was very satisfied with how things were going.

“Lysandra,” Elara took commend, snapping the young girl from her uncertainty, “this will be easier if we each grab a limb!” Elara pointed towards the large man’s foot, that was sprawled in front of Lysandra.

Not knowing what else to do, Lysandra bent down and grabbed the man's boot.

"On three," Darian instructed.

As the odd companions huddled out of the front door, the owner of the Diner cursed behind them, "You haven't paid your bill!" he shouted.

Darian laughed.

Chapter 8.

The awakening.

Ronan's vision blurred, the world swimming in and out of focus as he blinked against the throbbing pain in his head. Fragments of memory clashed together—Darian's imposing stance, the two figures huddling in the corner, the dark-haired woman's piercing eyes, and then... darkness, a crushing sensation that wiped everything away. He strained to move, only to feel his arms and legs bound, stretched out in a crucifix position. His wrists burned against the rough edges of the rope. A chill seeped into the room, and in the dim light, he could just make out the vague shapes of furniture cloaked in shadow.

Voices drifted from nearby, low and intent. He closed his eyes again, focusing on the sound. Someone was recounting a story, mentioning a place called The Garden. Questions from the listeners followed, blending with the storyteller's voice.

“In the end, Varrick found peace, I think,” the man said, his tone distant.

“We’re all haunted by our pasts, one way or another,” a woman replied, her voice stern—Ronan guessed it belonged to the dark-haired woman. “At least he had the fortune of finding his madness.” After a pause, she added with a slight chuckle, “Some people never go crazy. What truly horrible lives they must lead.”

“Interesting perspective,” Darian’s voice interjected. “But The Peacekeeper? He has no interest in Varrick—or even your beautiful Seraphina. He is, however, obsessed with Eli. Eli is known by many names, each despised by The Peacekeeper. Ironically, the same holds for The Peacekeeper himself. I know him personally, and let me tell you, peace is merely his façade. Like Eli, he wears many faces. I’ve heard some call him The Destroyer of Worlds. That feels more fitting.”

“So, do you think he’s from another world, then?” asked a younger woman, her voice light and songlike.

A pause lingered, as if each was weighing the question.

“I’m a simple man,” Darian answered finally. “I don’t understand what I can’t touch or see, but I know this: The Peacekeeper is not like you or me. There’s something ancient about him. He resembles the Echoes James described. He tolerates us because we serve his purpose, but I imagine that, beneath his mask, he despises us with a hatred as profound as it is insatiable.”

“And by ‘us,’ you mean...?” the younger woman pressed.

“All of us. Humans. He is something... else.”

“I’m guessing he and Eli have crossed paths before,” the dark-eyed woman remarked thoughtfully.

“Undoubtedly. His hatred is too personal. I’d wager these two have been locked in this struggle for a very long time. The bitterness and rage he holds suggest he’s been on the losing side of their encounters, time after time. Perhaps that’s why he hates us—though I’m not sure where we fit into all of this.”

The younger woman spoke again, her voice thoughtful. “There was something we found in our research—a ritual performed by The Fallen Ones called *Mendacium*. It described separating the world from truth, a process overseen by someone named *Arcimendax*. Later texts referred to this Arcimendax as *The Destroyer*. I wonder... could this Arcimendax be The Peacekeeper?”

“Those scriptures are thousands of years old,” James interjected.

“And yet here we are, discussing other worlds and mythical doorways,” Darian said dryly.

Ronan’s eyes snapped open as a sudden realization washed over him—he had no idea how much time had passed. He quickly took stock of his surroundings. This was one of Darian’s hideouts. A photo of this very room had been pinned to the briefing room wall just hours earlier. It

wasn't first on the list of places the city guard planned to raid, but it was on it. Panic surged through him.

"Darian!" Ronan shouted, his voice echoing hollowly.

The voices fell silent, and Darian appeared in the doorway, his expression unreadable.

"You're awake," he observed, though he looked anything but pleased.

"We need to go," Ronan urged, his tone urgent. "The city guard will be here any moment, and they're not interested in a discussion."

"No one knows of this place," Darian replied, frowning.

"They do. A photo of this room was shown to us earlier today. Someone wants you dead and has gone to extreme lengths to make it so. Who knows about this place?"

Darian's face darkened. "Hardly anyone," he muttered, mentally sorting through the names of those few who were aware. It was a short list—and every person on it had the power to order his death. It confirmed what he'd long suspected: the militia was merely another tool of the crime lords, and all roads led to a single man.

"Untie him," Darian ordered Elara, a note of urgency colouring his voice. "And gather anything you don't want falling into the wrong hands. We won't be coming back here anytime soon."

A red LED blinked above the door, casting a dim pulse that felt ominously like a countdown.

Darian and Ronan exchanged a brief glance, and whatever enmity had once stood between them melted away, replaced by a shared understanding of the danger closing in. The faint clink of metal echoed through the building, a stark reminder that their time was running out.

“Upright cupboard,” Darian said, gesturing toward a spot beside the front door as he pulled his hood up. In that moment, Ronan caught a glimpse of the true Darian—the ghostly figure whose reputation had preceded him, a man transformed into something deadly. For a fleeting second, Ronan felt a shiver crawl up his spine.

Ronan moved to the cupboard, throwing it open to reveal an array of weapons. He grabbed a pump-action shotgun, the cold weight settling comfortably in his hands, and loaded a few shells, stuffing extras into the pockets of his overcoat. There was no turning back. His days with the guard were over. Like Darian, he was now a fugitive, marked by those he’d once served.

He turned to see Darian already gone. Elara stood at the ready, two throwing knives glinting in her hands. James and Lysandra looked at Ronan, waiting for direction.

“There are only two ways in or out of this building if our briefing was accurate,” Ronan explained. “They’ll come at us from both sides. Our only advantage is that they don’t know we’re aware of their approach. The element of surprise is ours.”

The words sounded hollow, even to him.

“We’re taking the front exit,” Ronan instructed. “It’s risky, but the guards expect anyone escaping to favour the back route. The men at the front are heavily armoured but will be less alert than those closing in from the rear. There are twelve in total,” he added, barely a whisper, “We’ll be lucky to get out of here alive.”

Ronan led the way, followed by James and Lysandra, with Elara instinctively slipping into the rear-guard position. “Stay low,” he murmured, hoisting his weapon and gliding toward the staircase. As they exited the room, Elara turned the lock with a faint click.

“Good,” Ronan thought. He nearly stumbled down the first stair in surprise, when he unexpectedly heard Elara’s reply in his mind, “I know.”

He glanced back questioningly for a moment, seeing an eerie smile across her face, accentuated by dark eyes that held secrets he could only guess at. She raised her brow, suggesting he focus on the battle.

“We have five men headed our way,” Elara’s voice echoed in Ronan’s mind, “One of them really doesn’t like you.”

“The captain,” Ronan thought grimly, “It’s mutual.”

Elara’s voice returned. “Hold. They’ll reach you in three, two..”

Ronan squeezed the trigger. The shotgun blasts thundered through the confined space, leaving a ringing in their ears. The corridor erupted in shouts and curses; no one had anticipated an assault. Fire spurted from the muzzle, illuminating the chaos in brief flashes. Figures toppled and stumbled, falling into one another as panic set in.

Then, a single, towering man lunged through the smoke and bodies, his fury palpable. Ronan recognized him immediately. He had seen this man rip men apart with his bare hands, cleaving through good men and bad alike. He fired, but the shot went wide. The captain came at him, blade flashing, and with a shuddering crash, their weapons met - sending the shotgun clattering down the stairs.

Silence fell as the other guards lay sprawled in the hall. Only the captain remained, poised like a viper about to strike. Ronan gripped his baton, eyes locked on the captain's, waiting.

"It was only a matter of time, wasn't it?" the captain taunted, his voice a feral snarl. He paced back and forth, adjusting his grip, relishing the moment.

"When did you forsake your honour, Ronan? When did you become a lesser man?"

Ronan held his gaze, letting the captain's words slide past him like a venomous hiss. "Never interrupt an enemy when he's making a mistake," Elara's voice reminded him calmly. He nodded internally, watching for an opening, quietly.

The captain lunged, his blade sweeping toward Ronan in a wild arc. Ronan barely managed to parry, his arm trembling under the force of the captain's swing. The force of his block forced the captain off-balance, causing him to overextend for a brief, critical moment.

In that instant, a blade whistled past Ronan's ear, embedding itself in the captain's neck. Ronan lunged forward, his baton slamming into the captain's face with a sickening crack. Time slowed, and Ronan saw the last flickers of life in the captain's eyes - the lingering remnants of a soul, fighting to escape the prison that had enslaved it for so long. The captain's body sagged and fell across the stairs, blood seeping from his wound.

Ronan stood there, breath heaving, a strange sensation washing over him. He had long imagined this moment but never thought it would feel this hollow. A pang of grief tugged at him—grief he didn't fully understand. He brushed a hand across his face, surprised to find it wet with tears.

“The trouble with the world is that fools and fanatics are always so certain of themselves, while wiser souls are plagued by doubt,” Elara's voice murmured gently. “You did what needed to be done.”

Silence hung over the aftermath, broken only by their shallow breaths as they gathered themselves. “Take what you need,” Ronan said hoarsely. Even in this desolate part of Meridia, gunshots would bring unwanted attention. He intended to be far from here before more guards came sniffing around.

As they reached the lobby, Darian strolled through the front door, wiping his blade clean. “Took you long enough,” he remarked.

Ronan glanced toward the rear exit, where he knew he’d find the other guards, likely dealt with just as swiftly.

“Don’t,” Elara’s voice whispered in his mind, “some things are best left unseen. Tonight’s events will bring enough nightmares without adding more familiar faces to haunt you.”

Ronan gave a slight nod, glancing around at the others. “Where to now?” he asked, his voice resigned but resolute.

“The night’s still young,” replied Elara with gleaming eyes.

Ronan laughed.

Chapter 9.

The stone.

“In the very end, civilisations perish because they listen to their politicians and not their poets,” James concluded the reading, setting down the manuscript. He glanced up at his companions, who were lost in contemplation. When his gaze fell on Lysandra, something inside him stirred. She hadn’t said a word in days, having retreated deep into herself, trying to make sense of the world around her.

Just weeks ago, she was minding her own business, helping people find the odd book or engaging in inconsequential discussions with strangers. Since the moment she met James, everything had changed. Now, her eyes seemed different—like mist hanging over the ocean, spelling danger for anyone who dared approach her shores.

Feeling his gaze linger, she looked up and tried to smile reassuringly. Tried—and failed. Tears brimmed in her eyes. James thought about the joyful young woman he had met weeks before when he was a broken man. Now, he felt

overwhelmed but resolute, and in front of him, he saw a fearful young woman, drawn into herself.

“I need some air,” James said abruptly, holding out his hand to Lysandra. After a moment of hesitation, she took his hand and followed him out the door, leaving the other companions in a stale room that smelled of old books and empty pizza boxes.

As James and Lysandra exited the room, Ronan, Elara, and Darian sighed in resignation. They had all been there at some point—that moment when the world finds an entrance into your heart. It was never a stealthy entrance—more akin to a tidal wave crashing onto your shores, leaving nothing the way it was before.

“She’ll be okay,” Darian mumbled.

“These things take time. The first time I witnessed anything like the other night, I couldn’t sleep for weeks. The smells, sounds, and faces haunted me. Truth is, sometimes they still do. But after a while, I realized that the world is not all sunlight and butterflies,” Ronan added, concern etched across his forehead.

“I’m afraid this is only the beginning,” Elara said, her eyes transfixed on something beyond Ronan and Darian’s ability to see. “There is darkness ahead—darkness that will make the other night seem like rainbows and daffodils.”

“That’s comforting,” Darian smirked sarcastically.

“But true, unfortunately,” Elara replied.

In the days that followed the escape from Darian’s loft, the companions had gone into hiding. Elara knew of a discreet spot where they could come and go without raising too much alarm, saying only that it belonged to ‘a Sister.’ They knew better than to push for more information. It was here that they were trying to piece together a plan. They knew they needed to find Kae, but there was no clear pattern to his movements, and Darian could not tap into his normal network to learn Kae’s whereabouts.

They also used the time to learn more about each other, recognizing that fate had thrown them together in an adventure that none of them had chosen.

Elara was as wise as she was practical. Whenever they hit a brick wall in their plan or when the manuscripts lacked clarity, she would offer a wise quip, shifting their focus back towards a solution-oriented mindset.

Now was such a time. After days of scanning through the manuscripts they had brought with them from the library, they seemed no closer to connecting the dots than when they started.

How do they get back to The Garden? What was the essence of this feud between Eli and Arcimendax, and why were they being dragged into the fold? It had become clear

that James' venture into The Garden was part of something much bigger.

Elara rose from the table and walked to the open-plan kitchen where the coffee pot stood. Pouring the coffee, she raised the pot higher and higher from the cup, tracing the black fluid as it spurted downwards. They all needed a break—or a breakthrough. When the cup was filled, she glanced over at the two men, hunched over the table like old crows over a carcass. What they needed was hope.

“There will always be rocks in the road ahead of us. They will be stumbling blocks or stepping stones; it all depends on how you use them,” she said, trying to motivate the two young men.

The men grunted. A moment later, Darian looked up, frowned, and turned to Elara.

“Stones?” Darian mirrored her statement.

“Yes, stones,” Elara replied, not sure about the significance of his inquiry.

Darian held up his hand as if to pause the conversation.

“Stone,” he whispered to himself while his companions gave him time to gather his thoughts. Something tugged at his mind, as if a voice was forcing its way inward. He opened his mind, letting the strange sensation wash over him. He replayed conversations and interactions in his

mind, looking for a connection, discarding those that seemed trivial, navigating his thoughts like a long hallway—opening some doors and closing others.

Further back, he pushed, until he saw himself standing in a glass penthouse overlooking Meridia. A tall man in a tailored suit was pacing the room, with two impossibly large men on either side, staring blankly ahead. The man was clearly upset, talking incoherently, as if in conversation with someone, although no one else could be seen.

“Another rift has opened,” he bellowed. “That makes three new rifts in as many months. He’s planning something!”

Darian had never seen the man upset before, but in that moment, he seemed both angry and afraid.

“We need to put an end to this, now,” he continued his conversation with his invisible counterpart. A moment later, he responded.

“No, I don’t have it. I have teams searching day and night. We will find it. We believe it is in Isola di Verità.”

The man went silent. Colour drained from his face as he listened.

“Yes, my Lord,” Arcimendax said before he turned his attention to Darian, dark eyes ablaze with latent hatred. As he spoke, he stroked the famous black orb on the hilt of his cane.

Darian half-laughed. “Why didn’t I think of it before?”

Ronan and Elara looked at each other with quizzical expressions.

“Think of what?” Ronan asked.

It was a cool day, with grey clouds hanging low overhead. James handed Lysandra his jacket.

“I’m sorry,” James said as they walked, avoiding eye contact.

Below their feet, the streets felt damp and uneven, sending soft echoes down empty alleys. Through the clouds, he could see the sun sinking lower, and in less than an hour, it would be dark. This part of Meridia was far from the bustle and neon lights. Here and there, wildflowers bloomed from cracks in the pavement, stubborn and beautiful. Old Town was mostly a tourist attraction, but on the outskirts, it had an eerie quietness, almost suburban.

As they walked in silence, James heard a distant dog bark, children shouting, and then the sharp scolding of a father.

“It’s not your fault,” Lysandra said softly.

“Only it is,” James replied. “And the last thing I want in the world is for you to suffer on account of the madness that seems to find me.”

“We must all grow up sometime,” Lysandra said. “Just because we throw a beautiful net does not mean we will only catch beautiful things.”

James chuckled. “That sounds like something Eli would say.”

“Have you heard anything at all?” Lysandra asked.

“You mean from Eli?” James clarified. Lysandra nodded silently.

“I catch... glimpses... from time to time, but I cannot be sure if it’s really him or if I simply want it to be him,” James admitted. Lysandra nodded again, understanding the weight of his words.

“I was in love once, did you know?” Lysandra said shyly. James was caught off guard by the sudden vulnerability but listened in silence.

“He broke my heart, of course,” Lysandra continued, her voice trembling with bittersweet emotion. “But I remember how I felt in the early days.”

James said nothing, allowing her to walk through the fragile corridors of her memories undisturbed.

“We see in the world what we carry in our hearts,” she finished softly, as though that was the conclusion of everything she needed to share.

“I think I understand,” James said, letting her words wash over him like a slow wave.

He stopped and turned to Lysandra, taking both her soft hands in his. Her pale blue eyes met his gaze, filled with unspoken words. Her hair shifted slightly in the light evening breeze.

“I need you to be okay,” he said, his voice steady but tender. “What can I do to help?”

Lysandra’s eyes searched his, as if trying to find some hidden answer deep in his soul.

“Hope,” Lysandra finally said. “I need to know that at the end of all this madness, there is hope. Hope that we are not all much madder than we ought to be, and hope that we can put an end to all of this darkness that seeks to destroy us. I need for all of this to make sense—if not now, then sometime in the future.”

James swallowed, his mind racing with the weight of her words. He thought of Seraphina fighting off the darkness as he fell into the void that brought him back to this world. He thought of Eli, who always appeared when it mattered most. He remembered every detail of the path that led them to this moment.

“I can promise you this,” James said firmly, his voice low but sure. “Wherever this journey takes us, I will go there with all of my heart. I will embrace everything—the beauty and the terror—for somewhere in all of this, there is hope.”

Lysandra stepped forward and embraced James. While holding him tightly, she whispered, “Then onward we go, for all the doors to the past are closed to us now.”

The streetlight flickered briefly, casting a dim glow over the two friends as they found solace in each other's closeness.

“Shall we go see what the others are up to?” James whispered.

“In a moment,” Lysandra said, holding him close as if her life depended on it.

Back in the hideout, Darian’s voice carried across the dimly lit room.

“I’ve only met Arcimendax in person three times in my life. It’s never pleasant,” Darian said, his tone low and gravelly. “The man is shrouded in darkness. You don’t see it when his speeches are broadcast, but when you’re in his presence, you can feel it—something that isn’t right. His eyes... they’re like burning embers.”

The companions listened intently. The more they knew about their enemy, the better they could prepare themselves for what was to come.

“I’ve never seen him without his cane,” Darian continued. “He doesn’t need it, of course. He has no physical ailments that I know of, but it’s always with him. The hilt of his cane is an orb - a stone, if you will - of some material that is blacker than night. He’s always holding it, even when he’s seated.”

“I don’t follow,” Ronan said. “How is this relevant?”

“Twice, men have dared to enquire about the origin of the strange orb, and on both occasions, those men died a bloody and instantaneous death, as if their souls were ripped from their bodies.”

Lysandra looked on in horror, her breath catching in her throat.

“I cannot say for sure how it happened,” Darian said, shaking his head. “I wasn’t there, but the stories are told often enough to ward off anyone from asking questions. Arcimendax seems obsessed with the orb.”

“I still don’t see the relevance,” Ronan replied, glancing at Elara as if seeking clarity.

It was Lysandra who responded, her finger trembling slightly as she pointed to a manuscript on the table. Ronan handed it to her, and she turned the pages feverishly until she found what she was looking for.

“The man walked intently to the portal and raised his staff. An eerie darkness fell over the valley, and a faint humming noise could be heard. The portal seemed to falter and then faded from sight.”

“It seems,” Elara concluded, “that Arcimendax possesses the ability to destroy portals - or control them - and it might be that his orb is the key.”

“No, only destroy them,” Lysandra corrected her. “The context leading up to this event spoke of Arcimendax fleeing from Eli. He closed the portal in defense. In another manuscript, it references another orb, white as a pearl, deeply desired by Arcimendax, for that orb can create the portals.”

“This must be what he spoke about when I last encountered him. If I’m right, the white orb is believed to be in Isola di Verità,” Darian said.

Lysandra’s eyes flickered between Darian and James, an unspoken realization settling in her chest. James met her gaze and nodded slightly. There were simply too many oddities connecting them for it to be a coincidence. Something much larger was at play.

“So having both orbs would give Arcimendax complete control over the portals between this world and The Garden?” asked Ronan.

“Almost,” Lysandra said, recovering from the whirlwind of thoughts circling her mind. “But some scripts make it clear that there are many more worlds. The Garden is a destination, yes, but also a hallway. If Arcimendax can destroy or create portals at will, he would control access between all worlds.”

Silence fell over the companions like a heavy blanket.

Later that night, when the sounds of the neighbourhood faded and mothers laid their children to sleep, Lysandra sought out James.

She knocked softly at his door.

“I’m awake,” he replied.

“Lysandra,” James said as he sat upright in his bed, where he had been lost in thought, contemplating the weight of the day’s revelations.

Lysandra crossed the room and sat beside him on the edge of the bed. Without hesitation, she took his hand in hers. Her pale blue eyes locked onto his, filled with something fragile yet unyielding.

“There’s something you should know,” Lysandra whispered. James felt his heartbeat quicken, his chest tightening with anticipation. He said nothing, giving her the space to speak.

“The white orb is not in Isola di Verità,” Lysandra stated plainly.

James stared at her, his brows knitting together in surprise and confusion. He opened his mouth to speak but stopped himself, sensing there was more.

Slowly, Lysandra reached for the chain around her neck, her fingers fumbling slightly as she drew out a pendant hidden beneath her nightgown. It was roughly the size of an eye, smooth and unassuming in shape. Yet, even in the dim light of the room, it seemed to pulse softly, glowing with an ethereal light from within.

James stared at it, his breath catching in his throat. It was unlike anything he had ever seen.

“How?” James asked, his voice barely above a whisper.

“I would have walked around with this my entire life, never knowing it was anything more than a precious jewel my parents left me,” Lysandra said softly. “I think this—this stone—has something to do with why they were killed.”

A long silence settled between them, heavy and unyielding. James’s thoughts raced as he tried to process what he was seeing - and what it meant.

“I cannot be certain,” James said after a moment, his voice steady but quiet, “but I think we need to tell the others

tomorrow. If we're going to succeed - if we're going to survive - we need to trust each other completely."

Lysandra nodded, her fingers still lightly cradling the glowing pendant.

"I wonder how it works," James mused, his eyes lingering on the stone.

But then he became acutely aware of how close Lysandra was—her breath warm against his skin, her presence filling the small space between them. The faint glow of the pendant cast soft shadows across her face.

Suddenly, James let go of the pendant and leaned back, creating distance between them. He cleared his throat, trying to gather his thoughts and dispel the sudden nervousness that had crept into the room.

"We should get some rest," James said firmly, his voice softer now. "Tomorrow is going to be a long day."

Lysandra hesitated for a moment, her eyes lingering on his face as if she wanted to say something more. But instead, she gave a small nod and rose from the bed.

"Goodnight, James," she said softly before slipping out into the hallway, leaving James alone with his thoughts and the heavy weight of what lay ahead.

Chapter 10.

Into the den.

Darian slowed his breath, waiting for his eyes to adjust to the sudden darkness. He had entered the tunnel through a narrow shaft, hidden behind a dumpster in a dead-end alley. It was one of several such concealed entrances into the labyrinthine network of tunnels sprawling beneath Meridia - remnants of ancient ages upon which the city had been built.

These tunnels had served many purposes over the centuries: escape routes, smugglers' highways, and forgotten relics of engineering ambition. But today, they were something else entirely - a path into a place no sane man would dare approach without invitation: the very heart of Arcimendax's world.

At least three city blocks of winding darkness lay between him and The White Tower, but Darian dared not start his journey any closer. Skilled as he was, he was a known entity

among Arcimendax's followers. With a target firmly painted on his back, stealth was his only way forward.

He stood still, listening intently for anything out of place - the faint drip of water, the distant scurrying of rats, the low hum of machinery vibrating through the stone walls. Satisfied that the echoes carried no unexpected interruptions, he began to move forward, each step deliberate and silent.

It had been a full week since the companions had agreed they needed to secure both orbs. Easily said, nearly impossible to execute. Nearly impossible. Darian harboured no illusions about his abilities—if anyone could steal the orb from Arcimendax, it was him. But in truth, he had no plan - not yet. Step one was to get closer to Arcimendax, to study his movements and habits when no one else was watching. Only then would he decide how to proceed. Any rash action would mean certain death, and Darian had every intention of living to an old age, sitting on a porch and watching the sun set over the ocean.

His backpack held provisions for three days, along with a handful of tools he thought he might need. The reassuring weight pressed into his shoulders as he crept deeper into the tunnels - a rogue shadow slipping unnoticed beneath the city.

“No one - not even Arcimendax - would believe me insane enough to attempt this,” Darian whispered to himself. A sly grin crept onto his face. “Desperate times...”

Roughly three hours later, Darian recognized the insignia etched into the trapdoor before him. Opening it would place him inside The White Tower, past the initial security checkpoints, with direct access to the elevator shaft. To the left of the trapdoor was a keypad embedded in the stone. Only a select few knew the code to unlock it. But Darian's concern wasn't the code - it was the silent alarm it might trigger in the control room above.

He unshouldered his backpack and, for the first time since entering the maze of tunnels, switched on a faint headlamp. The keypad's wiring was deceptively simple. With practiced efficiency, Darian connected a small relay device to the circuit and pressed a tiny red button. A rapid series of numbers flickered across the screen, and then, with a soft click, the door unlocked. The keypad's display returned to normal, undisturbed and unassuming.

“That should do it,” Darian muttered under his breath.

But he didn't move forward immediately. Instead, he waited, crouched in the shadows, every sense alert. If an alarm had been triggered, it would be far safer for him to retreat back into the labyrinth. Several agonizing minutes passed in silence before Darian finally removed his device,

closed the keypad panel, and slipped through the trapdoor. If anyone checked, there would be no sign of his entry.

His natural curiosity had always served him well. There had been no reason for him to memorize the security layout of The White Tower back when he was still in Arcimendax's favour, yet he had. Over the years, it had become instinctive. He knew precisely where each security camera was positioned and understood their blind spots. That knowledge was his lifeline now.

Slowly and methodically, Darian began his ascent. Arcimendax's penthouse awaited him at the top floor - a steel and glass fortress that mirrored its owner's towering ego. It loomed above Meridia like a lion surveying a herd of lambs.

Reaching the penthouse unseen was one challenge; remaining hidden once he was inside was another. He had been there once before and had a vague recollection of its layout. There was little space to hide, and the higher he climbed, the more security he would encounter. For an ordinary thief, the task would have been impossible.

But Darian was no ordinary thief. You don't earn the title of "Ghost" without an entire arsenal of skills designed to render you invisible when the moment demands it.

He reached a junction point - a small maintenance room adjacent to an elevator shaft. With years of experience, he flipped open a small notebook and connected a crossover Ethernet cable to the network switch embedded in the panel. The faint glow from the notebook screen illuminated his sharp features as he began navigating the system. Lines of code scrolled across the display, and Darian's fingers danced over the keys with a confidence born from years of necessity. Every back door and, every exploit was explored as he practiced his craft. He paused, tilting his head as he listened for any sound nearby. The camera feeds between his current position and the penthouse would now be on a loop for the next hour. Only physical security remained a threat, but Darian had already accounted for that. He chose his timing carefully. A security camera loop in broad daylight would raise suspicion - guards would expect to see movement. But at 3 a.m., nothing or very little should be stirring. Only ghosts.

He slipped into the corridor, merging seamlessly with the shadows, ears sharp for any sound that might betray his presence.

The door to the penthouse stood ahead - ornate and adorned with intricate metal artwork. Darian paused, studying it. For a fleeting moment, he felt humbled just how true it was that knowledge elevated understanding. Once, this would have been just a door - an object of art and luxury. Now, knowing what he knew, its symbols told a story - a story of two ageless rivals, locked in an eternal feud that spanned across time and worlds. It brought the art to life and gave him deeper insights into the daily life of Arcimendax. The people of Meridia were like fodder in the larger scheme of things. The true passion and obsession that fuelled Arcimendax, was his hatred for Eli.

With a faint click, he withdrew a small digital camera from his backpack, took several photos of the door, and turned his attention to a nearby ventilation grate. He was removing the final screw when he heard it: faint, measured footsteps padding softly on the carpeted hallway. His body froze, instincts flaring to life. He considered his options. Seconds ticked by as he made his choice. Darian reached into his side pouch and pulled out a slender straw-like object - a dart laced with neurotoxin.

The hallway lights cast shadows in four directions, and Darian tracked the guard's movement through those faint silhouettes. When the moment came, he exhaled sharply through the straw.

The dart struck the guard's neck. He staggered, clutching at the sting, eyes wide with confusion before collapsing silently onto the carpet. Darian crept forward, inspecting the unconscious man. The neurotoxin would keep him out cold for at least twelve hours, and he would have no memory of what had happened. But unconscious bodies raised questions. Suspicion could undo everything Darian had worked for. With careful precision, Darian dragged the man into the elevator, spilled water from his bottle onto the marble floor, and cracked the mirrored panel against the man's head.

"One can hope," he muttered grimly.

He pressed the button for the second floor - the canteen level. By some chance, anyone who discovered the man would assume he had slipped on the wet floor, hit his head, and passed out. Routine. Forgettable. For good measure, he undid one of the man's shoelaces.

As the elevator doors closed and the man descended, Darian's attention returned to the task at hand.

Chapter 11.

Graffiti.

Elara's fingers tapped rhythmically against the table as she stared into the empty space before her. The candle flickered on the worn wooden surface, casting restless shadows that danced across her pale skin - a silent battle between light and dark. Her dark hair was swept into a crude knot atop her head, loose strands escaping to frame her sharp features.

Darian had left to claim the black orb, leaving his chair empty. Lysandra and James sat watching Elara, waiting patiently, while Ronan paced the room, his large frame casting long shadows across the floor.

For a moment, the companions were lost in their own thoughts, each wrestling with the weight of the past days. The world as they knew it had fractured, and with every passing moment, the pieces continued to shift into something unrecognizable.

Each time Ronan turned in his pacing, Lysandra felt the weight of his gaze on her. It wasn't the first time she'd noticed. She had felt the same piercing stare from Darian in recent days. The two men couldn't be more different. Ronan was broad, resolute, and direct - brutish at times, but with surprising moments of quiet introspection. Beneath the hardened exterior, she sensed something deeper, something buried.

Darian, by contrast, moved like a shadow - slender, unreadable, his presence a careful balance of calculated grace and lethal skill. He hid behind an air of nonchalance, but Lysandra saw the longing in his eyes. A longing she understood.

James watched her closely, studying her expression as she worked through her thoughts, as if he could see the storm within her mind.

"Hmm," he mused, a faint smile tugging at his lips.

Lysandra blinked, catching his knowing expression.

"What?" she asked, narrowing her eyes with blushing cheeks.

James merely shrugged, his smile deepening.

"What?!" Lysandra repeated, now slightly irritated, as if he had trespassed on her private thoughts.

It was Elara who broke the tension.

“Before the end,” she murmured, “what may seem harmless now may very well determine the fate of the world.”

James turned his gaze from Lysandra to Elara, his expression shifting from amusement to contemplation. Lysandra’s eyes shimmered, though she said nothing.

“You certainly know how to lighten the mood,” James remarked dryly. His tone carried the faintest edge of reprimand.

Elara only sighed. “Such is my burden.”

A moment later, Lysandra pushed back from the table and excused herself, disappearing down the hallway. James and Ronan both instinctively turned to follow her and put her young, conflicted mind at ease. James hesitated mid-step, realizing that - even though he loved Lysandra like a younger sister - perhaps this was something she needed to process alone. Three’s a crowd, after all.

Elara’s lips curled into the faintest hint of a smile, as James’s eyes caught hers.

“Young love,” she chuckled.

James glanced at his wristwatch.

“Eleven,” he remarked dryly.

"Time’s wasting," Elara remarked, her tone shifting to something sharper. "We still have an artist to find. You coming?"

James grabbed his coat from the hilt of the chair.

“I think it’s safer out there than in here,” he jested, tilting his head towards the hallway.

Elara smiled.

She rose from her seat with slow deliberation, stepped out the front door, and disappeared into the night, with James in tow. Within moments, the darkness swallowed them whole.

Elara’s arm shot out across James’s chest, yanking him back into the shadows and forcing him into a crouch.

A moment later, the two figures crossed in front of them. Their demeanour mimicked Ronan’s calculated discipline, marking them as city guard. As far as they knew, neither of them was officially wanted by the city guard, but Elara saw no need to risk drawing their attention.

Once the figures disappeared down the street, Elara nodded, and they moved on, quickening their steps. It was clear to James that Elara had a destination in mind and that this was not some arbitrary walkabout, hoping to stumble into Kae through sheer luck.

James took a hastened step forward to walk beside Elara.

“How does it work?” James asked, his voice low. He knew she would understand what he meant.

“The truth is that I don’t know,” said Elara. For a moment, their eyes locked and James could see something behind her strong façade. This gift was as much a blessing as it was a curse.

“I don’t know how my people came to have this ability, and sometimes... I fear I might be the last,” Elara admitted. Her mind threatened to race back to that dreadful evening when her village was attacked, and her loved ones were slaughtered. She fought against the flood of memories.

“Unless of course,” James replied, his lips in a slight curl of delight, knowing how Elara’s going to react to what he’s suggesting.

She mockingly slapped him on the back, grateful for his light spirit.

“Don’t even go there,” she replied, “I haven’t even thought of anything like settling down and having children for a very long time. In fact, I don’t think I’ve ever really seen myself as a mother or a wife. It’s an enormous responsibility and people tend to take it lightly.”

James said nothing. He had no knowledge of being a father or a husband, but he could certainly see himself in that role with Seraphina, if ever they could find their way back.

“People think poverty is about hunger and homelessness, but there’s a deeper kind of poverty - the kind where you’re unwanted and unloved. Too many children enter this world only to be abandoned to that fate.” Elara said.

She pointed to the left.

“We’re close, I think,” she affirmed.

The street she pointed towards was a steep uphill, with parks on either side. James was familiar with the area as he had actually worked on a section of the one park some years ago. Meridia had a couple of these parks, where people were reminded that life was a thing to be cherished. The park on the left had a large dam where – on weekends – boys might fish with their fathers while little girls chased gees with breadcrumbs in their hands. On occasion, families would stroll down the walkway with a dog on a leash. During summers, artists would perform on the stage of the amphitheatre and in daytime, busking artists might be found, hoping to collect a couple of coins. James loved the parks more than anything else in Meridia.

“There’s a...” Elara started, pointing in a direction James knew well.

“...bridge to the left,” James completed her sentence.

Elara chuckled.

“Who’s the seer now?” she teased, raising an eyebrow.

“I’ve been here before. I’ve worked these gardens,” James responded with smile.

James and Elara crouched, studying the lone figure from a distance.

Kae moved with effortless precision, the hiss of the spray can punctuating the quiet of the night. His body was taut with focus, muscles flexing beneath the dim glow of a streetlamp as he worked, the veins along his forearms standing in sharp relief as he wielded the can like a maestro conducting a silent symphony.

His tank top, streaked faintly with paint, clung to his lean but powerful frame, evidence of both his agility and strength. There was an intensity in the way he moved - fluid, practiced, as though the wall itself had already revealed its masterpiece to him, and he was simply bringing it into existence.

His dark hair, slightly tousled, framed his face as he stepped back for a moment, assessing his work with the keen eye of an artist who expected perfection. The towering buildings of Meridia loomed behind him, creating a halo of light that reflected against the midnight mist, but Kae was unfazed. The authorities frowned upon his trade, and so this was his office – cold and quiet nights of solitude with a backdrop of steel towers and neon lights – and he loved it.

James exhaled slowly, absorbing the mural as it came to life beneath Kae's skilled hands. It seemed familiar in some way. There was a group of people, wearing cloaks and hoods, walking on a dirt road, upward towards a towering peak. The moon was full and ominous with a slightly red glow. The wash of clouds suggested that there was a light wind blowing. The person in the lead was carrying a torch. The group seemed battle-ready as if this was no casual night, but a race against time. His heart raced with

excitement and anxiety, fighting like siblings over something neither understood.

He turned to his right to determine if Elara also felt the same familiarity, only to find her gone. He snapped his head around searching, his heart suddenly racing at the possible explanations. He swallowed the urge to call out, knowing a single sound could send Kae vanishing into the night. He spun in place, breath quickening, his pulse hammering in his ears. A cold rush of panic swept through him, draining the blood from his face. A flicker of movement in the shifting light caught his eye.

Kae stepped to the right, startled by sudden movement. His spotlight, perched precariously against the wall, toppled over, flooding the alley in harsh, white light. The glare momentarily blinded him - and then, from the shadows, a figure emerged. Elara.

She walked straight towards Kae, her right arm stretched out in front of her in a manner that said, "I mean you no harm."

When Kae recognised Elara, the spray can slipped from Kae's grip, clattering to the ground. He didn't react, didn't move. Then, slowly, his knees buckled, his breath hitching as if some unseen weight had been lifted from him. A moment later, his head was cradled in Elara's arms, who knelt down with him.

James stepped forward before he even realized he had moved. Whatever was happening, he needed to be there.

Elara's eyes suggested James remained quiet, waiting for the scene to play out.

"You're real," Kae whispered, with a slight accent.

"And you're finally home," Elara replied.

"James, take a picture so we can study it together later," Elara instructed.

James reached into his jacket, pulling out his phone. He framed the shot, but as his gaze swept over the image, something unsettled him. The top right corner seemed unfinished - just a void of black paint. He shook off the eerie sensation creeping over him.

"Kae, we've got to go. There are some people you should meet," Elara continued.

Kae and Elara rose as one.

"Lead the way," Kae said.

Chapter 12.

Decisions.

Darian stared down in shock, his breath caught in his throat. He suffered no illusions about Arcimendax's diabolical nature, but the scene playing out below him defied comprehension.

Four *Mendacium* - devout worshippers of Arcimendax - knelt in a wide circle, swaying back and forth as they chanted in unison. Cloaked in flowing black robes with golden edges, their faces were hidden beneath deep hoods that cast shadows where humanity might have once existed. The air was thick with the acrid stench of burning flesh, clinging to the back of Darian's throat with each breath he took.

Arcimendax stood at the center of the circle, his arms raised, palms open as though he were basking in some divine offering. Wisps of black smoke coiled upward from the kneeling Mendacium, drawn to Arcimendax as though he were inhaling their very souls. The chanting carried a rhythmic, serpentine quality - a foreign tongue hissing through the dim expanse of the penthouse. Darian couldn't understand the words, but the sound burrowed into his mind, making his skin crawl and the hairs on his arms stand on end.

He forced himself to look away, his eyes darting toward Arcimendax's cane, where the black orb rested. As he had expected, it was within arm's reach of Arcimendax, lying on a grand desk overlooking the glittering skyline of Meridia through a massive floor-to-ceiling window. It was now past midnight on the second day. Darian had positioned himself in one of the air vents overlooking the open-plan penthouse. The vantage point provided a clear view of the chamber and its occupants, while also shielding him from sight.

For hours on end, Darian had remained motionless in the cramped space, muscles locked in agonizing stillness. Only when the penthouse was finally empty - when Arcimendax and his followers had descended into whatever abyss awaited them - would Darian allow himself brief moments to stretch. The looping security feed he had set through his hacked connection ensured the cameras

would show only an empty room during these moments of reprieve. He also discovered that certain areas in the penthouse were not recorded – the room in front of him being one of those. He assumed that there were certain things – such as the ritual – that Arcimendax entrusted to no-one.

Over those two long days, Darian had learned three undeniable truths:

One - Arcimendax was not, in any conceivable way, human. The grotesque ritual below him made that abundantly clear. At times, Darian had entertained the thought of assassinating Arcimendax, hoping a blade across the throat might put an end to the nightmare. But now, he was convinced that even his sharpest weapon would fail to leave so much as a scratch.

Two - Arcimendax was nourished, even revitalized, by the worship of the Mendacium. They, in turn, appeared painfully human - tormented souls trapped in servitude to their enigmatic master.

“I wonder,” he thought, “what would happen to Arcimendax if the Mendacium did not worship him?” Even though Arcimendax seemed eternal, it appeared that his stride slowed towards the end of the day, until engaged in his dark rituals.

Three - despite two days of meticulous observation, Darian still had no clear plan for stealing the orb. Arcimendax was

rarely without it, and even when it rested mere inches from his hand, there was a predatory awareness in his posture, as though he could sense even the idea of someone reaching for it.

Darian's instincts screamed at him to leave, to retreat back into the shadows of the tunnels and abandon this suicidal mission. But he shoved the fear down, burying it beneath layers of cold determination.

Even without the orb, Arcimendax was a force to be reckoned with—a looming storm waiting to break. But with it? He was untouchable, an architect of destruction with the power to reshape the world to his will. Without the black orb, they held a sliver of high ground in the coming war, and Darian clung to that thought like a lifeline.

His mind flickered back to the conversation from the night before he embarked on this mission.

“What makes you so certain?” Lysandra had asked, her voice steady despite the flicker of fear behind her pale blue eyes. “It seems this feud has been going on for ages. Why would there be war now?”

Elara was the first to answer, her voice carrying its usual calm weight.

“It’s not so much that a war is coming, but more that we’ve been dragged into a war that’s already underway. And it seems like a war for the very souls of the world. The conflict is escalating, Lysandra. The signs are there.”

Ronan nodded slowly, his brow furrowed. “It’s true. I’ve seen war - on a smaller scale, sure - gang wars mostly. But the patterns are the same. The tension, the anticipation, the way the air thickens before everything collapses into chaos. It’s all here.”

James, who had been silent until then, leaned forward, his eyes distant as if he were staring into something only he could see. “It’s more than that. It feels... orchestrated. Like unseen hands are moving pieces across a board. I can’t shake the feeling that we’re some of those pieces - brought together through the strangest circumstances, positioned to play a role in whatever battle lies ahead.”

Lysandra nodded, absorbing their words in silent acceptance.

Elara’s voice broke the quiet. “We have the white orb. We don’t know how to use it yet, but we know it’s powerful. If we can secure the black orb, we’ll hold an enormous strategic advantage. Arcimendax relies on it - to close rifts, to maintain control over the pathways between worlds. Taking it from him will cripple his ability to counter us.”

Darian leaned back in his chair, arms crossed over his chest, eyes sharp beneath the shadow of his hood. “That might prove... difficult,” he said, the weight in his voice making it clear that impossible might have been the more honest word.

Ronan exhaled through his nose, his expression grave. “I haven’t met Eli, but based on what you’ve told me - and the simple fact that he seems to be the enemy of our enemy - it seems we’re fighting on his side, whether we like it or not. If taking the black orb weakens Arcimendax, it’s worth it.”

James spoke up, his voice thoughtful but resolute. “When you meet him—and I’m sure you will—you’ll find that you *want* to. There’s something about Eli that wakes you up from a long slumber, even if you didn’t know you’d been asleep.”

The words hung in the air, heavy with implication, each syllable settling into the quiet with a weight that was impossible to ignore.

“I wonder what all of this is really about - this feud,” Lysandra said softly, her voice carrying a note of distant contemplation. “One moment, we were living ordinary lives, and the next, we discover that nothing about this life is ordinary.”

Elara, ever the voice of wisdom, leaned back in her chair, her gaze distant as if peering into some unseen horizon.

“Life can only be understood backwards; but it must be lived forwards,” she said, her words deliberate and heavy with meaning. “We might never fully understand what’s at play. But for now, we can settle with the knowledge that we have a part to play.”

Darian reached for his glass, emptying it in one swift motion before setting it back down on the table with a sharp *thud*. His flint-like eyes met each of theirs in turn, his expression carved from stone.

“Then it’s decided,” he said, his voice low but razor-sharp, every syllable edged with steely resolve. “I will steal the black orb.”

The moment lingered, taut and electric.

With a deep breath, Darian turned his focus back to the present, his sharp eyes scanning the darkened penthouse below. He recalled the mantra that had saved his life countless times: “The strongest of all warriors are these two – time and patience.”

Right now, he had the luxury of neither. Time was slipping through his fingers, resources were dwindling, and - after hours of observation - it had become clear that stealing the black orb was impossible. Improvisation was now his only option.

“Let’s see,” Darian murmured to himself as he flipped open his laptop. “This should do the trick,” he muttered. A moment later, an alarm blared through the penthouse.

Arcimendax’s head snapped up, his sharp features illuminated by the faint glow of his phone screen as a message appeared from the security office. His expression barely shifted as he waved dismissively at the Mendacium, who collapsed to the floor, wheezing with exhaustion and tormented agony.

“Fire alarm in the canteen,” Arcimendax said, more to himself than to anyone else. He snatched up his cane and strode briskly towards the penthouse’s main entrance.

The moment Arcimendax disappeared from sight, Darian swung open the shaft grate and gracefully dropped to the floor below. The landing was silent, a predator slipping into its hunting ground.

With swift precision, he drew a slender blade from his side and approached the closest Mendacium. They remained crumpled on the floor, their black robes pooling like spilled ink, their breath shallow and rattling from their drained souls.

Darian crouched beside one, lifted the figure’s hooded head, and sliced cleanly across its throat. Black blood oozed from the gaping wound, thick and sluggish like tar.

“May you find peace and grace,” he murmured softly to the lifeless body as it crumpled back to the floor. “For death must surely be better than the daily hell you endure.”

One by one, Darian repeated the process. His movements were swift and deliberate, a mercy granted with each precise cut. When the final Mendacium lay lifeless, he straightened, his blade slick with black ichor.

“Peace to you,” Darian said, bowing his head briefly.

He wasn’t sure how long these souls had served Arcimendax, but he was certain that whatever promises had been made to them had long since been broken. In the end, they were prisoners - twisted tools repurposed into offerings.

Darian turned his attention to the large desk overlooking the breathtaking view of Meridia’s skyline. He crouched, sliding beneath the desk, and fastened a small device to its underside. The timer blinked softly as he set it.

“Two hours should be enough,” he mused.

He quickly rifled through the scattered pages on the desk, shoving anything with writing into his backpack. In one of the drawers, he discovered two curious boxes, each about the size of a pencil case.

“I’m sure you won’t miss these,” he said with a smirk, tucking them into his bag. With one last glance around the penthouse, Darian climbed back into the ventilation shaft.

Before disappearing fully into the shadows, Darian reached into his pocket and retrieved another small device. With practiced care, he attached it to the vent’s interior.

“Thank you,” he murmured sarcastically.

The small listening device would broadcast wirelessly on a radio frequency for two city blocks. While the channel would remain insecure, only he would know what to listen for. And if anyone else stumbled onto the signal?

“The people should know who they’re taking instruction from,” he thought with a sardonic grin.

Satisfied, he began his descent, moving with fluid precision through the maze of vents and tunnels, a phantom slipping into the city’s underground arteries.

Darian emerged from the tunnels and stepped into the cold night air. The soft breeze was a welcome contrast to the sticky perspiration clinging to his forehead. The damp cobblestones glistened beneath the faint glow of

streetlights, and the distant hum of the city provided a soothing backdrop.

“Meridia,” he said softly, taking in the fractured beauty around him. The city was a restless beast, never truly asleep. Neon signs flashed in kaleidoscopic brilliance, their colours battling the encroaching darkness that coiled in the city’s unseen depths. It was a place brimming with secrets, a metropolis lulled into a fragile rhythm of tolerable despair - a cycle its citizens called happiness or, at the very least, contentment.

If only they knew. If only their eyes could be opened to the truth - that life was not about merely staying alive, but about finding something worth living for. He thought of the last three days - every shadow he’d slipped through, every breath held in nerve-racking stillness, every moment where death felt close enough to taste. Darian couldn’t shake the image of becoming like the Mendacium, hollowed out and enslaved. Could such an unwilling transition be forced upon someone? He shuddered. Death would be a mercy.

“Sometimes,” he mused to himself, “we need to risk losing life in order to truly appreciate it.”

Snapping out of his reverie, Darian began walking calmly down the empty street, his boots tapping softly against the wet stone. Satisfaction glimmered in his sharp eyes as he thought about the chaos now unfurling in The White Tower. Arcimendax would have found his slaughtered Mendacium by now.

Darian imagined the furious scream that would have erupted from Arcimendax's throat - a primal roar of outrage and frustration.

Pausing at the corner of an alleyway, Darian checked his watch. He turned slowly to face The White Tower.

Three. Two. One.

A thunderous explosion shattered the silence. The penthouse erupted into an inferno of red, blue, and orange, flames clawing into the sky like a ravage beast. The shockwave ricocheted through the sleeping city, and distant alarms began their wailing chorus. Thick plumes of smoke billowed upwards, curling and twisting like malevolent serpents into the night sky. Darian shielded his eyes from the fiery glow reflecting off the towering glass skyscrapers.

In his mind's eye, he could see Arcimendax standing amid the devastation - his face contorted in blind rage, fists clenched at his sides as he bellowed curses into the smoke-choked void.

"Explain that to the voice on the other end of the phone," Darian said. He let out a low whistle, his lips curling into a sharp grin.

"A work of art," he said softly, but even as he said it, he felt a stab of conflicting emotion flowing through him like a riptide. He shrugged.

With one last glance at the smouldering tower, Darian turned on his heel and disappeared into the shadows, slipping into the veins of the sleeping city like a ghost fading into the night.

Chapter 13.

Serephina.

Seraphina stared at the swirling vortex, her heart pounding in her chest as James vanished into its churning void. Panic, heartache, and confusion warred within her, but she had no time to respond to them. A shriek tore through the air, snapping her attention to the shadow that lunged toward her, crimson eyes blazing with hatred.

She moved instinctively - blade flashing as she twisted into a forward roll, striking upward as she passed beneath the creature's arc. Her movement was a seamless blend of disciplines - fluid, precise, always attacking from a position of strength. A frontal attack against a stronger enemy would put her at a disadvantage, and so from an early age, Gabriel, her father's most trusted general, had taught her the technique that would put her behind her opponent.

The shadow screeched and collapsed mid-air, cleaved from crown to chest. Its face - if one could even call it that - reflected a mixture of anger, pain, and surprise. When its limp form hit the earth, the ground hissed beneath it, scorched black. In seconds, the creature crumbled into ash, swept away by the breeze as if it had never been there to start with.

Her horse stood firm beside her, its breath ragged with tension but unwavering. Loyal and battle-trained, it refused to flee, as if understanding that its rider still had battles to fight. Seraphina's chest pulsated as blood and adrenaline rushed through her. Her instincts were unwavering - when confronted with fight or flight, she would fight.

Seraphina turned her gaze toward the city beyond the hills. Even at this distance, Elowen's towers glistened in the sunlight, making it impossible to stare at the city too long. It was like looking directly into the sun, while at the same time being unable to turn your gaze away.

For eons, Elowen had stood proudly against every onslaught, impenetrable from all sides. Yet above the towering city, a horde of shadows circled like vultures anticipating a feast. The horde grew with every second that passed, as if the skies had simply torn open and the black

mass streamed through a gate - winged creatures blacker than midnight - a spreading stain across the sky.

Without hesitation, she mounted. There was no time for grief. No time to second-guess what had become of James or whether she would ever see him again. A voice screamed within, but she pushed it down. There would be time yet for self-reflection, but now was not it.

Every sword would be needed now.

She looked back once, unable to fully block out the emotional torrent inside, the ache in her chest blooming like a bruise. Then she rode - tears she hadn't meant to cry whisked away by the wind as she raced towards Elowen like an enraged storm.

Into the wind. Into the chaos. Into war.

Chapter 14.

The Council.

Seraphina rode like a woman possessed, hooves thundering beneath her as her steed surged forward, retracing the path she and James had taken only hours earlier. The morning's memories felt like a borrowed life - a distant echo blurred by the heat of battle and the looming shadow. The wind stung her cheeks, whipping her hair behind her like a searing flame. Her heart thundered in sync with the hooves pounding the earth.

Images of Elowen flooded over her as she crested the rise overlooking the city.

“Why is it that we appreciate what we have only when it is threatened?” she reprimanded herself, her eyes fixed on the scene before her.

A golden light danced on the stone walls, and ebony towers shimmered like dusk-lit beacons of hope. The sun, sinking low, painted the sky in fiery reds and oranges. The castle rose above the city, proud and unyielding as the people it protected. The gleaming city stood defiant against the encroaching dread - a fortress of light in a storm of despair. She scanned her surroundings, reacquainting herself with the terrain in anticipation of the imminent assault.

To the east, the Velinwood spread like a sacred hush across the hills - a forest as old as time itself, a canvass of emerald canopies and dappled sunlight.

The Forestfolk, who called themselves the Kaelari, moved through it like wind through leaves, preferring the peace and quiet of nature over the bustling of cities. They spoke in lifting tones, a sing-song dialect woven with rhythm and grace, shrouded in mystery and preferring to keep to themselves.

They lived simply, not primitively - in woven arboreal dwellings, suspended between the great trunks of the giant Sequoia trees that dwarfed even the castle towers. They were considered wise among the people of the Garden - as people who listened more than they spoke, often were.

To the west, Lake Elarin stretched endlessly. Seraphina remembered her visits fondly. At dawn, the lake would veil itself in mist like a bride's face, until the sun lifted it in a warm embrace and whispered, "I do."

In the villages nestled along its shore, life was simple and almost timeless, even in a place such as this, where time was already fluid.

The Lakemen and their families were weathered folk, with tanned skins, calloused hands and deep, warm laughs. Their homes were humble – as they were - their songs were old and slow against the percussion of waves colliding with their boats when out on the lake. They loved telling braided stories around fires that were always unnecessarily large, while their children played with wooden swords and shields in the flickering shadows.

Rising in the distance like silent sentinels of the realm, stood the Aethral Peaks. In the cold winters, their white-capped crowns would catch the sun before the lowlands stirred, and by twilight, they stood cloaked in purple shadows.

The world around her held its breath.

A defiant fire ignited inside her, fiercer than anything she had ever known. She would protect her people to her last breath.

The moment the bannermen atop the gates spotted her crest and the unmistakable silhouette of her horse, they sprang into action. The gates groaned open with swift urgency, and soldiers scrambled to make way.

Seraphina galloped through the gates, the echo of hooves bouncing off the stone walls as her mount plunged into the heart of the city. The streets, which just that morning, were bustling with everyday life, were now chaos incarnate. Merchant stalls lay overturned, their wares scattered across the cobbled roads. Crates and fruit baskets lay trampled, children cried in doorways, and panicked citizens darted between alleys like startled birds. The scent of smoke hung thick in the air, sharp and acrid, stinging her nostrils and coating her tongue with bitter dread.

This day belonged to the Enemy, for it had already stolen the peace of the city, a peace that must be restored if they wished to win the ensuing war.

She glanced skyward. Darkness continued to pour furiously through the torn sky.

Screams rang out from a nearby street. She calculated and then turned her horse towards the shouting.

The building was ablaze, with flames licking skyward like angry tongues. People rushed with buckets of water to try and contain the fire. A woman knelt over a lifeless boy, her hands clasped in prayer, her sobs shattering the air.

"What happened here?" Seraphina asked gently, placing her hands on the woman's trembling shoulders.

"One of those... things, m' lady," the mother whispered, her voice raw with grief and fury. "It just appeared. My son... he tried to fight it..."

Her voice broke, eyes dropping to the boy's pale face and scorched hand where he had tried to grapple with the shadow. A broad-shouldered man stepped forward, gripping a double-sided axe, his hand still shaking.

"I got it from behind," he said, pointing to a scorched patch on the road.

"It died there - I swear it and then it just turned to ashes!"

"They do that," Seraphina nodded solemnly. "They burst into flames and ash. I faced one earlier today. The same thing happened."

The man exhaled, visibly relieved, as though fearing he had imagined it.

"Help is on its way," she told the crowd. "The city guard will contain the fire. Stay inside, if you can. Stay safe."

A frightened voice rose from the crowd. "What are they?"

Time paused. Seraphina stood still in the chaos, the question hanging like smoke in the air. She knew the answer, though part of her had hoped never to say it aloud.

There was a prophecy as old as the Aethral Peaks. It spoke of day when a darkness will rise - a darkness that had been

imprisoned millennia before, when a similar rebellion had ensued. It said that the one who had been cloaked in shame, will break free of its chains and his fury will spill over all of creation.

It was to be a battle unlike any other - a battle that will see brothers betraying brothers to death, and parents their children. Children will rebel against their parents and have them put to death.

The enemy had many names, but one echoed loudest.

Seraphina pushed open the council chamber doors. Inside, the room was abuzz—commanders, envoys, advisors locked in strategy and debate. Her father and Eli sat at the far end of a great round table. Her father's nod acknowledged her return; she took her seat beside him without a word.

Eli stood and cleared his throat. Silence fell.

"Sometimes the hardest part isn't fighting your enemies," he began, "but naming them. I know many of you don't want to believe this. You've heard the old stories - some of you called them myths. But now you've seen them. The shadows above our city are called Mendacium. They serve an old ally of mine, turned enemy - Arcimendax. This war began before this world was born. It has already been won... but it must be fought again, for conceited creatures cannot admit defeat."

When some of the council members frowned, Eli turned to Gabriel.

"You grow vegetables behind your house, yes?"

Gabriel nodded.

"And each season, you must pull out the weeds again, even though you did so before?"

Another nod.

"So must we. Arcimendax is a master of deceit. He won't meet us in open battle. What you see circling above, is but one of many waves to follow. While deadly, they are a distraction from his true strategy. He will try and infiltrate the hearts and minds of those dearest to us. His greatest weapons are not fire or sword, but fear, deceit and distraction. Today does not mark the start of a war – this is just the next wave of an existing war that has been raging through the ages."

Eli's gaze swept the room. "This war will demand more than skills on the battlefield – it will test who we are in the deepest corners of our soul."

Seraphina exhaled slowly, feeling the gravity settle in her chest and letting Eli's words fade to the background.

"An enemy with a name can be fought," she whispered to herself, her hand resting on the hilt of her sword. She shifted her focus inward and tested the foundation of her conviction. The fire she found burned steadfast and unyielding.

"And an enemy with a name... can be conquered."

Chapter 15.

Faultlines.

"You were there! You could have stopped it. You could have said something, done something!" Kae bellowed, the veins in his neck pulsating, his fists balled as he looked at Ronan with unwavering disgust, his anger tangible and explosive.

"Yes!" shouted Ronan in response, "I should have. I've replayed that night a million times, but it's not quite that simple, is it?"

Kae stepped closer, eyes ablaze, every muscle in his lean frame taut as a wire, unintimidated by Ronan's substantially larger frame.

The table lay to the side, as did several of the chairs. When Kae and Ronan realised that they had met before on the night of Kae's arrest, the room had erupted in chaos. Kae had turned the table over in fury, sending chairs, food, glass and people scattering across the room. Darian had pre-empted the fury, and had vacated his chair before the ordeal, to find comfort in the shadows of the room.

Elara, who was sitting with her chair away from the table, seemed unmoved by the sudden emotion and remained calmly seated as a lighthouse in a storm. James and Lyssandra were both forced off their chairs by the tumbling table, half crawling to safety through scattered cutlery and broken glass.

Where moments before, the room was filled with conversation, it was now as quiet as a grave. Lysandra grasped her one hand in the other, pressing down on the cuts she had incurred as she scrambled across the floor, her eyes wide with surprise and shock.

Kae's memories surged like bile from the pit of his stomach, bitter and uncontrollable. "You don't get to talk to me about 'simple'. Tarin was the closest thing I had to family, and your silence and cowardice killed him as much as the rope around his neck."

Ronan stood his ground, allowing Kae the opportunity to voice his hatred and judgement. In truth, there was nothing Kae could say that Ronan hadn't said to himself a million times before. The narrative wasn't new – if anything, it was refreshing hearing it from someone else rather than the internal voice that refuses to let things go. His voice was steady, though tinged with regret. "There's nothing I can say that will give you the peace or justice you seek. I've played this over in my head a million times."

"Spare me your guilt," Kae spat, his voice trembling. "Guilt won't bring him back. Guilt doesn't change anything."

Kae waited for Ronan to respond, hoping he would say something that would give him an excuse to bludgeon the guard to a pulp, so that Ronan may feel the pain that he himself, has been carrying for so long, but Ronan remained quiet, meeting his gaze without anger.

“Say something!” Kae shouted, livid at Ronan’s lack of defiance, “You killed him! All of you – the so-called guard who lacked the balls to stand up your bastard general!”

The air between them thickened like oil, suffocating and flammable. James stood frozen at the edge of the room, unsure whether stepping in would douse the flames or fan them higher. Lysandra was pale, eyes wide, caught in an emotional storm, with eyes darting between James, Elara and Ronan, hoping either of them would step in and defuse the situation. Her gaze lingered on the sadness that hung over Ronan’s eyes like rain, and even though her hand was wounded, it was her heart the bled.

From the corner of the room, hidden in the shadows, Darian noticed her sympathetic gaze and something in him twisted and turned in rebellion - something died and something else was born.

It was Elara who broke the impasse.

“We can revisit the past as much as we like, but pain is still pain, and loss is still loss,” she said, her voice unwavering. “Everyone in this room has this in common: we all have loss and pain to spare. We can let it consume us, anchoring us to shores that lead nowhere, or we can harness it, like wind in our sails, guiding us to new horizons - where we can do

better. There are enough enemies outside these walls. If we're all to be judged by our pasts, what hope do we have for a future?"

Kae stepped back, breath ragged, fists slowly unclenching. His eyes, still hard and resentful, shifted between Elara and Ronan. Elara was right. He hated that she was, but that didn't make it any less so. He thought of Tarin, the wild young man with dreams bigger than Meridia. He remembered, in the end, how he thought that what ultimately killed his friend, was not the noose around his neck, but the notion of living a small, broken life amidst big dreams. No man should live a small life, who dreams of oceans and mountains and new frontiers. He remembered how Tarin's mischievous face was already ready to break into a smile and for a moment, he swore he could hear his old friend whisper, "Live the adventures for both of us."

Rage flowed visibly from Kae's eyes as he leaned into the words that echoed in him mind.

Ronan, seeing the shift in Kae, nodded slowly and then extended a hand.

"If you let me, I will do better," Ronan vowed.

The silence in the room was palpable as everyone waited in anticipation of Kae's decision. In truth, he had none. That fate would steer all of them to this point, was both cruel and cunning. Kae turned his attention to Elara, and some understanding moved between them, as if they had negotiated on a topic for days, yet only a moment passed. Finally, Kae stretched out his hand, eyes fixed on Ronan's

as if he studied the man. In silence, he nodded, shook Ronan's hand, and left the room.

Kae leaned against the wall, his heart as heavy as drunkard's head. His fingers traced the crude edges of a spray-painted mark - an insignia he had left there years ago in memory of Tarin's friendship. It was a simple image of a young deer, bending its front legs to touch its horns to the ground in a sign of resignation. Kae still didn't know why, but at the time, it simply felt appropriate.

He'd been trudging through the streets for the better part of an hour, seeking solace in the quiet. His breathing had slowed, anger shifting into sorrow and exhaustion. The air was cool and fresh, with the promise of rain.

"I'm sorry," he whispered softly, tending a wound that he thought had healed long ago. He crumbled to the ground and put his head on his knees. Time passed.

"Leopards and spots," Darian said unceremoniously, appearing from the shadows.

Kae lifted his head, startled to find Darian there.

Darian sat down next to Kae, not waiting for an invitation.

"I needed fresh air as well, to clear my head," Darian volunteered.

He was slicing an apple with a small blade that was clearly intended for other purposes. He offered Kae a slice. Not knowing what to do, Kae accepted the slice and nodded his

thanks. His gaze lingered on Darian's hands, which had red stains on them.

"Oh, don't mind the blood," Darian remarked, "it's not mine." Kae's eyes widened, and Darian laughed, although there was a note of sadness and cynicism to the sound.

"Once you left, Ronan took his leave as well and I helped James stich Lyssandra's hand. The cut wasn't too deep, so she'll be fine."

"You were saying? Something about leopards and spots?" Kae questioned.

"Oh, don't mind me. Your exchange with Ronan just struck a nerve. Make no mistake, I think he's the good sort, which says a lot, considering I hate the bastards in uniform. They're all indoctrinated and misled – entitled cunts that claim to take the moral high ground, when really, they're no better than the rest of us, fighting for the scraps. If you ask me, the city watch is more a sect than an institution, but he recently helped us out of a tight spot where he showed no hesitation to stand up to his former 'friends'. One can just hope that, when it's really us versus them – whomever 'them' might be, that the dice falls right, you know?"

"You don't trust him?" Kae enquired.

"Trust has little to do with it, I think. You don't know my story, but before I was discovered or recruited by a man named Hilario, I grew up in a home where both my mother and father were drunk more than they were sober. I never knew what led them there, only that they promised time

after time that they would change. They never did. In the end, it was me against the world. Any trust I had, died with their empty promises,” said Darian.

Kae thought about this, realising that there is no such thing as a person without wounds. We are the sum of our experiences and somewhere in that story, the pain we experience takes centre stage. Elara was right. Some people choose to cherish the pain, unable to let it evolve, while others see it as the driving force behind their purpose.

“Pain,” said Kae, “it seems one of the few things that unite all of us, no matter where we started.”

“Hmm,” Darian shrugged, slicing off another piece of the apple with artful precision.

“But you don’t like him, do you?” Kae pushed Darian for an opinion.

Darian revisited the concern he saw in Lyssandra’s eyes earlier that night when Kae threatened Ronan and how he hated it. He remembered how she had held his hand the very first night they met and how he had willingly plunged into the ocean of her eyes. He realised that he could remember and recount just about every interaction he’s had with her since. For a moment, for nothing more of a flicker, he wondered whether he was truly committed to the journey ahead or whether he was allowing himself to be drawn into adventures beyond his ambitions, for nothing more than the peace he found in the moments when their eyes met.

“I just wonder – when I allow myself to brood from time to time – what weighs more heavily on the heart of a man; duty or self-preservation?”

Darian cast the apple core across the street, sending it sliding off into the dark and replaced the blade into its sheath.

“I’ve been meaning to ask you – the photo James showed us, your most recent artwork – the one section is completely dark. James seems to think they interrupted you and you just didn’t get to finish it,” Darian remarked coldly. Even though it sounded like a statement, it was a question, and Kae followed his meaning.

“No,” Kae replied, “it was finished. The darkness in the work doesn’t represent the absence of something, but rather the presence of it.”

After a moment of silence, Darian nodded.

“I thought so,” he replied dryly.

“I’m glad you’ve joined us,” Darian said a moment later, staring off into the distance, looking at nothing in particular, “Sometimes I feel like a fish out of water...”

He let the sentence trail off into the night.

“Leopards and spots,” Kae said.

“Leopards and spots,” Darian replied, rising from the pavement. In a moment, Darian had faded into the night like a ghost, leaving Kae alone, to contemplate the journey ahead.

In the darkness, the city murmured its familiar hum, oblivious to the emotional fractures that balanced on a knife's edge.

Chapter 16.

Turning point.

James woke with a start. Lyssandra, an early riser, was already running around their safehouse, gleefully shouting about her discovery. Always the academic, she preferred books over practical matters, while the rest of the team focused on the physical side of things.

"James! James!" she shouted, her excitement palpable.

There was no sleeping when Lyssandra had made a discovery. She jumped onto the foot of his bed, bouncing up and down like a child on Christmas morning.

"Okay," he chuckled, "I'm up. What's your exciting news?" he croaked through a yawn, rubbing his eyes.

"A weapon. I found a weapon against Arcimendax!" she announced, barely able to contain her excitement.

James shrugged at the dark irony of the moment. Lyssandra, with her childlike innocence, raindrop-blue eyes and fierce red hair, bounding with excitement over a

weapon that might bring down ‘The immortal destroyer of worlds.’

“Have we all gone crazy?” James wondered, the thought lingering. She sat there, her grin wide and eager, waiting for an appropriate response.

“Alright, alright,” he grunted again, “Let me get dressed, then I’ll meet you downstairs.”

Lyssandra let out a squeal of delight and rushed out of his room, her wild hair bouncing behind her.

James shook his head, smiling as he forced himself out of bed. He and Elara had stayed up well past midnight, debating strategy and options, hoping for a breakthrough.

One thing had become clear: they needed to activate the white orb and find a way to open a rift to the Garden. They needed Eli’s council now more than ever.

James reminisced; while his original obsession might have been to reconcile with Seraphina, he had come to the conclusion that this was much bigger than his infatuation with a princess of an immortal race. This battle had been fought through the ages and he, Seraphina and the rest of them – they were all participants in something that most people were completely oblivious to.

James lingered for a moment, trying to see something beyond the mirror. He focused on his own eyes, trying to

peer behind the surface – tried to lift the veil, as if approaching a holy inner sanctum.

“Did he have what it takes?”

Maybe that was the wrong question to begin with, as he had realised that this was not about him. Years back, he thought of life as something to be lived fully, for its own sake. Now? So much had changed and he realised that his life was never his own to begin with. It brought him peace and filled him with fear at the same time. Life had become a paradox in so many ways.

He remembered something Elara had once mentioned in passing: *“The most valuable of all education is the ability to make yourself do the thing you have to do, when it has to be done, whether you like it or not.”*

Their situation weighed on him.

“Who were the lucky ones?” he thought, “the millions of people who went about their lives, not knowing or not caring about a war across the ages, or those who have discovered the truth, and who have the small chance of making a difference?”

With a final glance at the mirror, he brushed his hair in the general direction of decency and made his way to the kitchen.

“James!” Lyssandra exclaimed, “I’ll start again.”

The strong aroma of coffee filled the air. He acknowledged Lyssandra with a nod of his head and walked over the stove.

“In one of the books we salvaged from the library, I came across a text about a group of friends who discovered the truth about the Destroyer and set out to defeat him,” she began breathlessly. “It referenced a set of blades - daggers, really - with mystical powers. Forged by two men known as ‘The Brothers of Thunder’. The blades were rumoured to have the ability to end the life of both mortal and immortal beings!”

Her grin faltered for just a moment - just long enough for them to see the weight of what she’d discovered settle behind her eyes.

Elara reached for the manuscript. "There," Lyssandra pointed to the relevant page.

Elara skimmed the text in silence, her brow furrowing. “Hmm, interesting. But where to find them? Assuming they exist.”

“This is where it gets interesting,” Lyssandra said, her voice tinged with excitement.

“We never would have discovered their location were it not for the brave heroics of our resident rogue,” Lyssandra said, her eyes focusing on Darian. The young man felt the rush of blood to his face, suddenly feeling awkward and out of place, not knowing whether to acknowledge her recognition or to pretend like it was nothing.

Elara and James glanced at each other, seeing Darian’s response. Elara briefly raised her eyebrows and James

followed her gaze. Across the room, Ronan's face was hard, his eyes ablaze.

James glanced back towards Elara, who – without a word – made her view quite clear. “Here comes trouble.”

Lyssandra pushed forward with her story.

“When Darian returned from the White Tower, he brought with him, a collection of artefacts. The two small boxes were cryptexes. I am yet to solve the second, but the first was disappointingly easy,” she boasted, waving it around in the air.

James smiled. He loved seeing Lyssandra so alive, even though she was completely oblivious to the emotional discord between Darian and Ronan as she recounted her story.

“In truth, the scroll within the cryptex is unremarkable - a story about a trader who bought a box of collectibles from an old woman. In that box, however, was two daggers which, when the trader held them, seemed to vibrate in his hands with an eery energy. Not knowing what else to do, the trader – being a superstitious man – travelled to a temple and handed the entire box over to the monks who lived there.”

Lyssandra turned to Kae, who seemed completely captivated by her story. She nodded.

“The Shrouded Peaks,” Kae whispered, eyes wide with wonder.

“Yes,” exclaimed Lyssandra, passing around a photo. It was one of Kae’s many works.

The photo showed a mural, layered with an intrigue of dark strokes and rough edges. The scene depicted the Shrouded Peaks in all their ominous grandeur. The mountains – as their name suggested - were framed by a swirling fog, their jagged, unnatural shapes twisting and turning into the distance, consumed by grey skies and fading horizons.

In the foreground, the lone figure of a hooded traveller could be seen, barely more than a shadow, looking towards the vast expanse. The fog curled around him with breathless anticipation. In the distance, a temple loomed upon a ridge - its stone silhouette shrouded in mist and mystery.

Beneath the mural, Kae had scrawled something faint - an inscription barely discernible through layers of paint. A single word, “Thunder.”

Lyssandra continued, her voice a low hum as she allowed herself to be swept up by her own story. "The monks, upon receiving the box, supposedly locked it away in the deepest chambers of the temple – terrified of the vibrating artefacts and even more so, for their inability to understand or describe them, for they were, without a doubt, not of this world."

Kae looked down at the image, his fingers tracing the edges of the figure on the photo, and then to the distant temple.

“There’s something you should know,” he said, the air thick with anticipation. His companions waited.

“It’s hard to explain, but when I painted this, I was afraid. My work is always full of emotion, but this was different,” Kae confessed.

His words hung in the air, seeking a place to find rest, like a butterfly in a thornbush.

Eventually, Lyssandra responded, breaking the eery silence.

“There might be something to it,” she said, “because it is rumoured that no-one who has ever ventured into the temple uninvited, has ever come out again.”

“It could just be a way to keep treasure hunters and gold-diggers out of the temple,” James argued.

“Or not,” responded Elara, raising her eyebrows in caution.

James looked at the photo of the mural again, fingers tracing the lines of the mountains in the distance. For a moment, the image before him blurred, the distant peaks suddenly feeling closer, as though he could almost feel the chill in the air, taste the salt of the wind.

“Or not,” he whispered in echo.

Chapter 17.

Conflict.

Elara's eyes locked on a spot against the wall. Her companions had come to know this look and waited patiently. She was attempting to peer into the future, to give them some advantage. Her gift was valuable, as was her wisdom, but the former was unpredictable. Her visions flowed as they wished, and more importantly, when they wanted. She was a recipient of sorts, as opposed to the originator, a slave to her gift, and not its master. She tried, sometimes, to force a vision or a glimpse of the future. Sometimes it worked, sometimes it didn't. Now was such a time.

After several minutes of silent anticipation, she returned her attention to her companions.

"I cannot be sure, but we can safely assume that Arcimendax anticipates our actions. If we intend to seek out the blades, I am fairly certain we will be confronted. Given their importance, I can only speculate this will not be a task he will likely just outsource," Elara said dryly.

“So we confront Arcimendax head-on. Sounds suicidal,” Ronan summarised.

“I’m afraid so,” Elara responded.

“Why would he not simply seek out the blades himself and destroy them or keep them close, like he does the black orb?” Lyssandra enquired.

“Again, I can only speculate, but I image the brothers would have thought of that. If they had the ability to forge weapons such as these, they may also have had the ability to shield them from him, or to make it difficult, at least, for him to claim them as his own,” Elara said.

“Balance,” said Kae, “it’s a common theme in the murals I’ve been painting of late. If you study them – if you look beyond the image itself - you’ll find that the one consistent theme across all of them, is the battle between darkness and light. Look here,” he said, rising from the chair and walking to the wall where the photos of his art were hanging on a pin-up board, “You can clearly see the darkness and the light, always fighting to dominate the work.”

“Anyone ever win?” Darian enquired dryly, a note of sarcasm in his voice. It was a rhetorical question, but Kae chose to answer anyway.

“I imagine that’s the more literal parts of the art – while the real battle happens in the background, the characters in the foreground seem to play a pivotal role,” Kae suggested, pausing as if to say more, but it was Elara who responded.

“I think that’s an oversimplification. Trying to fully understand something that’s been going on for millennia from our very limited point of view, is reckless and dangerous. From the little I’ve been able to piece together myself – and this is just so I can try and make sense of it all – the battle was really fought long ago, and won. What we’re seeing is equivalent to the skirmishes after the battle, but still, what might be a skirmish for immortals, could be a battle for survival for us.”

“Battle or skirmish, won or lost, we are where we are, and the darkness and light are still in conflict and for reasons none of us can fully understand, we’ve been drawn into this feud,” James said.

His eyes connected with Lyssandra’s. She smiled, trying to seem reassuring, but her mouth and her eyes were telling different stories. He could see the fear below the surface, the uncertainty of what to do next. Their eyes lingered another moment, before James tore away his gaze.

“We need those blades. Ideally, we need the black orb, too,” James said.

“So we fight Arcimendax,” Darian chipped in from the dark corner again, not looking up from cleaning his nails with the edge of his dagger.

“How?” asked Ronan, “he cannot be killed – not by us.”

“We don’t need to kill him, just distract him long enough so that we can get our hands on those daggers. Once we do, everything shifts in our favour. I, for one, would love to feel

those daggers penetrate his dark heart and see him fade into ashes,” Darian brooded, still preoccupied.

Elara and James looked at each other, concern flowing between them. In the last couple of days, Darian had entered a dark, brooding mood that was spilling over to the rest of the companions, slowly, like mist rolling in from the ocean.

Elara remembered a prophetic moment, shortly after meeting Darian. It was the first time Darian laid his eyes on Lyssandra. A shiver ran down her back. The fate of the world was to rest on the decisions of this young man – a man who was knowingly walking into a dark, hopeless valley.

Elara looked at Lyssandra – such an innocent young girl, completely unaware of the role she will play in the future of everything they hold dear.

“Kae, I imagine you would be able to guide us to the Peaks?” James enquired.

Kae simply nodded.

“Ronan, you’ve got the most experience with direct confrontation. I need you to put together a list of things we might need – should it come to that – to fight off a group of assassins,” James continued.

“Darian, Kae might be able to give you more insights into the hillsides and valleys, so that we can rely on your stealth. Outright confrontation is a last resort. While you, Ronan and Elara have experience in these matters, Kae, Lyssandra and I are like farmers with pitchforks – we’ll be of little use

in any fight against trained professionals, even with the training you've given us. Stealth is the preferred strategy," James directed.

Darian nodded, first to James and then to Kae. For a moment, purpose seemed to replace the dark shroud that had surrounded Darian for some time.

"Perhaps purpose can tether us to the light, when all else fades into darkness," James thought to himself, making a mental note to explore this further with Elara at some point.

"Lyssandra, I need you to read like you've never read before. Elara can join you. There are several manuscripts on the Shrouded Peaks that we need to work through, if for no other reason, then to separate fact from lore. We need to know what we're up against, other than an immortal and his zealots," James concluded.

A quiet moment passed, the weight of the looming confrontation settling in like dust after a storm. Everyone tried to appear calm and focused, but beneath the surface, wars raged - battles of doubt and unanswered questions.

And yet, in the end, all questions circled back to one:

Do I have what it takes?

More than one pair of eyes dropped to the floor, shoulders subtly sagging under the invisible weight of that truth.

James pulled his dark hood over his head and wrapped his jacket tighter as the late afternoon chill crept in.

I need to see a man about a thing,” he said, his tone light, belying the gravity in the room.

As he disappeared through the doorway, the others stirred, each turning toward their tasks. By nightfall, the first outlines of a plan would begin to form.

Chapter 18

The Shrouded Peaks.

The wind howled like a mourning widow as the team crested the final ridge.

Before them, the Shrouded Peaks rose like ancient sentinels, jagged and cloaked in perpetual mist and mystery. Their silhouettes twisted into the sky like clawed fingers scraping at the heavens. Fog curled around the blackened stone, wet and thick, whispering stories of the many adventurers who ventured into valley below, only to be swallowed and consumed, never to surface again.

The temple - angular, ominous, and partially collapsed at one corner - loomed from the highest shelf of rock, its façade hidden behind a veil of swirling breath, as if the valleys around it were alive, breathing warm air into a cold night under the watchful eye of a red moon. It did not welcome visitors. It waited for them. Ready. Famished. Insatiable.

They paused to survey the breathtaking view, each of them caught between the grandeur and the dread that gripped them like a noose.

James stood slightly apart, his chest rising and falling steadily despite the tremor in his fingers. His alert eyes scanned the terrain, searching as much for answers as enemies. He had always been the pragmatic one, unphased by rhetoric and focused on what was practical and possible, but in this place, he felt doubt wash over him like an angry tide. What if we're too late? What if nothing we do matters? Why take the risk, when the future is as uncertain as the past is unclear? He tried to push the voices aside, but the doubt lingered like smoke. He adjusted the strap of his pack and tightened his grip on the blade that hung at his side.

Lyssandra knelt at the edge, her curls catching the meagre light like glowing embers. She should have looked out of place amid the stone and shadow, but there was a quiet strength in her now - an awareness that childhood had passed her by and left something more formidable in its place. Her hand drifted instinctively toward her pendant, a keepsake from a mother she barely remembered. She recalled a conversation between her mother and father, when she was barely old enough to walk.

“We’re not ready for this,” her mother had said, her voice failing and her eyes full of tears. Her mother seldom cried. Maybe that is why this memory was so vivid.

“No-one’s really ready for anything. We weren’t ready for children, yet here we are,” her father had replied, while twirling Lyssandra’s hair around his index finger, softly patting her head.

“We’re as ready as life expects us to be and that’s the best anyone can hope for. When the time comes, we simply step up,” she contemplated, smiling at the memory of her parents, staring at the temple in the distance and wondering if this is how they felt.

Kae stood beside her, his features hardened by memories of the mural he had painted—the one that matched this exact view. It was too precise to be coincidence. He could see the curling fog and the figure he had once imagined standing in this very spot. Only now, that figure was him. The realization chilled him. A single word formed in his mind. Prophecy. A shiver ran up and down his skin. His hands itched, craving a wall, a can of paint, a release, or something familiar, and yet it felt like all his life had worked up to this moment. Another word. Providence. He raised his brows in resignation.

Behind them, Ronan and Elara adjusted their gear in silence.

Ronan's shoulders were squared, his face unreadable, a fortress of discipline and purpose. But Elara could feel the tension crackling from him like an electric storm, ready to consume the world in untampered rage. His gaze flicked toward Lyssandra, then towards Darian, and then back towards the temple. Elara didn't need to look to know. The rift between them had deepened. From the corner of her eyes, she saw him shake off the distraction and focus his undivided attention on the scene below. His body tensed in anticipation.

Darian, ever the phantom, stood alone - silent, deadly, unreadable. His dark clothing blended into the environment, and he moved like a shadow unfurling, his lean figure, falling into unison with the movement of the grass in the wind. The daggers strapped at his sides had been honed that morning. His eyes were fixed on the temple, calculating, dissecting its approach like a puzzle he had already half-solved. The corners of his mouth were turned slightly upward – the only evidence betraying the excitement that boiled up inside him.

James approached him. "You know what you need to do."

Darian didn't speak. His jaw tightened, the weight of what lay ahead anchoring every breath. He nodded once. That was enough.

"We meet back here when it's done," James instructed. More heads nodded.

Elara and Ronan circled wide, disappearing into the mist to flank the temple. Darian waited until they were in position. He turned, only for a moment and locked his gaze on Lyssandra, then he vanished, melting into shadow.

James, Kae and Lyssandra found a clearing that put them out of sight from the main entrance of the temple, and settled in. They needed to stay out of sight in case things went wrong. Unlike the rest, they were not seasoned warriors. Distance and silence were their allies.

The temple was a maze of corridors, some still in regular use and bathed in the warm glow of oil lamps. Now and then, these passages opened into small chambers where candles carpeted the floor in flickering constellations, and heavy tapestries draped the walls - vast, surreal landscapes of towering mountains beneath brooding grey skies. Some of them felt almost familiar, reminding Darian of Kae's work.

He steered clear of the more frequented corridors whenever he could, favouring the neglected passages instead - black as pitch, where the darkness seemed to breathe and listen. In these corridors, the only light was a faint pulse that bled from glyphs carved deep into the walls - each one dimming and brightening in a rhythm that reflected a heartbeat. They seemed to breathe with the building itself, exhaling a pale, cold glow that barely touched the edges of the shadows. The air here was ancient, dry as bone, yet laced with a metallic tang - as though these halls had once borne witness to some terrible injustice, and the echoes of its screams still lingered, restless and hungry for vengeance.

Darian moved without a sound. Get in. Get the blades. Get out. That was the plan.

The deeper he went, the more the temple seemed to close around him. The light from the glyphs failed in patches, leaving voids where the dark pressed in so thick, it felt solid. Whenever he heard footsteps, he sank into those same shadows and became part of them. Darkness was not an unfamiliar place for him to go. Twice, he scaled the walls, pressed flat against cold stone while monks passed below with lamps and whispers, their footsteps oddly muffled, as though the air swallowed sound whole.

“No one ever thinks to look up,” he breathed, barely audible, before dropping soundlessly to the floor.

Not one to dwell on superstition, Darian could not ignore the wrongness here. Echoes bent strangely, coming back at odd angles or not at all. The air itself felt reluctant to move,

clinging to his skin like cold oil. Every so often, the faint pulse from the glyphs failed - as though the temple were holding its breath. A crease etched deep into his brow. He didn't like variables he couldn't name or control.

At last, the vault loomed ahead: a towering slab of obsidian, polished to a depthless black and veined with faintly glowing runes that pulsed subtly, like something alive beneath glass. Darian slowed too late, the shift in the air immediate and unnerving. Cold gave way to sudden, blistering heat. It surged into his lungs with each inhale, making his eyes water.

He tried to halt mid-stride, but momentum carried him forward. His boot touched the floor.

The runes flared in a burst of searing blue, drowning the corridor in unnatural light. Then, from somewhere deep within the stone, it came - a scream unlike anything in the natural universe. It was the voice of a world in its final, shuddering breath, raw with desperation and defiance, a cry so vast and ancient it felt as though the mountain itself was being torn apart. The sound drove into Darian's bones, into the very marrow, a grief so absolute it could bring a man to his knees and wring tears from eyes that had long forgotten how to weep. Blue fire leapt from the runes, crawling over Darian's skin, burning into his flesh and into his soul.

Dawn had come. The first streaks of light were about to crest the looming mountains, leaving James hopeful. Several hours had passed and the waiting was bearing down on the huddled group. Now and again, they would exchange whispered speculations of what might be transpiring, as if their hopeful projections of Darian's success, might make it so, but the undertone of the hopeful exchanges, was anxiety. For the most part, James, Lyssandra and Kae sit in silent reflection, each fighting demons of their own.

James was the first to react to the unnatural cry that cut through the silence. The sound hadn't just rung in his ears - it had clawed beneath his skin. He jolted upright, gaze snapping toward the temple's silhouette looming through angry mist. His companions were also coming to their feet, caution thrown to the wind as concern settled in.

"Something's wrong," he said, but before his companions could answer, movement stirred behind them.

James's hand went to his sword, but before he could draw it, cold fingers - unnaturally cold - latched onto his shoulders. The iron grip carried a strange sensation that crawled down into his arms, forcing the blade back into its sheath as if his own muscles had betrayed him. In the growing light, his wide eyes flashed - a raw mix of surprise, anger, and fear, like a startled stallion driven into battle.

More dark figures emerged from the fading shadows, embracing Kae and Lyssandra in a defenceless hold. Kae

twisted free long enough to land a strike, but his opponent barely flinched before answering with a precise blow to the temple. The opponent uttered a curse in a language unfamiliar to any of them. Kae crumpled, blood threading down his cheek like ink in water. Lyssandra's cry was muffled by a cloth pressed against her mouth. The sweet-sick scent that coated it, faded like her consciousness, swallowing her into a black pit.

In what felt like seconds of coordinated chaos, hoods were pulled over their heads, the fabric heavy and damp with the smell of burnt herbs. Their wrists were bound in cord that seemed to tighten the more they struggled. Kae and Lyssandra - still unconscious - were slung over the shoulders of the largest captors. Within moments, James was marched toward the temple, docile as a lamb to slaughter. His mind raced and his heart gave chase.

Elara and Ronan found themselves suddenly surrounded by the same dark-cloaked figures. Their approach was soundless, the mist refusing to betray their presence. If anything, the mist seemed in league with the figures that now marched on the two isolated companions with unnatural, choreographed precision.

In the space of a heartbeat, Elara's gift surged forward, bending to her will. She sent a shockwave of thought into the first group of men who rushed towards her, wielding black swords and buckler shields; they staggered, but even as blood welled at the corners of their eyes, two managed another step before collapsing - a resistance she had never encountered before. Two more fell an instant later, her knives blossoming in their chests, but still the line did not break.

Ronan's sword moved like a storm - silver arcs cleaving the air, every strike precise and final. Yet he, too, noticed the uncanny way the cloaked men adjusted mid-swing, avoiding death blows by fractions, as though guided by an unseen power.

But for every enemy that fell, another took its place.

Elara surveyed the battlefield. This was a fight they could not win.

"We surrender or we die," Elara's voice echoed in Darian's mind.

"Are those not the same thing?" Darian responded, as his sword cut deeply across the chest of another attacker.

"We may yet find a way out of this, but for now, we must survive," Elara replied. She threw down her sword in an exaggerated show of surrender. Begrudgingly, Darian followed suit.

With complete apathy towards their fallen comrades, the front-most soldiers came to a stand in front of the companions.

Elara stretched out her arms towards the man, knowing what will follow. In a surprise, the man stepped forward and landed a blow to her side, sending the air from her lungs. Darian was about to retaliate, when a blow that felt like a hammer, landed on his jaw. His eyes teared as he stood his ground, as if challenging his attacker to try that again.

“Turn around,” the one man instructed with a heavy accent.

“You fight, you die, yes?” the other man added. I was not a question.

Bound and weaponless, they were herded toward the temple, their captors’ boots making no sound against the ground. Behind them lay a carpet of bodies cooling in the mist, the survivors stepping around the dead without so much as a glance. Ronan met Elara’s gaze; her voice brushed his mind - steady, defiant: “We’re not done,” she said.

He nodded once, though some quiet part of him knew they had been captured by something far more dangerous than men and the fear of the unknown, clutched its claws around his neck, laughing with a sound of gluttonous satisfaction.

Arcimendax stood like a flame-licked monolith, ringed by his Mendacium. His robe shifted like smoke, its folds curling and uncurling as if alive. His voice, when it came, was velvet wrapped around venom.

“How quaint,” he purred, circling the bound prisoners with the patience of a predator. “Children... playing at war.”

Arcimendax turned to the knot of soldiers who had escorted the prisoners into the hall and gave a single nod. The front-most soldier returned it in kind. As one, the unit pivoted and strode out, their departure as precise as their arrival. Whatever bargain had bound them here was complete - their part in this was done.

He stopped before Lyssandra, who was only just rousing from her drugged sleep. With slender, blackened fingers, he traced the curve of her cheek. She shuddered at the cold, unnatural touch, fighting to mask her revulsion. More importantly, she kept her shoulders squared and her pendant tucked deep within her clothing. She didn't know what would happen if Arcimendax laid hands on it, but the thought alone told her it could not be allowed.

“I might spare you,” he murmured, almost tenderly. “You'd make a lovely pet.”

She burned with the desire to strike back, but her throat locked, her heartbeat hammering against her ribs. Fear and panic collided, dragging her into a silent freefall. His voice slithered through her thoughts like invasive vines, prying at the doors she tried to bolt shut.

She walled herself off from the pendant—refusing him even the shadow of a thought that might tip the war in his favour—and instead, reached for the calm stream of her childhood. She saw the water so clear she could trace the darting paths of trout, felt the cool current circling around her ankles. The air was thick with the scent of pine swaying in an afternoon breeze, the sky a slow-blooming fire of orange and pink as the sun whispered its final farewells.

“Clever little one,” Arcimendax bellowed in rage.

He pressed the sharpened nail of his index finger into her forehead—and at that touch, his presence surged inward, burrowing into her mind. Memories flickered without her consent, yanked to the surface like fish on a line. Her breath caught, the edges of her vision sparking white. He rifled through her thoughts with brutal efficiency, tearing down the walls she had erected.

A scream broke through her throat as she fought against the terror of feeling herself laid bare to him. At the far end of the hall, blood streamed freely from Elara’s nose, her features twisted into an expression of raw, unshackled pain. Lyssandra would never know it, but in that moment, Elara’s will was the only thing keeping Arcimendax’s fury from tearing her apart. She poured every fragment of her strength into shoring up Lyssandra’s defences, holding back an immortal onslaught unlike anything she had ever faced.

Elara half-staggered, clinging to lucidity as her mind burned under the assault. Tears blurred her vision, but her focus held just long enough to reach across the void between them.

“Now,” she whispered into Ronan’s mind, before the world dissolved into darkness.

Ronan needed no second bidding. He roared, straining against his bonds, eyes blazing like a forge fire stoked to white heat. The ropes bit into his wrists, drawing thin lines of blood, but he pulled until his muscles shook, sweat streaking under the torchlight.

“I will have your head on a pike,” he growled, the words forged from pure, lethal intent.

Arcimendax laughed—not in mockery, but in the delighted madness of a predator toying with its prey. Then, in a blur of inhuman speed, he closed the distance. His palm struck Ronan’s chest with the force of a stampede, lifting him from his feet and hurling him across the chamber. Stone met bone with a brutal thud, and the air tore from Ronan’s lungs in a ragged, choking gasp.

James could only watch in mounting terror—Elara sprawled senseless on the floor, Lyssandra bloodied and trembling, Ronan writhing like a fish gasping on dry land. His thoughts spun in tight, frantic circles, chasing an escape that would not appear. The Mendacium began to chant, a low, throbbing sound that seemed to come from the stone itself, reverberating through the chamber like a pulse of doom.

Above, hidden in the shadows, Darian saw it all—like a tragic play unfolding on a stage.

A war raged inside him. He could vanish, slip back into the dark and pretend none of this mattered. The blades were his—ancient artefacts of mysterious power. He could leave, find a new life, disappear without a trace.

But below, crimson streaked the face of the woman with ocean-blue eyes, and the strangers who had somehow carved their way into his guarded life were being cut down like prey. Even Ronan—whom he despised—pulled at him with a strange, unwelcome camaraderie.

He remembered a conversation with Elara that first night, her warning that a choice would come. He'd laughed it off then, but now he understood.

“What’s the point of saving the world,” he muttered, “if I’m not there to see it?” Darian knew, even as he said it, that he was no longer the man that could view life through such a narrow lens.

He looked at his seared hands in the dim light, then set down the grey pack. Inside was the prize they had come for.

Elara still lay unconscious, yet in the churn of his thoughts, he heard her voice:

“To love is to die to yourself. Everything else is survival. You know this better than most.”

“Yes, old woman,” he whispered, his gaze locked on Lyssandra. A rare smile crossed his face—part joy, part sorrow, part surrender.

He drew a long, deep breath, and then he moved. Years of training, distilled into a moment of perfect focus.

By the time he exhaled, four Mendacium lay dead, knives jutting from their chests. A heartbeat later, the rest crumpled to the floor, freed from the torment of their enslaved existence. Confusion erupted. Guards scanned the shadows beyond the torchlight, seeking the ghost who had cut through them.

“How about you pick a fight with a real man?” Darian called, stepping from concealment.

“You!” Arcimendax roared, flames bursting from his body, casting violent shadows across the room.

Darian didn’t linger. He turned and fled, letting the darkness take him one last time.

The sudden chaos was all Kae needed. From his kneeling position - momentarily ignored in the uproar - he surged upward, yanking a blade from a guard's belt and driving it deep beside the man's spine. He twisted, and the guard crumpled.

James reacted instantly, lunging at the guard between himself and Kae. He slammed into him, knocking the man off balance - just enough for Kae's blade to flash again, slicing clean across his neck.

James rolled forward, snatching the knife from the fallen guard's grip. In the next heartbeat, he and Kae stood back-to-back, weapons raised, as the remaining guards closed in, forming a tightening circle.

The soldiers may have gone, but there were still too many for two novices to hold. One guard spotted James's brief lapse in focus and lunged, blade poised, only for the weapon to slip from his hands mid-stride.

Across the room, Elara stood upright, terrifying and wonderful, her hands spread toward the encircling men. One by one, they staggered, clutching their heads, before collapsing. Lyssandra darted forward, snatching a knife from the nearest body, her breath ragged.

Moments later, silence fell, broken only by the harsh breathing of the companions. The air was thick with the copper tang of blood. The torches hissed and guttered as though in a sudden downdraft. Somewhere not too far off,

a faint curse coiled through the silence like smoke, crawling under their skin and prickling the back of their necks.

“You alright?” James asked, glancing at Elara, who still swayed on her feet.

She lifted a finger, her gaze distant, as if listening to some unseen voice.

“Darian, take that staircase. Between the two columns you’ll find a grey bag,” she said.

Then, turning back to James, she added dryly, “I’ll live.”

“Same here,” Lyssandra said, though her wide eyes betrayed the shock still etched into her.

When Darian returned, James met the eyes of each companion in turn.

“Grab what you must,” he said. “The sooner we leave this place, the better.”

Behind them, the scent of sulphur lingered, stubborn and malevolent. Somewhere deep within the stone, a low pulse throbbed - like a heartbeat - and the faint echo of that curse slithered through the air, cold and knowing, promising this was far from over.

Chapter 19

The Gate.

James, Elara, Kae, Ronan, and Lyssandra had been running for an hour, trying to put as much distance as possible between them and the temple.

There had been a mid-stride debate about going after Darian, but a quick rebuttal confirmed what they all suspected - even with the blades in their possession, they were likely no match for Arcimendax.

Then Elara stopped. She tilted her head, as if hearing a whisper carried across the ocean. Time froze as the companions waited on her, eyes heavy with concern and fatigue.

Slow seconds passed until, in silence, Elara began to cry. Her companions waited, but in truth, they already knew. Darian was gone. He never stood a chance - not going head-to-head with an immortal demon, a destroyer of worlds.

Lyssandra's eyes swelled with tears, and James, Ronan, and Kae sat down heavily on the boulders that lay sprawled across the countryside.

"It was a close thing," Elara said quietly. "But in the end, he chose well."

She looked to Lyssandra. New tears welled as old answers gave way to fresh questions. This was the way of life.

"Self-sacrifice was not part of Darian's vocabulary," Elara whispered, honouring the sanctity of the moment. "But today, he rewrote his story."

Kae shifted his weight and pulled a tiny flask from a hidden pocket. He unscrewed the top and tilted the contents into his mouth. Wiping his lips, he held it out to the next companion.

"To Darian," he said.

"To Darian," the friends echoed, passing around the flask.

For the next hour, the group sat in silence, resting and wrestling with their own demons, trying to make sense of the future and their role in it.

It was Elara who broke the silence.

"Anyone with any ideas?" she asked.

Kae opened the grey bag that Ronan had laid on the ground between them, drawing out the black daggers. As he moved them around in a feigned cut and slice, they gave off a strange, prickling sensation. He shook his head.

“I am too simple a man for all of this madness,” he said, gesturing to the blades.

“Perhaps that’s the point. We’re all regular people, living regular lives...” Ronan offered.

The group looked at him, and then at each other, before bursting into strained, cathartic laughter.

“Ronan,” James chuckled, “there’s just about nothing ordinary about any of our lives. At least not now.”

Tears followed the laughter, unbidden but welcomed, emotions long held at bay finally spilling free.

“This much is true. I’ve heard it said that a slave is anyone who waits for someone else to come and free them,” Elara said.

“The world is changing. Things that should have been vanquished long ago, still prevail. And unless we - this ordinary group of people - do something about it, we’ll be spectators at the end of yet another world.”

After a moment of reflection, James replied, “I’m many things, but I’m no spectator.”

“Hear, hear,” said Ronan.

Lyssandra nodded in quiet agreement.

Above, a drift of clouds passed before the sun, casting a flare of light that reminded her of the white orb and how close Arcimendax had come to obtain it.

With bloodied hands, she reached behind her neck, unclasped the necklace, and let it coil into her palm.

For a moment, the group simply sat and stared at the odd artifact. Then something changed.

The blood encrusting the orb began to liquify, drawn toward the white sphere. It circled the orb in widening crimson rings, like moons orbiting a planet. The orb hummed and lifted from her hand, vibrating with energy. The rings spun faster, white and gold light interweaving with the crimson.

“What’s - ” Lyssandra started, stumbling backward as the orb grew in size, spinning wildly.

“I don’t know, but we should definitely stand back!” warned Elara.

A brilliant flash erupted, searing the air with light so intense that phantom images danced behind their eyes. James felt as though he were staring directly into the sun, yet he couldn’t look away.

Then - silence.

And where the orb had floated, a translucent doorway now hung in midair.

Through it, a different landscape shimmered: lush green vegetation, blue skies scattered with soft clouds, and distant mountains that did not belong to Meridia.

James slowly moved forward, never taking his eyes off the doorway.

“Is that - ?” Kae began.

“I think so,” James answered.

A moment passed. James shifted his weight, cast one final glance at the temple in the distance, then stepped through the doorway.

Elara, Lyssandra, Kae, and Ronan exchanged raised brows.

“I suppose he means we should follow?” Lyssandra asked.

“Unless you’d rather go home, take a shower, and meet here again tomorrow?” Elara jested.

One by one, the companions stepped through.

When Kae, last to enter, planted his feet on the other side, the doorway vanished with a soft *pop*, and the white orb dropped gently to the grassy meadow.

Lyssandra bent to pick it up. As she rose, she noticed a pair of brown sandals standing before her.

Her gaze lifted.

A man in a white robe stood before her, a golden circlet at his waist. His eyes were kind, ancient, and impossibly

gracious. He smiled, and peace flooded her heart like rain that touched the land after years of drought.

James stepped forward beside her, recognition dawning in his expression.

“It’s about time,” Eli said warmly, “We’ve been expecting you.”