

(Dunno if this counts, but) for Nick Bostrom...  
Thank you so much for “The Fable of the Dragon-Tyrant.”  
Even I did not expect it to be this huge and fruitful...

# Chapter 1

“Acid?”

“Check.”

“Freeze?”

“Check.”

“Fire?”

“Check.”

“Smoke?”

“Check.”

“Good.” Said his father. “Now finish the packing and let us go.”

“Father, are we really going to do it...?” Said Joulr.

He slapped Joulr, swinging his hand fast. Joulr shrieked with pain, almost sobbing, but he held his tears back. “Do not question! Finish the packing and then we will go!”

“Y-Yes, father...” stuttered Joulr. Deen then walked leaving him. He still held his tears, considering that his hearing is sharp. He finished packing his bag, full of potions, and followed his father.

“Oh!” Almost forgetting it, he went to the table next to his bed, where he put his mother’s photo on it. He swept his tears off his eyes. “Hey, Mom... just wanna say... we’re going out to kill the dragon... I don’t know if it’s even possible, but... can you wish us luck... I’m sorry if...”

The dam crumbled down. He knelt in front of the photo. He somehow hoped that his mother would *actually* show up and hugged him from behind, although he was fully aware that it was impossible...

“JOULR!” shouted his father. He wiped his tears off and stopped crying — which took quite a while — and immediately went downstairs with his bag.

As he went downstairs, he heard someone else saying, "... not killing *the weakness*. It's *accepting the weakness and living with it for the rest of your life...* hi there, Joulr."

"Mr. Lips. Good morning..." greeted Joulr.

"Hurry! We're leaving!" his father was obviously not pleasant with Mr. Lips' presence. He walked out of the house, without even saying farewell to Mr. Lips. Joulr followed, "See you later, Mr. Lips..."

He heard Mr. Lips saying, "Be careful!" They didn't even close the door. His father was already away, Joulr had to run to follow his pace.



The sun hadn't even risen; it was few minutes left, anytime. He greatly rubbed his black-purple stick onto the ground. The friction made the stick combusted in red, bright fire, to brighten their path. He looked back: Joulr was following him.

"Keep up."

"Y-Yes, father." Stuttered Joulr.

He sighed. He couldn't help but recall Mr. Lips' words before they were going...

He immediately shook them off, as he literally shook his head.

It was quiet, since the sun hadn't risen. There were no people on the road; obviously, they were asleep. Deen could imagine themselves frowning in their sleep and moving around in fear, even occasionally waking up with screams. *This will end soon...*

Near the exit of the village, he saw more warriors — in various classes — already waiting for them. In total, there were about a hundred people, more or less. Some were in complete iron armor, with swords on their waists. Some were wearing hoods and robes, half of them with staffs, while some carried nothing. Some had bows and arrows on their backs, with daggers sacked on their belts. Some of them carried big bags, and prepared some glass-bombs on their belts.

What brought him to surprise, was King Brice. He didn't wear a royal cloak, as usual; instead, he wore a simple dress and robe, like an ordinary person among all of his people.

"My King!" He ran away to his front and bowed down. Joulr was behind a bit late, he ran following him, but then stumbled on a rock and fell down.

King Brice immediately ran toward Joulr, and helped him standing. "Are you alright, son?"

"Joulr! Don't embarrass yourself!" scolded Deen.

"I-I-I deeply apologize..." Joulr fell down to bow down, but King Brice stopped him.

"It's not a problem." said King Brice. "No need to bow down. I'm just a man."

"But, My King..."

"The status of king *means nothing if this fails*, Deen." cut King Brice firmly. "This is the only army left of us defeat that abomination."

Deen looked back. There were only about a hundred people. One of them, a warrior, opened his helmet. It turned out to be Eddorn. "The King is right. That abomination has defeated many of our fellows. We're the ones that are left. The ones who can fight..."

Deen naturally gulped. The latest army sent to kill the abomination was about ten thousand fighters, from warriors to healers. None of them returned.

"Look at the good side. Everyone here is the elite ones." one of them said.

"I know. I honestly have a confidence that this time... we will win." said Eddorn.

Everyone else cheered, encouraging each other. Meanwhile, Deen grinned, *Indeed! We will win, definitely!* He looked at Joulr, who was still afraid and nervous; King Brice put his hand on his shoulder.

"What are you doing? Do you not think that we will win?!" shouted Deen.

Joulr squealed, "N-No, father..."

"Deen, don't be too hard on your son." said King Brice.

"My apology, My King." bowed Deen.

"Joulr... Joulr, isn't it?" comforted King Brice.

"Y-Yes..." squeaked Joulr; he wouldn't even look at his eyes.

"Why don't you join them for a while?"

“Y-Yes, My King...” He walked clumsily toward the group, Eddord and the others, who had known him, greeted him, as well.

“Deen!” said King Brice. Low, but sharp.

“Yes, My King.”

“You just lost your wife... *look at me in the eyes!*”

Slowly, he lifted his head, looking at his eyes. “You just lost your wife... but he also just lost her mother.” said King Brice. “He needs a father, to help him grief, not scold him instead.”

“I understand...”

“Do you!?” said King Brice, firmer. “I know you when you *do* understand...”

He stopped for a while, and then continued calmer, “I’ll be honest... I don’t know what it feels like to feel loss... but, I know enough, when I say that, it’s... it’s changing you worse...”

He put his hand on his shoulder, as if they were ordinary people. “My King...”

“Here, I’m not a king. Have I not said that already?” Said King Brice. “Do not let grief blind you. I don’t like this person in front of me... you would not like it at all.”

“I understand...” He almost called him King Brice, but managed to hold it.

King Brice sighed heavily. “No, you don’t...”

Deen frowned. Probably for the first time, he was confused with King Brice; usually, he always said to people with transparency, and without confusion. King Brice seemed frustrated, and exhausted as well. He simply said, “Don’t be too hard on him. That’s all I can say.”

He then said the everyone, “Usually, I found fear in the armies, before they went out to kill the abomination. But, here, I see brave men and women. The best elite fighters in the kingdom... I see hope as well...”

They cheered. “But do remember... your family in homes. Your husbands, or your wives, or your children...”

He turned back to Deen for a while only, before continuing, “They’re waiting for you to come home in victory. They’re waiting for you... TO DRAG THAT DRAGON’S HEAD ALONG THE

WAY HOME!”

The cheers turned sharply into shouts of joy and encouragement. It was quite loud to wake the people in the houses. They lifted their hands or their weapons and staffs, even jumping around. King Brice said loudly, “Now go and defeat that abomination! And may the Lady of Luck bless us a good luck!”

Still cheering, but soon enough, they began their journey. There were about ten wagons carrying weapons and big glass-bombs, each one with two horses. As they went toward the forest, Joulr came toward his father.

“Remember what I said.” said King Brice. “Not as a king... I’m saying to you as father, to a father.”

“Yes...” said Deen. He then hesitated, before whispering to his ears, “Are you considering on taking the offer...?”

“*Do not!*” said King Brice, also whispering, but much more frightened. The previously encouraging sound disappeared within a blink. “I don’t want to think about it!”

“Father...” said Joulr. He was still frightened to his own father. Just after King Brice advised him, only then could he see his son’s face. He was grieving, at the same time, fearing on looking at his face, or so he thought. Joulr wanted to look at his face, but then looked down again.

*I’ve been terrible...?* He sighed, trying to calm himself, and said, as gentle as he could, despite that he was still furious, “Come, Joulr.”



“I mean, it’s ridiculous! There’s no way you can measure a circle... Deen!”

Eddorn waved to behind, toward Deen and Joulr. They had to pick up their pace to walk along with them. “Eddorn. How is your family?”

“It wasn’t easy.” admitted Eddorn. “The little ones woke up just before I left. I promised them that I would go back home with strawberries.”

They just walked past arbutus bushes. He added, “After going back home, of course.”

Deen said nothing. He simply looked ahead, before Joulr came to him and greeted, “Sir Eddorn.”

“Joulr.” replied Eddorn, smiling widely to him. “How are you holding up?”

“I’m good...” said Joulr.

“It’s okay to say that you’re *not good*.” said Eddorn instantly. “You just bore a horrible happening.”

He threw a sharp, rebuking look to Deen. *So he knew as well...* “It’s a very... well, I don’t have the words for it, other than ‘horrible.’ I can only say that... we’ll avenge your mom. I promise that, too.”

He looked at Eddorn. At that time, something struck Deen’s eyes. “Ugh...!” It was sunlight; they had been walking toward east. The sun just rose and began bathing them all with sunlight, as if the world confirmed and sealed Eddorn’s promise to Joulr. The group cheered and were awed seeing the sunrise. Eddorn, Deen, and Joulr were the ones at the end of the line.

The light was like a very sharp thousand spears, thrown from the sun itself, toward their eyes, blinding. It could even pierce through the gaps between the leaves, as they walked through forest. Slowly, but surely, the darkness evaporated, and the leaves began to show its color. The sky also began showing its morning color, thanks to the sunlight. It then became green and teal, with invisible, but definite yellow. Deen admitted, it was indeed beautiful in its own way.

“Why are you so sullen?” said Eddorn, looking at his face.

Deen sighed. “This... we will face the abomination. It would be much better if we weren’t marching toward it...”

“Why the pessimism? Don’t you think we will win?” said Eddorn.

“I...” At a glimpse, he was indeed feeling pessimistic. He somehow felt betrayed by himself, since he was spirited just few moments ago. But he knew that there was something else behind it; he just couldn’t explain it in words. “I do not know... I do hope that we will win...”

“Hope!? I know we will win! I know we win!” said Eddorn. He pointed at the wagons. “We even have that nasty acid stuff there!”

“Death’s Breath...” murmured Deen. Even thinking about it made Deen felt disgusted. It was still clear in his mind, when it accidentally got onto *her* arm...

“Not just acidic. It’s been upgraded...”

"I know." said Deen. "I made it too... partly."

"What do you mean, not just acidic?" asked Joulr.

"It is also poisonous, and flammable." said Deen. "It is the nastiest gas we have ever made, perhaps in the entirety of humans' history."

"It will destroy the abomination from the outside and the inside." said Eddorn. "And also burn it. Again, inside and outside."

"How long will it burn?" asked Joulr.

"Days." answered Deen. "Over a thousand Celcius degrees. Our thermometer can't measure higher than a thousand, after all."

"That's amazing." said Joulr.

"See? Even your son is amazed!" said Eddorn. "That abomination can't stand all that damages!"

Deen simply nodded. There was still doubt in his heart. *If that is the case, why would King Brice actually consider the offer...?*

Nevertheless, he didn't want to think much about it. He preferred seeing the results practically...



"Remember the plan, everyone."

The group of about a hundred split up. Deen and Joulr was with other five people: three wizards, a hunter, and another chemist. They all waited above the ground, on the two trees which had been marked. Each one was quite distant, about the width of the abomination and some extra meters. Deen and Joulr were with a wizard, while the rest were on another tree, both sides facing each other. He could barely see them, even though it was already sunny morning.

"Cheer up." said the wizard; Deen hadn't known his name, but it didn't matter to him.

"I still think this can go wrong..." responded Deen.

As response, he slapped on his cheek. It was quite hard, it stunned him and Joulr. "Don't



fucking do that! You piece of shit!”

Joulr was mad — for the first time after the loss, he saw Joulr getting mad. The wizard turned away to the direction where they predicted the abomination would come from, completely ignoring them, as if he did nothing wrong. He was about to grab a glass-bomb, and smash it onto his head, but Deen stopped him, and shook his head. *Not worth it.*

So he tried to ease himself up and let go his anger, obeying his father.

There was a sound of something broken, unnaturally loud, after few minutes of silence. “There it is! Get ready!”

He pointed his staff down, toward Death’s Breath, ready to pick and throw it. The abomination was nowhere to be seen, but he could hear its roar and loud stomping sounds, quite loud.

“Wait for my cue.” Said the wizard. “They’ll wait for my cue as well.”

Deen couldn’t tell how he would cue them, but he was too tense to ask it. He and Joulr grabbed two glass-bombs of acid. “Aim the eyes, don’t panic.” He reminded Joulr. “Don’t regret on missed throws. Just focus on throwing the next one on target.”

“Yes, father.” Said Joulr.

“And get rid of that negative thought.” Said the wizard with sarcasm. “We don’t have time for that.”

The abomination was still far, but the roar and stomp sounds were already loud, each second of it actually scared him to his heart (both figuratively and literally). It then got louder, meaning that the abomination came closer toward them. “Closer!”

But then, it got lower. Obviously, the abomination got further from them.

“Did the abomination... run away?” Said the wizard.

“It seems like it...” Said Joulr.

“No, no, no, no, no, no, no, no, no, no, IT CAN’T BE!” The wizard got frantic, almost taking his staff away from Death’s Breath. “What the fuck are they doing?! They should send it toward here!”

“Maybe there’s a problem...” Said Joulr. As if the abomination confirmed what he thought, the sounds went even lower and quieter.

“Oh, fucking seriously!?” Shouted the wizard.

“Calm down...”

“How the fuck would I calm down!?” Shouted the wizard.

“Remember the plan! No matter what, stick to the plan!” Said Deen. “Or have you forgotten?”

The wizard obviously wanted to reply, even probably slapping him again. But he turned out to be able to hold himself calm. “F... So what now!?”

“We stay. Our job is only to bath the abomination with Death’s Breath.” Said Deen. “Their job is to bring the abomination here.”

“And what if they fail!?” Said the wizard.

He resisted himself from slapping him in return. “You just said to get rid of negative thoughts...”

“Shut up!” Said the wizard, but with blushed cheeks. Deen snuffed. *Huh! He turned from calm and confident to pessimistic and panicked just in seconds.*

“I can’t barely hear the sounds!” Said Joulr, and he was right. The sounds were almost unheard now, as if it was just a small dragon. “Something is wrong...”

“Of course! It all went wrong! We should be done already right now!” Said the wizard. He no longer pointed his staff toward Death’s Breath. Instead, he pointed it toward the source of the voice, and closed his eyes.

“What is he doing?” asked Joulr.

“Seeing what actually happened up ahead.” answered Deen. “One of the perks of a wizard.”

He opened his eyes, “Rugan’s spear, the dragon...”

The previous franticness was nothing compared to what was in his face after seeing ahead. Deen got curious, “What? What is it?”

Before he forced the wizard to answer his question, he realized that the surrounding got brighter in a short time. It was already bright with the sunlight, but apparently, there showed up another source of light. It was red, and it grew brighter, and hotter as well.

He turned back. It started from a fireball, which looked small at first. But as it approached, it grew even bigger.

“RUN!”

What was on his mind at that second was grabbing Joulr and jumping to another tree, even though it was seriously dangerous. Fortunately, he made it to the branch of the next tree, big and strong enough to step on. Unfortunately, Joulr wasn't agile as he was. He didn't get to the next tree. Deen held his hand tight as possible, and thanks to adrenaline, pulled him up to the branch.

“COME ON...!”

The wizard was obviously too panicked to react at all. The fireball hit Death's Breath, and blasted everything around it. The impulse alone pushed Deen and Joulr off the tree, and the fire almost gulped them. As result, they were thrown away to another tree, quite far from their position. It did hurt, having their stomachs hit by the branch. One of the glass-bombs cracked; he simply took it off his belt, and threw it away.

But Deen realized what their biggest problem was. “GET UP! THE DEATH'S BREATH...!”

Joulr, understanding that, followed him. They got down the tree, and ran away from the position of Death's Breath. “DON'T LOOK BACK!” He screamed to Joulr, as the roar and stomp sounds returned loud.

He automatically remembered when it accidentally hit her wife's hand. It hit her skin, before it got her hand wholly...

Despite that he warned Joulr not to look back, he himself wanted to, to see how close they were to the gas. But then, there was a tendril of root ahead of him, popping out of the ground. Spotting it, he avoided the root. He decided to keep running away.



*Supposedly, it's just fifty meters...* panted Deen. “I think it's safe now...” He stopped running and turned back.

He was alone.

“Joulr?”

Behind him was the forest, burnt, covered in smoke, and corroded by its acid, in massive destruction. It turned out that he was just few meters from its range. But he didn't see other people than himself.

“Joulr?” He walked slowly, going around the damaged part of the forest. His eyes keenly searched for a movement or a shape of a boy, aside from falling branches and the fire itself.

The fire and the smoke then disappeared. They both were sucked up to the sky. He didn't bother to see what or who sucked it. Seeing that the forest was free of the fire and the smoke, he started walking into the damaged part.

“Joulr?” he still walked and searched. The vibration of the ground didn't mind him; it shook the ground greatly at first, but slowly reducing, and then stopped. The air was a bit sour, but he didn't mind it. The only thing he had in his mind was walking and searching.

## Chapter 2

His mind was the first thing that woke up. He slowly opened his eyes. The sun wasn't risen yet. His wife was still sleeping.

*Oh, she finally slept...* thought Hower.

He sighed as he rose slowly from his bed. His whole body was excessively weak, he decided to crawl instead of walking. He went to his wardrobe, and switched his dress. All had been done quietly and quickly; he didn't want to wake his wife at all.

Finishing his dressing, he went to the bathroom. *I can't go out like this. Maybe water on my face would wake me up completely.*

There was a big bucket full of water inside the bathroom. He took a handful with his hands, and splashed it onto his face. He coughed, because of the water inside his nose. He looked out with panic, and held his breath. It seemed to him that they hadn't awakened by his cough.

*Good. It's time to leave.*

He quickly left the house; he thought he heard a grunt from inside the bedroom.



*I regrettably announced that the warriors... the last warriors in the kingdom... our last hope... has failed.*

*We were so certain...*



He walked in silence, wearing his hood. There was no one on the roads...

"Hower." called a familiar voice. Reluctantly, he turned back.

"Mr. Lips." greeted Hower. He couldn't look at him in the eyes.

"So you're selected...?" said Mr. Lips. He sighed and shook his head in sadness. Somehow,

it triggered him.

*"Thank you for your pity, Arold."* said Hower, angry. "Now, if you excuse me..."

"Hower, have you said farewell...?"

"My family is not your business!" shouted Hower.

"I'm so sorry, Hower..." said Mr. Lips. Hower decided to ignore him and increase his pace. He kept calling several times, but Hower kept walking away from the village, into the forest.



*Previously, the... the dragon has offered a deal...*



He turned out to be the first that came to the place. The soldiers had already stood by at the barren ground.

"Ah, Hower. You're early." Said a man sitting at his desk. He began writing on a paper, next to a thick pile of papers.

"Get it done already..." Scolded Hower, trying to be calm and nice.

"Alright, then." said the historian. He looked at the paper; his name was written on the top, with a note next to it.

It felt like a gut punch onto his stomach. He suddenly felt heavy, ready to fall faint. The historian seemed to notice it, as he said, "Try to relax. I imagine it won't hurt."

As reply, Hower stared at him straight in the eyes. The historian simply wrote and ignored his stare, like nothing was wrong. He looked around: there were quite a lot of soldiers around, some of them even stared at them both openly, so he resisted himself from *exploding*.

"Yes... Hower deStrat. Forty-one years old. The only son of Harold and Lianna deStrat. The husband of Sarah deStrat. The father of Lianna deStrat Junior."

He knuckled his hands, and breathed to calm himself down, but even he himself realized that it didn't do much.

“Issue... debts...” Continued the historian. He smiled, but it wasn’t the kind that expressed sincerity and kindness. It was rather a default kind, expressing ignorance and a sort of emptiness, even. “Well, thank you for the registration, Hower. You can wait inside.”

He pointed at a huge steel cage, at his left. It was on a huge flat wagon, with wheels, attached with lots of horses. The height was just enough for people, without having to crouch down. The width and the length could contain up to a thousand, and few hundreds extra if cramped up. There was nothing and no one, yet, inside the cage.



*We have no choice but to comply...*



The only thing he could do, was watching from inside the cage.

Soon enough, lots of people, from his village, and others, came for *the registration*. Most were old, but there were also some adults, about his age; Hower suspected that they also had immense debts to the kingdom. Only few came with their families, and most came alone. *The cage* was quickly filled. As he guessed, *they all* were devastated and frightened.

There were also several times when some of the villagers fought against the king’s soldiers. Predictably, they all ended up losing the fight and being beaten up, just enough to give up their furious will. The soldiers moved fast to stop the fights; none of them were dead.

By his estimation, he guessed that there were about a thousand and five hundred. He barely had any space to breath, much less moving around freely. It was even harder *to ignore* all the wails and screams of those in *the cage*. Every family already left the place, all while crying and cursing as well. The soldiers as well prepared for the travel. The historian himself was nowhere to be seen.

He could hear the rider whipping the horses. Slowly, *the cage* started to be pulled. *Finally, it has been... about fucking half an hour...*

It was slow at first, but it also gained speed; at first, Hower thought that it was too heavy for the horses. Everything on the place was taken out. There was no mark at all proving that there were lots of people in the place, apart from the footprints. They soon left the place.

He spotted two people coming to that place, when he was already far away from the place.

He couldn't see them; he was already too far, and the sun blocked his sight. One of them was a child, and the other one was an adult, likely a woman.



*We will begin the offering tomorrow...*



But the next second, the cage was covered by something black; Hower thought that it was rather giant black cloth, with magic. Everyone screamed and swore, and they most certainly began panicking and pushing each other away, trying to get out of the cage. Hower could only cling himself onto the side of the cage, and stay shut. He once felt a punch onto the back of his head, which made him slightly dizzy. He shouted, "FUCK OFF!" but his shout was covered by screams from everyone else. It was completely dark, so out of rage, he decided to cling on the cage with one hand, faced against the cage, and punched and kicked whoever in front of him. He heard a woman grunting of pain, when he swung a kick, but her wellbeing was the last thing Hower had in his mind.

*I'm so sorry... The faces of his wife and his daughter uncontrollably flooded into his mind. I shouldn't...*

Something clicked in his head. *Of course! Why haven't I thought of that?*

Someone else managed to grab his hand. He decided to stop clinging on the cage, and began rampaging out of control to anyone around him. As result, he got punched several times, but he didn't hesitate to reply it violently. Soon later, he began using teeth to tear anything his mouth could reach. Although he couldn't get much to bite and tear, he kept fighting with everything in and of his body, as best as possible, to make as much of wreck as he could.



*The dragon demands one or two thousand people as offering to itself, everyday. Regardless of the age, status, and sex. If the quota is not filled per day, the dragon threatens to kill ten thousand people.*

*We have no choice other than to comply...*





The black blanket was lifted, and the cage disappeared; it took a while for his eyes to see, after unknown amount of time in the darkness. It turned out that the damages he had done wasn't as bad as he thought. They all fell down, like sand being poured out of a bucket. They all looked at the direction, slightly mesmerized, but mostly terrified.

## Chapter 2.5

Up to eight hundred people were standing, each forming into a huge single group, all gathering tightly with each other. On the other hand, the soldiers and knights of the kingdom stood around them, their eyes watching sharply, as if anyone of them would suddenly run away and try to escape. Slowly, one by one, they formed into a single line, in order to register their names, stating their names, their parents' names, addresses, birth dates, and their reasons for *the selection*.

"Exactly one thousand?" said Brice.

"Exactly one thousand." Answered Mopy. "There are actually more than three thousand, but we decide to keep them for the next day's portion."

Brice and his minister stood on a hill, looking down at the big group in the middle of the valley. He noticed that some of them were chained. Seeing their bruises on their faces, he could guess that they were previously trying to escape.

"Some are resisting, I see..." said Brice.

"Yes, but we've taken control of them." Said Mopy. "We're considering on whether we should put them to sleep when we give them to the drag — *The Great Dragon*. I imagine that *The Great Dragon* wouldn't like to eat iron shackles." He ended it with a chuckle.

"Very well." Nodded Brice. "What about the people we didn't get to register? Any progress on that?"

"We're still working on that, My King. Some cities are not pleased when we request the list of civilians." Answered Mopy. "They're actually rebelling against the kingdom army..."

"Hhhh..." sighed Brice, closing his eyes.

"But we're suppressing them as we speak, although it might take while..." continued Mopy.

"See if they can keep some of them alive. Having two or three people to feed the — *The Great Dragon* should be helpful." Said Brice.

“Already did, My King.” Said Mopy, bowing down. “It might be difficult, but we’ll be doing our best.”

Brice, saying nothing further, looked down on the crowd. There was a boy, about eleven years old, to his guess, which were chained as well. With his glasses, he could see that there were bruises on his faces; even one of his eyes was swollen. However, he turned his gaze toward the hill, the very one where Brice stood. Although he knew that there was no way the boy knew who were on the hill, he had a feeling that the boy was actually glaring at him, knowing well that they were having eye contact with each other. In a way, he even reminded Brice of Joulr, Deen’s only son.

Something sparked up within Brice’s heart. It was something new, something that he had never experienced before.

“That kid... bring him to me...” said Brice.

“My King...?”

“You heard me. Bring me to my room. Go find another replacement in his position.” Said Brice firmly. He turned and walked away, saying, “Now, you’re saying that some cities are rebelling?”



“You didn’t tell me it was this intense...”

“My apologies, My King...”

Plenty of rubbles and broken armors, as well as bodies, were all scattered on the ground. Half of them were of soldiers, while the rest were civilians, who clearly fought against the kingdom’s army. He even spotted some of the limbs completely separate from the respective bodies. There were fire and acid all around as the residue of the battlefield, in the midst of the city nonetheless, although none of them were threatening at the moment. Some soldiers and civilians were picking up whatever they could save and salvage, from weapons to wounded soldiers. Brice himself had to look from afar, at the balcony of his private mansion in Dusai, accompanied by Mopy, and three knights as bodyguards. Again, he used a balcony.

However, as far as he could see, most of the wounded were those of the soldiers.

“Where are the rebels?” asked Brice.

“We only managed to catch five of them. Most of them were already defeated, while those we managed to capture already committed suicide. Only a few managed to escape.” Said Sir Quirrel, the knight next to him.

“I thought that you were ordered to capture as many as you can.” Said Brice.

“Yes, My King. My deepest apologies, because these civilians proved to be harder to catch than we thought.”

Brice lifted his eyebrows. “Really? That hard?” said Brice, a bit skeptical, but he then looked back to the sight of the battlefield in front of him, which was a strong proof of the knight’s argument.

“We will find and capture them, My King. By your order.” Said Sir Quirrel.

“Anyway, what of the consensus data?” asked Brice.

“We obtained it, My King. They’re sorting and listing it out as we speak.” Said Mopy.

“I take it that these revolting people... are aware of what we intend to do?” frowned Brice. “Seems convenient...”

“We’re actually tasked with collecting more people from this city. The consensus data was an additional assignment to us. Although, if I’m to opine, it rather seems that they acted out of reflex, considering that they saw a company of soldiers marching to the city.” Said Sir Quirrel.

“Ah, I see...” nodded Brice.

“Regardless of that, the issue is solved. We managed to collect up to a hundred people.” Said Sir Quirrel.

“And we’ll list the people whom we didn’t get to list previously.” Said Mopy.

“Good, good...” said Brice, feeling a bit exhausted for some reason. “Good job, my knights. Your loyalty is appreciated.”

“Thank you, My King.” Said Sir Quirrel.

“But... if I may...” continued Sir Quirrel, “about the recompense...?”

“I’ve said it, and I’ve meant it. *Your families and relatives will be spared.*” Answered Brice.

“You get the scrolls already, don’t you?”

“Yes, we have, My King. Our deepest gratitude, My King.” The three knights immediately bowed down.

“Now, leave me alone.” Said Brice, looking at Mopy. “I’d like to have a private moment with my minister.”

“Certainly, My King.” The three knights immediately left them both, as Mopy snapped his finger. Although it was invisible, he knew that the sound barrier was set onto both of them, blocking their voices from being heard outside the balcony.

“So... how did they react when you tell them the deals?” asked Brice.

“Excited. Relieved. Probably a bit conflicted, but it doesn’t seem like they’d think twice about it.” Said Mopy. “There are some who don’t look pleased with the proposal, but we can take care of that. I can guarantee that most of them will not turn on you, My King.”

“But we might still need to take their bodies when their families and relatives die, or pass their due time...” argued Brice.

“Of course, and that can be arranged as well. Discreetly.” Replied Mopy.

Brice took a step away from him, although it didn’t have anything to do with what he felt toward Mopy. As he took a look on the battlefield, he happened to see a woman, about thirty years old, helping a soldier walk away to a medic post. From afar, she looked a bit sorrowful, but also cheerful and hopeful, probably to encourage and comfort the soldier.

“And you’re sure this is the right decision...?”

“Unfortunately, My King, at this moment and time, we need as many manpower as we can, in support of My King yourself.” Said Mopy. “The last fight against *The Great Dragon* costed so many of us, and still ended up in failure. And now, we’re surrendering ourselves to *The Great Dragon*. There will be many people that disagree with that decision — this battle itself is the proof of it. You’ll need people who’s willing to side with you.”

“But I... I thought that *The Great Dragon* is already behind me...” stuttered Brice.

“By authority, yes. But people are not listening to you, nor to *The Great Dragon*. At least, not yet.” Said Mopy. “Not immediately. Imagine if all of the knights and the lords revolted against

you, because all their families would be given to *The Great Dragon*. What would *The Great Dragon* most likely do in response of that?"

"He would storm down and decimated everyone by *Himself...*" answered Brice.

"Exactly, My King. That's not pretty at all. That's the worst outcome that could possibly happen." Replied Mopy. "We — *you* need to maintain and show them your power. Maintain order amidst chaotic moments, not total obliteration."

Brice sighed. "Understood. Good point... I trust that you're handling that?"

"Yes, My King."

"Very well," Brice waved his hand. Mopy snapped his finger again, and the sound barrier was removed.

The sensation emerged again.

"That woman... the one who is carrying a soldier... I want her brought onto my room. Captive, of course."

Mopy paused for a while, before continuing, "Yes, My King..."

Brice walked away from the balcony, as he said, "Well, then, if there's nothing else..."



The mother was shocked. Because there was a small sack of gold right in front of her, just slightly bigger than her own palm.

"J-Just this much...?" said the mother. The children around her, as she sat down, took a look at the small sack, looking curious and confused.

"It's the amount of the available saving from Mr. Batten, ma'am..." said the clerk.

"But it's not, isn't it...?" said Brice.

Brice and Mopy sat on security room, watching the clerk lobby through a device of remote vision on the corner of the lobby, only by the two of them. They focused on the service for a Mrs. Batten. With a single glance, it was apparent that she had been crying repeatedly; even as this moment, she seemed like she was about to break down and cry again in front of the clerk.

“We’re running low on finance, unfortunately...” started Mopy.

“I know, no need to remind me.” Grunted Brice. “Just tell me what the purchases are, what they are for, whatever it is...”

“Well, I’m not an expert on this topic, to be honest.” Said Mopy. “My guess is, they’re ingredients.”

“Ingredients for what?” frowned Brice, suspicious and confused.

“We still don’t know. I’ve consulted with the chemists, and they’re not sure either. It appears that *The Great Dragon* wants us to make something for Him.” Said Mopy. “*He* hasn’t given us further orders, though. Right now, we can only buy the ingredients and store them.”

“The sellers didn’t bother explaining that to us, then?”

“It’s... not exactly legal market, My King...” said Mopy. “There’s no way we can ask them what we’re buying and their functions...”

Brice turned to Mopy, surprised. “Wait... what...?”

Mopy paused for a while, before continuing, “Oh, I’m sorry, My King... it appears that you haven’t been informed. In the inter-universe mass market, it’s... apparently not really available publicly. Illegal, even. It’s not a big problem to us, fortunately, but it’s not a stroll on the park either.”

“I didn’t know at all...” said Brice, feeling slightly uncomfortable.

“And the fact that we don’t even exactly know what we’re looking for doesn’t help at all. Add that with how expensive they all are.” Added Mopy. “It’s been extremely tiring...”

“Your efforts are appreciated, Minister Mopy...” Said Brice.

Mopy continued, seemingly not even noticing Brice’s compliment, “If we didn’t — if we *hadn’t attacked The Great Dragon* in the first place, we probably wouldn’t be having financial issues...”

Brice said nothing. What Mopy just said to himself kept ringing repeatedly in his mind. He tried to imagine the possibility, the scenario where they immediately gave in to the invading alien and its requests. Deep down in his mind, he still couldn’t accept the new lord above him, ruling over him and his own kingdom. But on the other hand, he found himself not having even a single

spark of rebellion against the dragon at all.

*Since when...?* Wondered Brice himself. He tried to recall the exact point of time when the zeal to fight went absent, but he couldn't. Because it technically meant recalling all the moments of losing his trusted and beloved people, he decided to not pursue it. All he could was just marvel at the fact that it was absent at all.

"I... I'm terribly sorry, My King..." said Mopy, apparently just realizing it, "I didn't listen to what you were saying..."

Brice didn't listen. His eyes were fixated on the family, who were about to leave the lobby.

*If I didn't care about that...*

"My King...?" repeated Mopy.

But he rose and walked away, as he said, "I want the whole family, mother and children... send them to my room. Send them in captive condition, like previously..." as he ignored the chill sensation.



Of all the pre-sending services to oversee, the final building was the messiest of the four.

All kinds of unpleasant and negative sounds were heard, all of which really loud. Screams, sobs, cries, even curses and lullabies were all around the hall from every corner. Even though private rooms were built, the people who were about to be sent and their families comforted each other right in the entrance hall, in any way they desired. There was not a single care on whether it would disturb the others or not.

Because of that, up to a hundred soldiers of the kingdom had to stand by in the hall, trying to maintain the conduciveness of the whole activity and place. Even from afar, because Brice and Mopy thought that it was best to not enter the place during such a situation, he could see that there was actually a pretty huge fight between civilians, the soldiers had to separate them from fighting each other.

Under the spell of invisibility, Brice and Mopy watched from an alley, which happened to directly face the entrance hall of the departure train station, leading straight to the mountain where *The Great Dragon* resided. Some knights who accompanied them as bodyguards were also around, hidden even from them.



“My apologies, My King... as you can see...” started Mopy.

“Goodness...” frowned Brice. The first emotion that showed up upon seeing it was disgust. “Not even a care to the surrounding... they could be actually garnering for sympathy and pity from the soldiers...”

“We’re advising them to utilize the rooms we have prepared, but, as you can see...” Mopy stopped midway, looking shy and somewhat embarrassed.

“If I recall correctly, we have also provided morsem for them, haven’t we?” snapped Brice, but still maintaining a low voice. “In case some of them wanted to get high and remove themselves from the fears and all emotions during the whole travel.”

“Well, yes. Although only a few uses the service... they’re the ones who reside in the private rooms instead...”

“*Very grateful of them.*” Responded Brice with sarcasm and cold tone. “I’ve tried my best to ease their pain, and they’re not even doing well for themselves.”

Mopy said nothing. He simply stood behind Brice. By that time, the fight was over; the soldiers managed to dissolve the fight. He happened to see a young soldier gently carrying an old man, who seemed to be accidentally caught along in the fight, to a corner of the hall.

“I start to wonder if I should even keep this infrastructure on.” Stated Brice later. “What do you think? We’re running low on finance, right”

“Yes. Shutting this down will relieve us of the burden, although not much.” Stated Mopy. “Although, I can’t say that it’s a completely wise decision. This appears to be one of the fundamentals to keep people from actually revolting against the kingdom.”

“But at the cost of these messes!?” replied Brice.

“I’m simply stating the possibilities, My King.” Mopy bowed down. “They’d like to see their family members for the last time. If we don’t allow for them, we might have the funds redirected for other purposes, but we may get backlashes from the people in return. Regardless of it, it’s up to My King.”

Brice sighed heavily out of annoyance. He was about to show up from the invisibility spell and shout to the soldiers to separate the chosen people from their families and destroy the comforting infrastructure right away. But listening to Mopy’s advice, it came later to his mind

that it didn't feel like a good idea.

He sighed again, and then reluctantly stated, "Remove the morsem. Keep this going, but no more morsem for them. Will that help the finance?"

"It will help, My King." Said Mopy.

"Good..." responded Brice. "And that soldier, too... at this point, you know what I demand already..."

"S-Sir...?" frowned Mopy, confused.

"That soldier. The one who's helping the old man... yeah, the two of them. Make sure they're restrained, all of them. I'd like to have a..."

Brice paused for a while. The sensation was felt, although not as intense as he had it for the first time.

"I'd like to have a private moment with all of them." Said Brice. "No guards, not even outside my room."

"Yes, of course, My King, but... what do you plan from having them in your room...?"

He didn't answer. Instead, he turned and left Mopy alone, as he added, "Oh, and get me Orcus as well. I want to talk with him."



With the room being completely shut by curtains, it felt ominous, even to Brice. But at the same time, it also felt cozy. The sound of burning woods on the furnace filled the room, while he also set the spell on the room to lower the temperature, just enough to give cool temperature for him. The only thing that illuminated the entire bedroom of his was the furnace itself.

Brice himself sat on his chair, enjoying his wine, while shaking his knees. His eyes were fixated on the door, waiting for it to open. Half of his heart were nervous for what was about to be done, but he also, somehow, felt excited and curious. He kept picturing scenarios of what would likely happen in his mind, although not in great details.

*I wonder... what...?*

And before he finished the wonder, he was interrupted.

It felt like hours, but eventually, the door was opened.

First, it was the boy from the valley.

And then, it was the woman who was helping a soldier.

And then, it was a mother, with all the three of her children.

And at last, the soldier and the old man.

All of them are in chains, interconnected to each other.

They all were dragged by other soldiers.

“What’s going on here...?”

“Why-why am I here...?”

“My... My King...?”

“There must be a mistake here...?”

“Mommy, I’m scared...”

“It’s-it’s alright, darling...”

“Let go of me! What the hell!?”

“Shut up! Watch your mouth!”

“Have they been sent away from the castle?” asked Brice immediately.

“Yes, My King. The prince and his family have just left to Gusarto by horse carriage.”

“Good. Close the door.” Said Brice coldly.

As soon as the soldier closed the door, Brice snapped his finger, activating the lock spell on the door.

“Why... why am I here...? What did I do wrong...?”

“My-My King...?”

“You! You fucker...!”

The next finger snap of Brice’s made a huge wardrobe next to him open.

As soon as they saw the content of the wardrobe, they froze.

No one said a thing.

The only sound in the room came from the burning woods in the furnace.

Because they were shocked by the content of the wardrobe.

“What... what are you doing...?”

Brice turned to look at them.

“Something to show me how far I can keep going... in a way...”

He then took out a long, but thin saw from the wardrobe, one of plenty, least nasty tools in the wardrobe.

It was filthy, with rust and stain of blood.

There was no more anxiety in his mind and heart.

Nor was the chill he had felt from the morning, that had nothing to do with the weather.

There was only curiosity, asking himself how far he could go.

And then Brice said coldly, “Don’t worry. Even though it’s my first time, this will be as slow as I can, and there’ll be no one to stop me.”

## Chapter 3

She repeatedly looked front, and back, and left, and right, even up and down. The forest was quiet and calm, aside from the squirrels and birds. There was no presence of a single human.

“It’s safe...” Demeter whispered, she didn’t even dare speak out loud.

“Are you sure?” said her father.

“Not really...” replied Demeter honestly. “We have to move!”

But it wasn’t as easy as she thought. They were her parents, as well as their siblings, eight in total, and they all couldn’t be younger than sixty years old. Their faces were already full of wrinkles. They could still walk, but after resting for thirty minutes, she was aware that they couldn’t last long in running away.

“How much longer?” asked Viser, her father. “I just want to know...”

“Shouldn’t be much further... but I don’t know...” said Demeter. She realized that they also began panting, even though they hadn’t run at all. “But that’s not the problem.”

“I know.” said her father, with grim and fury. “Fucking Brice...”

“To think the abomination proposed such a demand...” said Duvard. “And to think of the king...”

“King!?” laughed Viser, keeping his voice low. “I prefer being lynched and having my body rotten on a pole over admitting that man as my king and being sent to be eaten by that abomination!”

“Father!” scolded Demeter, shocked. “That will not happen!”

“Sorry, my dear. But I can’t help but mean it.” said Viser.

“Think it through, Viser. If he rejected, the dragon would attack the kingdom and eat ten thousand people, and even the last fighters couldn’t stop it.” said Rae, her mother. “The dragon is smart. It made an offer he couldn’t refuse, even if it’s unbearable...”

“SHUSH!” cut Demeter. They all were awake enough to understand the situation they were in, and to shut their mouths and lie down on the ground, all immediately.

She jumped on a tree next to her. It was a dense tree, hiding herself perfectly. He pulled out her sword from the holster on her waist, in perfect silence. Despite the noise from the birds and squirrels, the sound of soldiers coming close to them was clear as crystal.

*About twenty... slowly... they surely hadn't known of our presence...* thought Demeter.

Soon, they were in her sight. There were twenty-three soldiers walking on the road. They looked around afar, obviously looking for them. He could see chains on their belts, ringing and swinging as they walked.

*No one else was around...* Demeter noticed. *I guess they couldn't spare the wizards to catch us.*

She jumped straight ahead toward them; the distance between the tree and the soldiers would be about five meters. By the time he landed on them, he already sliced three of them in the neck. The soldiers were rather shocked in the first seconds, but it was enough for Demeter to kill another six of them. Only after then, the soldiers began to *wake up* and attack.

They all tried to attack her, but her movement was too fast for their eyes to follow. With a simple kick on the ground, with just one leg, she pushed herself toward any direction she wanted to go. She maintained her position low, lower than their chests, and struck them, either at neck or at head.

But her real problem was the strength of the kick. She hadn't enough time to practice on controlling it better. As a result, instead of stabbing a soldier, she clashed and pushed him against a tree, with her head.

*Ouch...* As she turned back, five of them, closest to her, already lifted their swords, and were about to swing them down. She simply slashed their legs with her sword, incapacitating them all, and then stabbed the one she clashed with, before killing them all five, one by one.

There were eight soldiers left, and they all just started drawing back, dreaded by the fact that she was no mere fighter by appearance.

“To think we'll face an *elitist...!*” Said one of them. She could tell that they were thinking of running away.

“She’s not professional yet...”

“Doesn’t mean I’m not dangerous.” taunted Demeter. The reply alone made them stunned and scared even more. She would like to kill them all, but she remembered that she was on an importance to take her parents away to safety. So she said, “You can die here, right now, or run away, and live for another day. Your choice.”

The soldiers looked at each other. There was doubt and fear on their faces. *Almost there... just run away, and I’ll leave you alone.* Thought Demeter.

But they suddenly ran toward her, all at the same time, their swords lifted up high to be swung down onto her.

She wasn’t stunned nevertheless. She charged forward and cut two of them in the middle, all in a go, aiming at their necks, and at the same time, grabbed her short blade and threw it to another one on his head. They two were pushed aside by her charge. The others didn’t even have time to change their mind. Demeter immediately switched direction, and went after the other two at the right side. She stabbed one at his body, breaking through a gap of his armor between the chest and the stomach. With her hand, she pushed another one with all her might, clashing him directly to another tree. He grabbed a sword on the ground, which one of the soldiers dropped previously, and threw it, as well as her sword, toward the remaining two. They didn’t have time and readiness to swallow what happened, much less to respond for defending themselves.

By the time she stopped and pulled brakes on herself, they were all falling down, bursting blood on their necks and heads, lifeless. There turned out to be one soldier remaining, the one she pushed onto the tree. He grunted, trying to stand up, but he was in serious pain. Demeter grabbed her sword, and stood next to him, with her sword on his neck. “You should have run away.”

Eventually, the soldier gave up standing. She could hear his breath loud and clear, in pain. She guessed that his ribs were broken, or even worse. “I... wanted to... to save my parents...”

His words struck her in the heart. “What do you mean...?”

The soldier laughed weakly. “You know nothing... you just run... away... like a coward...”

“I’m saving my parents. I’m not running away...”

*Wait, why am I crying?!*

“Whatever...” grunted the soldier. “You can never understand... what it’s like in towns...”

He gently, and weakly, held the tip of her sword, and shoved it into contact with his neck. “Finish it.”

She suddenly realized how fresh the air was, because she breathed in and out deeper than usual. Her sword suddenly became heavy, and her hands shook, though almost invisible. It was even harder, because the soldier looked her in the eyes. He then chuckled, “You’ve never done an execution...”

She gulped. Again, it struck her. She looked around, at the bodies of the soldiers, most of which half-decapitated. “An elitist... never hesitated to kill... but too frightened to execute... you can’t protect everyone like that...”

“Shut up!”

“You’ll face making tough decisions... and you can’t, with a faint heart...” Said the soldier.

“I’m not faint-hearted.” denied Demeter.

“Then prove it...” challenged the soldier. “A stab... on my neck...”

With all her might, which was all she needed indeed, she pushed her sword into his neck, clean to the tree. Blood burst out of his neck, but she still had strength and will to dodge the blood burst. The soldier instantly became lifeless, dropping his head and hands. She quickly pulled out her sword, and swung it repeatedly, to clean her sword from blood. She kept breathing, which proved to prevent her from losing control.

*Calm down... I need to calm down...* thought Demeter to herself. *They’re all saved now.*

She quickly went back to where her parents were. It was a bit distant from the battlefield. She still breathed in and out, to calm herself, and to put her attention on rescuing...



“DEMETER!” screamed her mother.

The scream stunned her, and woke her. It made her see what had happened in front of her.

Her father was just stabbed in the heart, from behind. Judging from the speed of the movement of the sword, it was another elitist. The sword was pulled out of his father’s body just



as fast as it was stabbed. Around him, the other elders, siblings of her father and mother, were already dead and lying on the ground, their chests stabbed as well. Her mother ran to her back with all her power, which wasn't much already.

As her father fell down, she could see the one who stabbed them all.

"Monia..." said Demeter.

"Demeter." replied Monia, cold and resentful, a complete contrary of her usual behaviors. "So this is your doing..."

"Just..." Demeter gulped, trying not to look at the elders. "You've done enough..."

"You know, they put up quite a high price for getting a body to the dragon..." said Monia. She crept left in a circle, so Demeter naturally walked slowly to the left as well. Her mother also went left, but maintained her position behind Demeter. She didn't hear her mother sobbing at all.

"The dragon eats dead people as well...?" gasped Demeter.

"The dragon eats flesh. Any flesh." said Monia. "It can't tell the difference, anyway."

"You can't do this, Monia..." she realized that her voice was now shaken. "*That abomination...* it won't stop at a thousand a day..."

"You're thinking that the dragon is greedy. You're so wrong about that."

Without warning and further words, she charged forward. She was just as fast as Demeter, if not *faster*. She was still shocked that she barely had time to actually defend herself from the attacks. Unlike the previous soldiers, who were fast as a normal human could be, Monia was an elitist, at a higher level than Demeter's.

Her swings were wild, in a scope of three hundred sixty degrees, coming from every direction: up, down, left, and right. Assisted with the moves, were piercing moves. They also came from every direction. The clashes of their swords were loud, annoying, and rapid; she counted about four to six clashes per second. To Demeter's thoughts, she was like a spiked iron ball spinning uncontrollably. She resisted herself from avoiding, as she knew that Monia was also after her mother, after killing the others...

Thinking of her father, one of her swings pierced her right, sword-wielding hand. It wasn't

a clean cut, but it was a big slice on her hand. She fell down, and dropped her sword as well. As she predicted, Monia was after her mother, after Demeter fell down and became a perfect chance to kill cleanly.

So out of reflex, she grabbed her leg, and threw Monia away. But she instead was prepared for that; she landed on a tree, and dashed herself forward. The tree was broken by a single dash of hers. Demeter just stood up and took her sword at that time.

Monia, again, turned into non-stop attack mode, trying to break through her defense. Her face showed everything: determination and coldness, the kind that was impossible to talk over. Their strength seemed to be equal; she couldn't break past Demeter, but so was the contrary. Demeter, however, while deflecting her attacks, was thinking of other possibilities for her to do.

But she didn't have any, and she didn't know if there was even any.

*I can't keep doing this! Should I take Mom and flee instead...?*

Out of the blue, Monia stopped moving. Not moving, as in *freezing*. Her sword was pulled back to do a piercing stab at that moment; it even turned out that she was at midair. There was nothing between her and Demeter.

Her hand, on the other hand, was about to deflect the stab, by swinging her sword. Not responsive enough to stop it in time, it instead slashed her in a diagonal line, starting from her right chest, hitting her neck, and cutting through her left cheek as well. The cut was certainly deep, as she stretched her hand out, and the blood burst out rapidly from her body and her neck, Demeter couldn't avoid it. The blood blinded her eyes, so she quickly wiped it with her hands, and she held her balance from falling over.

After cleaning her eyes, Monia was already on the ground, facing the ground. Her blood instantly flew from the cut, making a red puddle below her body. Already lifeless...

She turned back. Her mother's hand was stretched toward her, but she immediately knew who she actually pointed at. "Mother..."

She grabbed Demeter's hand, and pulled her. "Come on! We need to leave!"

"But..." She wanted to turn back, but her mother forced her to look at her only, up close, by turning Demeter's head.

"Their bodies will rot anyway. But I have made their spirits rested. That's what matters the

most.” Said her mother. Her eyes met Demeter’s, just a few centimeters. Not a single tear was rolling on her cheeks. “But they will not bother resting our spirits! We must leave, *now!*”

## Chapter 3.5

Without forcing it, her tears rolled down on her cheeks. She didn't hold it anymore, like she usually did.

She sat on the cliff with her legs hanging. The wind blew straight to her chest and face, with her hair flapping backward. It wasn't strong to a level where she would be blown, but it felt like she could be easily blown away.

*Father...* said Demeter in her heart. She automatically recalled the moment he fell down, in front of her eyes.

"Demeter! Breakfast!" called her mother. She slowly rose from the cliff, and went into a small shack, just a few meters from the cliff. It was simple, made of wood, and only had two small rooms: dining room, combined with kitchen, and bedroom.

Her mother was drinking the mushroom soup, as she entered. There was another bowl, with a spoon inside. She sat in front of the bowl, and began sipping it slowly.

The smell alone was tempting. It took some time for her to realize that it was her favorite food all alone. "Mother, you have prepared this since... when?"

"Just recently. We did plan to travel to this mountain... before the announcement, of course." said her mother.

"We?" asked Demeter, with a sigh.

"Demeter..." her mother instantly shook her head, and put her hand on Demeter's right hand. "I know it's hard to let go... I can only say that... I'm here for you, Demeter."

She looked at her mother for a while, before continuing, "How could you not be in...?"

"Grieving?" guessed her mother. "I guess because I've dealt with so many deaths, I don't feel burdened..."

"Even by Father's death...?"

"Especially by Viser's death." Responded her mother.

“But... I failed him... And the others... And their bodies...”

“Sshhh...” She calmed Demeter; she rose from her seat, and hugged Demeter. “You don’t fail anyone, honey. Not at all...”

Demeter wanted to cry again, but seeing her mother calming her, and even kneeling on her knees, she could only look into her eyes. She continued, “We’re alive, that’s why. We succeeded for them. Don’t convince yourself otherwise, alright?”

Demeter pulled her breath to rather get rid of it from her mind. She could only nod. She stroked on her cheek gently, full of love and understanding. It was when Demeter began to see sorrow on her mother, but it was only for a while. She then smiled, as if nothing bad had happened, and then returned to her seat.

*How could she be so...?* Demeter wasn’t sure of the right word. She wanted to ask her, but then decided to keep it to herself.

“So... What should we do next?” Said Demeter, changing the topic.

“Stay here, for a while.” Said her mother. “Perhaps we can come to Lupy...”

Hearing the name itself made Demeter shudder. “Mother, are you serious...?”

“We can’t stay here... As in ‘living the rest of our lives,’ in this shack, just the two of us. What if they find us?” said her mother. “We were very lucky that we dealt with only Monia... I’m so sorry about her...”

“Don’t.” Cut Demeter cold. “She doesn’t deserve it.”

Her mother was slightly surprised, but nevertheless continued, “but next time, we’ll deal with worse, tougher, definitely a lot more knights or warriors. We need shelter, from someone we can trust...”

Demeter gulped. “Yes, but... Lupy?”

“I don’t like him, granted, but we know other people who are worse than Lupy.” Said her mother. “He’s more headed-level and reasonable.”

“We can’t just come to him and expect him to accept us. You know that, Mother.” Said Demeter. “We’ll have to work for him...”

“Work...” Said her mother shortly. “That sounds false...”

“Alright, maybe it’s not entirely the right word, but you get it, Mother.”

“Well, if that means a good room and good food, at least we need to consider it.”

“Mother...!” Grunted Demeter. “We’d fight against our own kingdom! My friends, our neighbors... Are you seriously going to do it?”

“They made a choice.” Said her mother. The smile disappeared and the tone turned cold in a second. “Your father is right... I can’t believe I’m saying this... *The kingdom has fallen*. You can say it’s not even a kingdom anymore, the moment they gave up to the dragon. Voluntarily, in fact.”

“You said that there was no other choice... That they would perish if they didn’t...”

“I know what I said.” Said her mother, frowning. “Yes, it’s not pretty. I’m still on that... But on the other side...”

She then shook her head. “Must be confusing for you. I do understand that they’re desperate... But this is... *Unbelievable*... Does that make sense to you?”

“Yes, Mother.” Said Demeter. “But does that justify siding with... *them*, and... fighting against the kingdom?”

“Perhaps... or not... but this is not about that. This is about our survival.” Said her mother. “There’s no time or luxury to think of justice, as this moment.”

Demeter could only sip her soup in silence. She couldn’t deny her mother’s points, although she had a small urge to refute it. Her mother seemed to notice it, as she said, “Some things you don’t need to... or have to think too much about. Just think what you can, what matters to you.”

“Really...? What matters to you, then?” Asked Demeter.

“You. And...” She paused for a while, but Demeter knew she was about to mention her father. Her mother ended up answering, “You. Just you. That’s why I’m thinking of going to Lupy...”

There were a few spoonfuls left in her bowl. She took her glass, drank it, and then said, “I’m going out for a while, probably hunting.”

“Alright, then.” Said her mother. “Be careful, Demeter.”

“I’ll be fine.” Said Demeter. “Call me if something happens, alright?”

“Don’t you worry about me, Demmy.” Her mother smiled. “Your mother has pretty big stuff in her sleeves.”



Behind the shack was the upper part of the mountain, covered in dense forest. Between each tree was just about one meter or even less. All of the trees’ heights varied from three to five meters, almost shielding everything below from sunlight. Even so, it still managed to lighten the ground by piercing through the leaves and branches. She tried her best not to step on flowers, which already looked beautiful and completing. They were all around the ground, but somehow, forming certain paths, which split and merged one to another. She couldn’t see a pattern from the paths, or a certain factor that made the paths.

She pulled her knife, and held it with a backhand grip, and crept as silent as possible. Her eyes were focused on the door in front of her, while her ears were on the surroundings, in case unwanted presence showed up and approached her.

The deer was about two meters. Its flesh alone would be enough for two of them in a week. It was dark blue, which was striking among the brown color of the trees. But the antlers had lots of branches, reaching enough to cover its head and body at front part. They even had sharp points, all pointed forward about five centimeters. It was bowing down to eat the flowers, but she knew that its ears were listening to any change of sand.

*Neck...* Thought Demeter.

With all her might, she threw the knife onto its neck, where there was nothing in between. Its cross guard was quite big, so it stopped at the blade part completely inside its neck, instead of the whole knife being thrown cleanly through. The deed was furious, and hopped around wildly, but only for a few seconds, before it fell down dead.

With the deer dead, she relaxed and walked toward it, to carry its body on her shoulder. She went deeper into the forest for a stroll.

The sun was on the east side, about halfway from the furthest point to the middle of the sky. She had to squint her eyes from the blinding light, as she went to the edge of the eastern cliff. Her eyes looked on the forest below her and the sky, scanning for anything out of the

ordinary.

From atop, she could see clearly passages toward the mountain. She saw no one, and heard no one, and smelled no one, although her mom's spell already did its job for censoring intruders.

Her eyes were nailed to one passage. As much as she wanted so much to avert her eyes away, she was instead fixated on the dot in the forest, just a few meters from the passage. It was empty; there was no one there, and nothing left in that spot, but she saw some trees that were tweaked abnormally, left and abandoned with any attempt to fix. There was even a single big trunk, broken by force, and the rest of the tree, lying on the ground, next to it.

Automatically, her mind brought herself back to the fight, especially Monia.

*To think she would be...*

She simply paused, as she didn't know the right word to describe.

*To think he would...*

Her senses became dull; she no longer watched around with alertness. She kneeled down, as if her energy was depleted to almost zero. Her sight became watery and blurred, and she could even barely breathe. It all happened suddenly within a second, like a volcano wholly exploding and splashing magma all around the island. Her whole body felt numb, as if it would crumble into dust.

*I should have stayed...* her mind had only one thing spinning inside.

Her eyes now focused on the bottom of the cliff. She couldn't be sure; she could only predict the height as tall as hundreds of meters. If done properly, she could land safely on the ground without any scratch, but her body somehow was too stiff, doing nothing but walking.



There was a sound. It started from low volume, but slowly and gradually got louder into a long, loud, thunderous roar. She noticed that it came from above, the sky itself.

It was the only thing that kept her standing still on the edge.

The huge rock was in red blazing fire. It wasn't ordinary red with orange and yellow, like any normal fire. It was actually red; in a way, close to the color of blood. It was pretty distant from where she stood, much less to its landing destination, but the sound of the roar, as it



entered the atmosphere, was abnormally loud.

*It's... could destroy a mountain...!*

*Or a dragon...?*

Her eyes were onto the meteor. It wasn't as bright as the sun, so she didn't have to squint her eyes. She tried on looking at the meteor into its details, but the only thing she could see, even with her enhanced eyes, was the fire.

Slowly, the roar sound turned down, as the meteor passed by her. It went beyond her sight, if not the other side of the world. But she kept looking and hearing, until it made a boom sound of the landing, which was like the sound of a book falling onto the floor. She guessed that it was about ten minutes since she heard it.

*What is that...?*

## Chapter 4

The rain was massive, storming the whole village. The sound alone was quite deafening, in the sense that simple conversation would be almost impossible. The sky itself was all dark grey; not a single dot of blue was there, as if the sky grieved as well...

But it wasn't a problem at all for everyone in the village. The rain didn't touch the village at all. It instead stopped at midair, few centimeters from the rooftops, and flew toward the borders, outside the village. The sound was also reduced, though it was still heard; it became a background noise in low voice, not powerful to obstruct people talking to each other.

Mirina saw her friend, Darran, walking toward school. He seemed tired after crying; his eyebags were swollen, and his nose was red. She came toward him, easily tapping on his shoulder, and said, "Hey, Darran."

She was about to say, "How're you doing?" but she then thought that it was rather redundant and inconsiderate. They stopped next to the entrance of the school, while everyone else walked in.

"Hey..." replied Darran, weak and low. She had to hold control of herself, to not crying as well.

"You look like you got a flu..." as if to confirm her guess, he sneezed.

She put her hand few centimeters in front of his nose. "Let me cure it for you."

She grabbed the whole of the flu, with her magic, and transformed it into grey smoke, to make it easier for her to pull it out through his nose. The smoke was in quite a huge amount, and the color looked disgusting to her. She then made the smoke burnt. It burst fire out of the smoke with the same disgusting color, into nothing. "There. That should do it."

She looked at him. The flu was gone, but it didn't change anything on his face. His eyebags were still swollen, his nose was still red, and most importantly, the sorrow didn't disappear. He said, still in weak and horrid tone, "Thanks..." and then left.

She wanted to stop him, but even her body disagreed with her. She stood still, frozen like the statues in front of the school. One thing she had her focus on was preventing herself from

losing control. No one greeted her, or asked why she froze there; they were pretty much as in grief as Darran was.

“Mirina. What are you doing?” asked an adult behind her.

“Mrs. Svylsan...” greeted Mirina, out of shock. The shock alone turned out to stop her sorrow almost immediately.

“Come on. Class is about to start.” said Mrs. Svylsan, with flat face. She took her into the school.



“Food chain.”

Mrs. Svylsan used to smile all the time in the class, while teaching. But it was probably the first time Mirina saw her not smiling. She could only wonder of the sudden change, she was warm and kind just yesterday.

*Not her too...* thought Mirina.

“It’s basically this natural arrangement, a trail of living organisms. It’s a diagram for us to know and understand what eats what, and what is eaten by what.”

She tapped on the wall at the front of the class, with her knuckle. A picture showed on the wall. It was several pictures, all connected by thin black arrows, forming a continuation. It started from grass, and the arrow pointed from it to a grasshopper. Her eyes followed the direction of the arrows, from the grasshopper to a frog, and then to a snake, and then to an eagle, and then to mushrooms.

“Simple. Grass,” the picture of the grass glowed over other pictures, “is eaten by a grasshopper,” the glow was switched from the grass picture to the grasshopper picture, as she mentioned its name, “the grasshopper is eaten by the frog,” the glow was switched again, from the grasshopper to the frog, following her words, “the frog is eaten by the snake, and the snake is eaten by the eagle.”

“And what about the mushrooms?”

“I just get to that. The mushrooms work as decomposers. It doesn’t mean the mushrooms eat the eagle. It means, when the eagle dies, the mushrooms will decompose its body, and gain

nutrients for themselves, and the grass as well.”

An arrow with dotted line showed up, connecting from mushrooms to the grass. “Sometimes, it can be a full circle. Sometimes not. But this is a simple example.” explained Mrs. Svylsan. “If we’re to include everything, it will be enormous.”

The simple food chain turned into a bigger, much more complex diagram of food chain. The pictures were way smaller, she had to twitch her eyes to look at the animals. The arrows were also more complex, linking to each picture and from more than one organism.

But she noticed that above all the diagram, there was a big red arrow pointing upward, just as big as the dragon itself, and it pointed to a single, big picture.

“However, above all of the living organisms in the world, there’s only one that stands above all.” explained Mrs. Svylsan.

She looked at her face. That was when she realized that she was angry.

*“The Great Dragon. This...”*

She paused for a while, looking at the children. Mirina, sitting at the last row of the class, also looked around. Most were grim, but she noticed that there was also confusion, as they stared at Mrs. Svylsan and the food chain pictures.

“Take, for example, of this tiger.” She continued, with flat tone. “Tiger eats lambs. So that means tiger is superior to the lamb. That’s what it is when it comes to food chain. Superiority and inferiority. Everything, and everyone, if you pay attention, has their own superiority and inferiority. Except for The Great Dragon, of course. There’s no organism that is above The Great Dragon. He’s superior, without my inferiority.”

There was something from Mirina’s heart, a sort of powerful urge to dispute her. She resisted it and controlled herself to sit by and listen further to what she said. *Maybe this is just a joke...*

A student few seats from her lifted his hand, asking, “What about the decomposers? Won’t they decompose the dragon after he dies?”

*He...?*

Mrs. Svylsan pulled her breath, and paused again for a while. It took about half a minute,

before she continued teaching. Some students began to look at each other with wonder and confusion.

“Well, the law of decomposition doesn’t apply to The Great Dragon.” Said Mrs. Svylsan. “And that’s what we will call Him. The Great Dragon. With capital on T, G, and D. And also capital on H, when using pronoun.”

Mirina frowned. She lifted her hand, asking “Mrs. Svylsan, why would we call *it* The Great Dragon? It’s almost like we’re worshipping *it*...”

“Of course not. We simply give respect...”

*There it is again... the pause...*

“It’s... regardless of how... who they are, we must respect them. It’s basic, polite, behavior, simple as that, just like we must be kind and compassionate to each other...”

*Pause again... something’s wrong! This is all wrong!*

She pulled her breath, and then continued, “Well, that’s all for today’s lesson. Good day, everyone.”

She *stormed out* of the the room, leaving all the students dazzled. Few seconds later, everyone broke the silence, and started talking to each other.

“What happened? What is with Mrs. Svylsan?” Asked Jeremy, next to her.

“Wish I knew...” Responded Mirina. “And what’s with the dragon stuff...”

As she was about to point at it, the pictures of food chain already disappeared. “Oh... I mean, seriously, what?”

“Hey, guys,” said someone next to her. It was Roven. “You wanna check her out?” He said with whisper.

“Oh. You.” Mirina rolled her eyes.

“Come on! Don’t you guys wanna know what’s with her?” whispered Roven, with mischievous, trouble-making smile. The others were talking quite loudly, so his sound was barely heard, even to Mirina and Jeremy.

"I don't know..." Jeremy scratched his head. "Last time..."

"I won't be caught. Promise." guaranteed Roven. "I've mastered it, even the teachers won't find out."

"Are you sure?" asked Mirina, doubtful.

"One hundred percent, fucking sure. I also have brought some stuff to help along." nodded Roven. "Come on, guys. We can help each other, and we won't get caught."

"Mirina looked at Jeremy, who looked at her as well. They both shared dread of coming along and breaking rules with Roven. However, she was also curious of what was with Mrs. Svylsan, and she could tell that Jeremy, as well as Roven, was thinking the same.

Curiosity trumped over obligations toward rules of the school. Mirina nodded, "Okay. We're in."

"That's the spirit!" Roven's smile widened, and even got more mischievous, somehow.

"Quit that!" said Mirina. "How do we leave out of the class?"

Suddenly, he groaned, and wrapped his stomach with his hands. His face turned pale, from mischief into pain in a second. "Ow... my stomach... think you can take me to clinic?"

They both immediately understood, and rolled their eyes. *Typical.* Thought Mirina. "Come on. Let's go." She and Jeremy stood up.

"I don't know... it's too much for me to stand up... I need to be levitated, I guess..."

*So we both can get out... of course.* "Fine. Jeremy, a bit of help?"

"Sure." Together, they levitated him off his chair, and went out of the class. None of the students were even bothered with them, though some looked at them with curiosity.

After they got out of the class, Jeremy said, "That's pretty smart..."

As they were about to put him down, Roven said with normal voice, "Actually, my stomach actually hurt. I set up a spell to make my stomachache, in case they ask."

"What?! Are you serious!?"

"We have to be convincing!" He snapped his finger. She then knew that he set up a spell

on them.

But then she realized that it was more than one of invisibility.

“Hold on. What is this spell?” said Mirina, a bit frantic. The sensation of the spell was weird, and even a bit frightening. She felt half-way intangible, like a ghost, but also half-way solid. There was also a sense of drowsiness. Her body felt lighter than she thought, it was as if she could float by the spell.

“What do you think is it? You know spells, anyway, don’t you?” Roven showed his mischievous smile again.

“This is not spell of invisibility...” said Jeremy.

It took a while to think and recall. She felt a chill in her bones, which had nothing to do with the spell. “You wouldn’t dare...”

“Ah, you figured it out, huh?” said Roven.

“How could you...!?”

“You can spot spell of invisibility easily. So much for being invisible. This is much more effective...”

“This is a dangerous spell!”

“What? Would you rather like being found and having detention? I thought you want to find out...”

“I do! But with this spell!?” shouted Mirina.

“Keep your voice down! They’ll find us!” warned Jeremy.

“Oh, Jerry, it won’t. *They will never catch us!*” said Mirina with loud voice. “This is Ethereal Spell. This is not spell of invisibility.”

Jeremy appeared to not know what it actually was, as he asked, “What is it? I’ve never heard it.”

“It’s one of the forbidden spells. It makes you... real enough for us to talk to each other, but to the others...” explained Mirina, gulping in fright. “It’s like we don’t exist...”

“False. It makes us not present to them at all.” corrected Roven. “Non-existence means tweaking and messing time and place, or something like that. Even I dare not do that.”

“That’s very dangerous! You could permanently kill us, seriously!”

“What?”

“I wouldn’t use it if I don’t know any.” said Roven. “Trust me. I got this.”

“How... how could you even do it?”

“Hold on! I still don’t get it...” said Jeremy. He began panicking as well. “We’re really going to die!?”

“We better not!” Mirina stared at Roven, which made him rolling eye, out of annoyance. He then explained, “Ethereal Spell makes us *ghost-like, ethereal. Undetected in any way.*”

He stretched his hand forward, and burst out fire. She noticed that they, and the fire as well, were half invisible. “You can scream all you want, make faces to anyone, or cast out attacks, and they wouldn’t know it at all. *They really can’t detect us magically and physically.*”

“Like we don’t exist... we’re not present at all.” continued Mirina, and suddenly screaming. “I still CAN’T BELIEVE YOU’RE DOING IT!!!”

“Is it because of the danger or because it means I’m way better than you?” smirked Roven. She had to resist herself from punching him.

“Oh, you imbecile...!”

“I still don’t understand. What’s actually the danger?” asked Jeremy, with innocence.

“Well, simple. You’re between presence and absence...”

“Between life and death, you mean! That’s how they *can’t detect us in any way.* If you’re not careful, we’ll be actually dead! Like, our life forces are gone!”

“Technically, not our life forces. It doesn’t have anything to do with that...”

“WHAT THE FUCK!?” screamed Jeremy suddenly. There was a janitor in the corridor, but despite that they were standing open in front of the door and speaking out loud, he didn’t notice them at all, because of the spell. “WHY DO YOU BRING ME ALONG!? ARE YOU FUCKING



SERIOUS!?”

“I know he would be exploding.” said Mirina, satisfied.

Roven sighed. “Look, over there.” He pointed at the runes, at the end of the corridor. “That’s how they would catch us, even with ordinary spell of invisibility. They sense specific spells and energies in use. They would sweep away the spells and energies, and then lock us in chains. Is that what you want?”

Unable to answer. Roven continued, “This is the best, *the next level shit!* We can do whatever we want! At least until the battery runs out.” He showed to them a small black stone from his pocket. It took only a second for Mirina to know what the stuff was. “Dark storage...?”

“The one and only. I’m surprised you know this too.” said Roven. “Lots of space to keep stuff, or to keep energy. Works for both. I’ve stored enough for twenty four hours of this spell, but I’m sure we don’t need that much time.”

“Isn’t this... *illegal?*” asked Mirina, with dread.

He smiled, but this time, it wasn’t as naughty as usual. There was something else from his smile. “You know, it doesn’t matter at all anymore, don’t you think?”

She was shut. She instantly understood what he meant, and she admitted that he had a point, but she decided to say nothing. Roven continued, “Come on. Let’s fine Mrs. Svylsan.”

“Wait. I thought you needed to go to clinic...” asked Jeremy.

“I do. After we find out where and what.”

He lifted his dress. There was a glowing rune on his stomach. “Adjustable. I shut it down for now. After finding her, I can put it in my stomach, and have actual stomachache. There won’t be trail or proof that this is made up.”

Mirina gulped. “You have prepared all these...?”

“It’s raining. I actually wanted to skip school, but there’s Mrs. Svylsan’s lesson.” said Roven. “So I thought to stay for her class, and then storm out of the village.”

“With Ethereal Speel?”

“Of course! How else can I leave the village?”

“Why do you want to leave the village? What for?” asked Jeremy.

“I want to swim, why not? I’m bored...”

“You casted the spell... all by yourself?” asked Mirina. There was no more anger. It was rather awe, and a slight of dread.

Roven laughed. “It’s actually not hard, if you know the tricks. Believe me. The problem is only the amount of the energy, that’s all. You want to learn how?”

Yes! She screamed in her heart, but seeing his smile made her annoyed. She said and hid her excitement, “Let’s talk about it later. We need to find Mrs. Svylsan.”

“Okay, then. You can put me down. I’m fine now.” said Roven. As he said, when they both put him down from levitation, he could stand up well.

Jeremy, on the other hand, looked dreaded. She could tell that he clearly didn’t like the idea of having the life force seeping away from him, literally standing between life and death. “So... we can... walk through the walls?”

To answer his question, he out his hand against the wall. It didn’t stop; it rather passed through the wall. “Duh! You can walk through people...”

He went toward the janitor, who was cleaning the floor. She thought that Roven would clash with him, until he walked through the janitor, as if he was mere air. “I told you, this is *the next level shit!*” replied Roven with excitement.

*Rugan’s spear!* He actually... thought Mirina. “Alright, we know! Let’s go now, before the next class.”

They walked in the corridor, toward the rune. It was huge, with round ceiling. The lighting came from the windows, which didn’t mean much, with the rainy sky. At the corridor, there were five classrooms. Mirina peeked into the classes, by having her head phasing through the door; there was no gap or window on the class to peek through. On the third class, she saw Mr. Wallen teaching history.

She spotted Darran on the last row of the seats, near her position in her class. His eyes, still swollen, were on the front wall, but her intuition strongly suggested that he wasn’t focused on the lesson at all. Her mind reminded her to the morning when she met him.

She quickly stopped peeking, and left the class, but her tears already rolled on her cheeks. As she swept it, both Roven and Jeremy noticed it. "What is it?" Asked Jeremy.

Mirina sighed. *Should I tell them...?*

"It's Darran..." replied Mirina weakly. "He's still... mourning for his grandparents..."

Even Roven, with his excitement, lost it. "Ah, Darran..."

"Why, seriously?" asked Jeremy. She heard anger in his tone. "His parents died, and they have to take his grandparents?!"

"I told you. It doesn't matter now." said Roven. "Everyone's doing their own shit, whatever they want."

"What does that do with Darran?" said Jeremy, confused.

"Duh. They just take the elders as they please. They look at the list of population in every village and town, seek for those above fifty years old, and started calling out the oldest ones. They're going to die soon, so what's the difference?"

"Not all old people..." started Mirina.

"Yeah. There are also some adults with debts or prisoners. They're useless. So they decide to put them for good use. How good of them..."

She looked at him. His smile was another kind, not one of mischief. She was surprised to see Roven's sarcastic side for the first time ever.

"But look at the other choices. If we don't provide it food..." stated Jeremy.

"Oh, food. *We are food. Very nice.*" said Roven. His anger was clearer. "No wonder they bring seasoning up there as well. *Tastier food for The Great Dragon.*"

"What do you expect? Deny its request and die by fire?" replied Jeremy.

"Hiding!" said Roven short. "Pretending to die! Anything but surrender!"

"You can't be that stupid..."

"Guys, let's talk about it later." cut Mirina. She could tell that they would indeed quarrel with each other if she let them. "We're looking for Mrs. Svylsan."

“Where could she be?” wondered Jeremy.

“Let’s start with teacher’s room. That’s where teachers gather and rest, right?” suggested Mirina. “How long does this spell last?”

“Well, since we’re there, it can last up to eight hours, more or less.” said Roven. “But that’s not the main problem.”

“The next class. I know.” said Mirina. “You’re really going to skip class?”

“Yeah... after the clinic, of course.” said Roven. “Let’s fine her.”



Although the spell was definite and protective, she couldn’t help but feel scared, when stepping to the territory outside her class. She usually visited her friends from other classes, but she had come to the teacher’s room just two times in her life, and she was always nervous.

“Are you sure one hundred percent, they won’t see us!?” asked Mirina.

“HEY, MORONS! WE’RE HERE!” screamed Roven loud. Nobody heard them. “See? Stop worrying.”

“But it’s still...” Mirina stopped.

“Why are you so panicked?” said Jeremy.

“I’m... I’m always nervous...”

The teacher’s room was in a way, similar to classrooms, aside from the size and the arrangement of the tables. It was about four times larger, and each table wasn’t cramped into narrow space. It was rather spacious and magnificent. The ceiling, about five meters from the floor, was filled with clouds which rained snow, gently; it stopped midair but rather gave cool sensation, even to them three. There were lots of drawers on one side of the floor, from the bottom of the floor to the top of the ceiling. They all were pulled out and in by magic, and some papers would fly away toward teachers or tables, or going in.

But she tried her best to calm herself and not be nervous. It felt as if there was also aura of fear and authority poured onto anyone with weak will.

Jeremy and Roven, on the other side, didn’t look feared. “This is insane. I’ve never been in

here..."

"Oh, I've been here several times. When I'm dying to know my score." Said Roven easily.

"With what? This spell as well?"

"Duh. There's no other way." Said Roven. "I mean, there are, but they're not quiet, I tell you."

"You haven't told us how you learn this spell." Noticed Jeremy. "And how you can guess it."

"There, Mrs. Svylsan." Pointed Mirina, coincidentally to avoid his question. She was just entering a room at the corner of teacher's room. It was just about half the height of the big room.

"We can phase through the room, right?" Said Mirina.

Roven shook his head. "You guys are disbelievers." For proving it, he went toward the room, phasing through all the teachers and the tables and stuff. It was really weird to Mirina, considering that it was more than simply phasing through surrounding. She and Jeremy followed him behind, also *phasing*. There were two teachers who were doing a link between each other. The spell appeared as light blue straight light between the teachers. None of the others walked through the light, as to Mirina's knowledge, the spell was the kind that was easy to interrupt. However, they walked through it, and nothing happened at all.

*I probably need to learn this spell...*

"... the problem?" Asked Mr. Prow.

"You do know what the fucking problem is, Stef." Said Mrs. Svylsan. She swung her hand, pointing backward, right at Roven's nose. "*The Fucking Great Dragon...*"

"Whoa..." Chuckled Roven.

"What the fuck is that!? We're fucking worshiping him now?!"

"We need to teach the children..."

"ARE YOU FUCKING SERIOUS, STEF?!"

"Sit down." Said Mr. Prow, cold and dangerous. Even Roven shuddered.

But it didn't work for Mrs. Svylsan.

"ANSWER ME, STEF! ARE YOU SERIOUS?"

"WHAT ELSE SHOULD I DO?" replied Mr. Prow, just as loud.

"He must have set up silence on the room..." Added Roven.

"WE CAN'T WIN AGAINST THE DRAGON! WE HAVE TO GIVE ONE THOUSAND PEOPLE PER DAY, OR HE WILL COME HERE BY HIMSELF AND KILL TEN THOUSAND PEOPLE, JUST BECAUSE WE DON'T FULFILL HIS DEMAND! IS THAT WHAT YOU WANT?!"

"AT LEAST WE WOULD NEVER SURRENDER! NOW WE HAVE TO WORSHIP HIM?!"

"SO THEY WOULDN'T HAVE TO BE HAUNTED BY HIM!" shouted Mr. Prow, "Where's Ludia? Where's Rugan? Where's God? Aren't they supposed to help us?"

Mrs. Svylsan sniffed and chuckled out of sarcasm. "You're starting... you're starting to compare God to that abomination?"

"You haven't answered my question! Where are they? Huh!" challenged Mr. Prow. "If they're so powerful and passionate for us, how come they let him come here and terrorize all of us!? You know I'm telling a point!"

She looked at him in the eyes for few seconds, and she chuckled.

"What's so funny?"

"I have the answers. But with your mind, you just can't understand." replied Mrs. Svylsan, much calmer. "At least until you're honest to yourself and to me... what is it that you actually want to do?"

"What I... I want to save everyone... why are you so delusional?" replied Mr. Prow, pulling out his hair.

"That's not the answer, Stef." said Mrs. Svylsan. "Let me know if you figure it out." She walked out of the office.

"Where do you think you're going?"

"Quitting." said Mrs. Svylsan, as she closed the door.

There was then only Mr. Prow, though Mirina, Roven, and Jeremy were still there. She forgot that she was under Ethereal Spell, because she was so caught on their fights, and the boys seemed to be the same. He sighed heavily, released the spell of silence off the room, sat down, and took break, closing his eyes.

“Wel..” said Roven, breaking the tense silence. Mr. Prow was still on break. “Mission accomplished... let’s go back.”

“Hold on.” stopped Jeremy. “Are we not going to talk about it?”

“About what?” added Mirina, confused.

“What is there to talk about? She quits? That’s too bad, but what can we do?” answered Roven instantly. “The dragon eats one thousand people per day? Well, *I hate it*, but there’s nothing we can do about that. We call *him*, *The Great Dragon*? Now that’s stupid...”

“But...” stuttered Jeremy.

“But what? It’s not stupid?”

“It’s all because... everyone’s afraid...” reasoned Jeremy.

“So we should live in fear? I’m sorry, that’s just out of my league.” responded Roven.

“Not everyone is like you, Roven.” said Jeremy, no longer stuttering. She could tell that there was a strong dislike from Jeremy’s face toward him.

“Well, you better start living like me. Believe me. It’s good, and it;s right.” countered Roven. He stared at him in the eyes. It was when Mirina realized that she was just seeing *his real face* for the first time, not the sarcastic or mischievous one. “Because I know what it’s like, calling one powerful entity with respect and worship, all because of fear, not because of purely respect, or love. *It kills*. You just think that it’s about breathing physically and pumping blood.”

“What are you talking about?” said Jeremy.

Roven took out the dark storage stone from his pocket. She couldn’t tell what he was about to do, but she knew it would be something bad. Mr. Prow was still on the break; with Ethereal Spell, there was no way he could tell their presences. She acted quickly, by standing between them, and holding on his hand, and his chest.

It was the first time for her to touch a man’s chest, but she somehow managed to hide her

blush, "Roven, no..." persuaded Mirina, "*Please, listen to me...* You need to go to the clinic..."

She could tell that Jeremy, knowing what Roven might do, prepared himself to counter any spell cast. She also knew that he wouldn't stand a chance.

Roven finally sighed, after seconds of tension and unpleasant thrill. "Well, lift me up, then."

Mirina sighed a relief, and also hid it from them.



## Chapter 4.5

"Where did you get it from?" Asked Mirina.

They both sat at the lake, their legs soaked into it. It was still raining, but she and Roven didn't mind it at all. It somehow calmed her mind from recalling what she had heard, back in the office...

"What?" asked Roven.

"The dark storage, what else?" said Mirina. "That's not a trivial thing to make, even for you, or some stuff you can buy on market..."

"Oooh... I smell underestimation. You think I'm like Vekka, is that it!?" replied Roven, with mischievous smile. At first, it looked to Mirina that he was pretending to be offended, but she then had doubt seeing his face.

"That's not what I mean..." Mirina replied awkwardly, annoyed.

Roven chuckled, before saying, "Alright, alright...this..."

He took out the stone. It looked like obsidian stone, about the size of his hand. It was much blacker, but it didn't glitter, although it looked smooth and slippery. She could already sense its magic luring her into the stone, just like any black hole.

"Is it really made from black hole?"

"Black hole gem. See, black hole themselves can't last forever. Eventually, they'll lose their gravity, and die, leaving some gems behind. This, is the gem." said Roven. "Featuring the same function as black holes, but we can control it."

"But... black holes take so much time to die..."

"We happen to find one that's about to die." said Roven. "We were really fortunate..."

"Okay, but you still haven't told me... did you make it by yourself?" asked Mirina, before realizing how stupid the question was.

As result, Roven laughed. "Silly, no..."

"I know! I know! Just tell me!" Mirina blushed, embarrassed by herself.

He sighed, and paused for a while. The rain started to annoy her, but she chose to let it. She was about to press him again, but Roven answered, "I helped these guys to make these gems. Like I said, it's not easy at all. Together, we make for ourselves ten gems."

Mirina frowned. *Not ordinary sorcerers, must certainly...* "Who are these guys?"

"Ordinary villagers. You wouldn't recognize, but they're all really talented." said Roven.

"Figures." said Mirina. "So why do you all make these?"

"We're going to kill the dragon," said Roven easily. "Yes, it's a really long shot, but we're just beginning. This is just a start. A preparation."

What surprised her was the way he talked about it. It almost sounded like they were going to go for a deer hunt together.

On another side, she was confused. "A preparation... what do you mean?"

"What, of course, to kill the dragon." said Roven.

"Hold on..." She rose from the ground, and lifted her hand. The rain only above their space was shifted sideways, similar to the spell they set up back in the village. His words were clear, without any implication or hidden meaning, but nevertheless it still took some time for Mirina to process.

But to her surprise, he charged first. "Don't tell me that you love to live all your life terrorized by the dragon."

"Are you...?" stuttered Mirina; even she couldn't tell herself why she was stuttering. She breathed in and out to calm herself. "Okay-okay-okay-okay..."

"Spit it out. Don't bother censoring." said Roven.

To his advice, she burst, "*Are you out of your mind?*"

"No." answered Roven, confident and certain. "I don't plan to live all my life terrorized by a dragon, who just comes here, and declares that we must sacrifice ourselves to it, or else. I'm

going to kill the dragon, with them. *Why is that out of my mind?* Is it wrong, or something?"

"Well..." Mirina realized that she was walking back and forth. "First of all, that's against the rules!"

"What rules!? You die by being eaten by the dragon as you're old, or having tons of debts to the kingdom, you have to pay it with your life! No, thank you! I'll pass!" said Roven.

"You'll be branded as a rebel, even by saying that."

"So be it. They're too stupid and frightened to think clear." Roven also stood up. "I'm not sitting still, growing old, and waiting for my fucking time to come, to die by being digested by a fucking dragon!"

"You can't be... how are you going to kill it in the first place!?"

"Well, I have some ideas."

"Ideas!? You mean *theories!* What if the dragon can't be killed!? What if you're found out and busted by the kingdom's knights!?"

"If, if, if... it's still an *if.*"

"Yeah! A very small *if!*" Replied Mirina. "It's very risky, very dangerous, and the chance's *really little!*"

"So what? I should just sit still and do nothing?"

Mirina didn't answer; she could only stare at Roven. His determination was indeed strong and solid, she couldn't see a way to convince him otherwise. Roven then continued, "No. I see a chance. I know it's slim, but unlike those times, when they sent the last remaining fighters, now there's an opportunity."

"What opportunity? What's the difference?"

"It thinks that it has won. That's just natural." Replied Roven. "Overconfidence from an overpowered beast. And we have some people who are just capable."

"Who?! They're all dead..."

"Not fighters, no, we can't bluntly fight in front of the dragon." He displayed the

mischievous smile, the one she often saw from him, "We stay low in shadows, wait and find for a good chance, and then blow a massive charge to the dragon. If it fails, we just go back to shadows, and devise another way." said Roven "And this..."

He showed to her the dark storage gem. "I know this is going to do lots of good. I know it."

Mirina didn't know what else to say. She moved her hand toward the gem. "Can I... test it?"

"Sure." He was about to hand it to her, when he stopped and said, "Just one thing, though... no, some things I need to ask..."

"What is it?" Mirina sighed, and put her hand back down.

"How do you know that this is dark storage?" Asked Roven. "No one would have, and could have known what this is."

"Library." Answered Mirina short. *Surely he knows what I'm talking about.*

Confirming her assumption, he laughed. Even it sounded mischievous, as if he was about to do something bad. "I never knew... you would, *literally*, sneak into the forbidden part..."

"I needed to do something..." Mirina blushed, and looked away, trying not to think about *the accident*. "I needed to confirm it, before I actually did it..."

"Did what?"

"Not a big thing. Doesn't matter. You wouldn't want to know, trust me." convinced Mirina. "Might as well copy them all and read it in spare times."

"Let me get this straight first. You were, *really*, naughty and broke the rules, but you freaked out when hearing that I intend to kill the dragon?" chuckled Roven.

"Oh, Ruvan's spear!" Shouted Mirina, "That's different, of course! That's just school! Your case is worse! You're to break the kingdom's rules!"

"That's not fair..."

"Think about it, Roven." said Mirina, putting her hand onto his shoulder. "I..."

Her mind felt heavy; she was certain that it wasn't by someone's spell. She tried her best to put what she was having in her mind onto sentences. "I understand... I don't like this too... I

came here as well because I... I can't believe they want to..."

"Exactly." concurred Roven.

"But killing the dragon...? Going against the kingdom..."

"Don't be ridiculous. Kingdom's got blind and stupid."

"Doesn't change the fact that it's breaking the rules. The kingdom is the kingdom, no matter what rules they declare. All those, that's no small thing... that's really scary..."

"That's why we need to do it carefully." said Roven. He already continued, before Mirina interrupted, "Yes, *we*. I do hope that you'd come along... join along... I actually need your help."

He finally gave her the stone. As she even touched it, its sensation crept from her hand, into her whole body. It felt almost like taking a huge amount of tacy in one time. Her body felt fresh and empty, a sort of emptiness that she couldn't describe filled her body, as if she was injected with something liquid. It gradually reduced, but slowly. She managed to speak, "This is...!"

"It takes some time to get used to it." said Roven. "Can you tap into its contents inside?"

Just as he mentioned it, she noticed something from the stone. She closed her eyes, and focused on the stone alone. It was hard for her to describe, but as he said, the stone felt much bigger than her grip, but still within her hand. To her, it best resembled outer space above the sky: empty, ridiculously spacious, and without gravity.

She sensed lots of energy inside the stone, raw and uncontained, but not escaping the stone. It looked like white glowing fog. Aside from the energy, she also sensed lots of runes, swords, arrows, bows, food and drinks, and many more inside. They all seemed to be floating in such empty space, although it was simply on her sense of feeling, rather than her sense of sight.

"I can feel it! It's amazing!" replied Mirina.

"I know." said Roven with a grin. He returned to sitting near the lake.

"So, when you want to take something from inside? How does it work?"

"Well, imagine that you're taking something from a pocket." Said Roven. "But with your mind."

"Interesting...!" Without actually looking, she could tell how each sword looked like, such as their details, the carvings, and the spells contained. Among them, there was one that intrigued Mirina. It was a long thin sword, without handle and cross-guard; it was actually more to a needle than a sword. As he suggested, she imagined her hand stretching across the blank space, to grab the sword.

The sword popped out at her right, and she quickly grabbed it. It was light, almost weightless, and looked fragile, but she knew that the sword was far from it. Mirina noticed that the sword had sharp edge, almost invisible.

"Ah, yes, Wh... I'm sure you know of this one, too." grinned Roven.

"White Pin..." replied Mirina. "There's only one hundred of these in the world..."

"I found it in the middle of the forest. It was really just a stroll, stretching my legs." said Roven. "I saw something glittering and glowing in the ground, so I checked it out."

"That's so random..." said Mirina, frowning with suspicion. "It could be a trap..."

"Yeah, I thought so too, until I checked on the sword, and everything around me at that time. I would have known if it was a trap, or something worse." said Roven. "I suppose it was fallen off some time, when they were fighting against the dragon."

"I see... that makes sense..." said Mirina, recalling the past, when lots of fighters were struggling to defeat the dragon. She remembered some of them indeed wielded White Pins, although she didn't really remember their names.

"You can take it if you want." said Roven. "I have lots of swords inside, just as good as this sword."

She gasped, shocked and staring at Roven with disbelief. "Wha... really!?"

"No. You can't." Roven rolled his eyes. "Of course you can. I just said so. I have lots of swords inside. And it's not really my type."

"I..." She looked back at the thin sword; she noticed that it also gave her sensation of increased vigilance to surrounding. She tried swinging it. With its light weight, the movement of the swing was insanely fast; even her eyes couldn't follow it. But it turned out that her movement was also fast.

"The specialty of White Pin. It makes the wielder fast as well, if not too fast." said Roven. "I tried it once, I accidentally hit the wall for going too fast."

Mirina chuckled. "I can't do sword fighting either... not really well. I'll have to train hard..." She lifted the sword up to the sky and looked at it. She naturally felt exhilarated just by seeing it. She looked at Roven, and with a wide smile, said, "Thanks..."

"You're welcome."

"You said that... you need my help...?" She threw back to him the dark storage gem, which he caught easily. "Hold on... is it possible that anyone can access the storage inside the gem, with a bit of mind control?"

"Oh, taking over the gem remotely? I asked the same question to them as well." said Roven. Mirina sat back next to her, and put White Pin next to her. They were still sheltered from the rain. "Apparently not. It only responds and obeys to the first person that touched the stone."

"But I can access it..."

"Because I let it. Otherwise, you wouldn't be able to." said Roven.

"I see." nodded Mirina. She couldn't help but keep looking at the sword, in case it suddenly disappeared from her. "It's astonishing. A pocket safe, with unlimited storage space."

"Exactly." said Roven. "But there's going to be more astonishments..."

She looked at him. Again, he displayed the mischievous smile of his. It felt almost as if he was about to tell a lie. "What is it?"

"We're also working on this project." answered Roven, still smiling mischievously. "I can't tell you yet, but it's just as powerful as this dark storage. Unfortunately, it's... we're not sure on how to make it correctly."

She frowned. Her mind told her to just grab the sword and leave, but she sat still nevertheless. She made a deduction, "Let me guess. That's why you... *you all*, need my help?"

"Yes. I, not we. I haven't told them about you, by the way." said Roven.

Her wrinkle on her forehead persisted. She instantly assumed, "White Pin... that's why you gave me? So that I would help you?"

"No." Roven answered, instantly turning to firm and confident. "You seem to like it... correction. *You like it.* And I already have lots of swords, just like I said before. *I need your help,* and it has nothing to do at all with White Pin."

She just stared at him. In a way, she wanted to distrust him. But he also looked at her in the eyes, without his mischievous smile. *It doesn't look like he's lying...*

"Okay, fine, I can help. But what about joining this... this group of talented sorcerers? Is it a demand?" asked Mirina.

"No... but didn't you say...?"

"I know." cut Mirina short. "Yes, you know what? I hate that dragon too!" she admitted; it popped out through her mouth easier than she thought. Everything she had experienced in the day poured back and filled her mind, including, most especially and excruciatingly, Darran's face, when she saw him in the school entrance. "But I'm scared! This is no small thing!"

"There's nothing to worry about, as long as we watch each other's back and stay low." assured Roven. "Don't worry, you're not the only one who's scared. We all have thought of this, and it could work. By now, we're almost ready on preparing a safe place, and even start the attacks."

"Really? How would you...?" asked Mirina, stopping midway.

"Oh, you'll see." said Roven, smiling. "It's really smart. Better to show you than to explain it to you."

*He didn't want to tell me yet...* "Hold on, I haven't said yes yet..."

"What? You're joining, right?" asked Roven, slightly confused.

"Yes..."

"There it is!" shouted Roven with victory.

"I need you to promise me..." cut Mirina, before Roven said anything further. "That it is really safe. I don't want to get caught... much less having my parents involved...!"

Even by thinking of that made Mirina shivered by fright. Roven assured, "Of course. It will be fine."



"And *we both* can trust these sorcerers as well?" Mirina gave pressure on the word 'we both.'

"I have a good feeling about them." answered Roven, grinning. "We can trust them. Of course, we need to be careful as well. But we certainly can't do it alone. The way I see it, we all need each other. No luxury to work alone and suspect each other."

Mirina snuffed. "You know, sometimes, I wish I could say, 'I told you so,' that you're so wrong."

Roven looked at her, at first confused, but then he chuckled. "Well, good luck for that."

They went silent for about a minute; the rain was still heavy. She lifted her hand, and the rain then poured upon them. The sword was still next to her; she decided to put it on her hold. Her mind was actually still shaken on what she had learned, and Roven's intent and invite didn't help at all.

But somehow, it also calmed her mind. Because she realized that it could actually solve everything.

"What about Jeremy?"

"I personally don't think Jeremy would say yes." admitted Roven. "You see how he was shaken after we sneaked into the teacher's room. If I'm to say that we're about to kill the dragon..."

"He'd lose it. Yeah, that... that sounds right." said Mirina agreeing.

"Did you... intentionally... I mean, did you know about their plan?" asked Mirina. "Since you're about to join these guys, in some insane quest?"

"Not just some insane quest." corrected Roven. "No... I didn't even... I was just surprised as you were. The more reason I need to do this. At least for me... probably for you too..."

"I really don't like it. But..."

They both looked at each other. For a while, she spotted something from Roven, indicating that he was actually dying to wait for her answer. Her heart pounded of fear; she actually couldn't believe what had just happened, much less joining Roven into a long-shot, insanely dangerous quest of killing the dragon, with people she had never even met. The only thing that gave her

strength was recalling Darran.

"I'm in."

"Thank you..." Roven blew his breath in relief.

"Know this..." added Mirina. She wasn't sure of telling it to him, but she did it anyway. "I did it... for Darran..."

"Oh, yeah..." his face turned grim. "Poor Darran... of course."

"Not just for him... but for other grandparents as well... and other people who got eaten, because of their debts..." added Mirina quickly.

"Yes." said Roven, firm, serious, and confident, but still grim as well. "Over fifty thousand people... we will avenge them all."

"Tell me..." said Mirina, suddenly intrigued. "Why do you want to kill the dragon? Is it for those people, or you have other motives?"

"Well, no..." answered Roven, looking away. "I just hate being governed like that... tyranny and stupidity and stuff... sounds stupid, right? Compared to your motive..."

"I don't think it really matters..." said Mirina. "Just seriousness, and real purpose... that's what matters, at least in this case."

"Fair enough..." replied Roven. They both then returned to enjoying the view of the lake, mainly the continuous, never-ending drops of rain onto the lake. It looked boring, but somewhat hypnotizing, as they both just stared at the drops of rain.

## Chapter 5

“Good morning, Mr. Litten.” said his assistant.

The first thing that greeted him was the greeting from the assistant. It made him smile a little. “Good Morning, Reberra.”

“I’m surprised to see you in, sir.”

They entered into the big mansion of the research institute. Just as he entered, he could hear classical music of violin floating and flowing slowly and pleasantly all over the air inside the institute. They both greeted the receptionist at the entrance; he wrote their names on the list of attendance.

“You were still mourning for your grandfather...” said the assistant.

“I’m fine. I wouldn’t come here if I’m not.” said John. “What’s new?”

“The scour team has brought us lots, actually.” said Reberra. “Scales, claws, shards of teeth, even poop.”

“Eeeewww...” shuddered John, disgusted just by hearing it. “What are we going to do with it? It’s fucking disgusting! And the smell...”

“I know, sir. But they insist.” said Reberra. “And considering that they’re, quoting Professor Amber, *for the purpose of fertility...*”

“Don’t mention that person to me in any way...” started John.

“Mr. Litten!”

The sound came from behind. He instantly pulled his breath, controlled himself, set up mask of happiness on his face, turned back, and said, “*Professor Amber. Good morning.*”

“I’m surprised...”

“I’m fine, thank you very much.” cut John. “Let’s start the stud, shall we?”

“That’s the spirit, Professor Litten.” he tapped on his shoulder.

*GET OFF MY SHOULDER, YOU FUCKING ASSHOLE!!!*

“We have lots of stuff to check on.” said Professor Amber. His assistant, Reberra, said nothing.



“Test number eight.” said Professor Amber.

They were in a bright room for observation. There were two assistants, aside from Reberra, who were recording the whole test onto their minds. On the other room, was a scale of the dragon floating in the middle of the empty room. Between both rooms, was a glass, resistant to any kind of damage.

“We’re going to see if the scale can actually stand Death’s Breath...”



Arold Lips walked in. “How is he?” he asked his wife.

Jena was putting a blanket on Deen, as he entered. She could only shake her head, cued him to walk out of the room. She followed him, closed the door, and said, “He walked back here alone, in morning, looking for Joulr, with...” She wept her tears, and continued with broken voice. “No, Arold. He’s not fine at all.”

“What can we do for him?” sighed Arold. “Aside from sending him to asylum...”

“Arold, we can’t keep him here. We’re lucky enough that we have enough for ourselves, without having to be in debts to the kingdom...” said Jena.

“But sending him to asylum is essentially sentencing him to death!” refuted Arold. “This starts from the kingdom, to be honest...”

“I know.” she stroked his hair, going down on his left cheek. He could tell that she was trying not to cry anymore. “But there’s nothing we can do for him...”

Together, they looked at the door. He had a thought about what to do with Deen, but he immediately buried it in his mind.



Professor Amber stood facing against the glass, and looked toward the assistant. John stood at the corner, visible, but letting him performing for recording.

“Death’s Breath...”

*Death’s Breath...* sighed John.

“... is the compound which the chemists created, intended to defeat *The Great Dragon...*”

*Eeeeeewwww...*

“It’s effects are nasty indeed. Highly corrosive and poisonous, and with fire, combusting a thousand Celcius degrees of fire.” explained Professor Amber. “By theory, the scale should be destroyed completely. But today, we’re going to *actually* test it. Reberra?”

“Yes.” responded Reberra. She nodded, and the dark grey gas quickly filled the room. It looked, somehow, slightly disgusting to John, although he had seen much more disgusting stuffs.

It wasn’t transparent. The gas filled and covered the whole room. They all left it for few minutes in silence. John couldn’t help but be curious if it indeed could work.

“Burn it.” cued Professor Amber, after few minutes of exploding the scale to the gas. Reberra nodded. The fire was automatically ignited inside the room, out of nowhere. All it took was a little spark, almost invisible to eyes, and the whole room was by bursting out bright red-yellow light, and the whole room was in fire. It literally lasted for minutes. The heat of the fire didn’t reach to the other side, but John could only imagine how hot it was.

“Okay.” said Professor Amber. “Pull it out.”

Reberra nodded. The gas and the fire were sucked out clean of the room.

The scale was unscathed.

“Unscathed.” confirmed Derrean, using his enhanced eyes. “Like the gas doesn’t touch the scale at all.”

“Is there magic emitted from the scale?” asked John.

“No, sir. There’s nothing magical to protect it.” replied Derrean.

“Interesting.” said Professor Amber. “I suppose the mission would be a total failure. It never hurt *The Great Dragon* in the first place...”

It made John snapped, but he tried not to choke on him, so he coughed, and suggested instead, “But we don’t know anything about the poisonous part yet.”

“Fair enough, though I don’t think that could work...” said Professor Amber.

“Really? How so?” asked John. His patience began running out.

“It’s just a hunch... but a mere hunch is not reliable to make a conclusion, I know.” added Professor Amber. “Well, I think... considering that the acid and the fire do nothing to the scale, one will think that the poison will do any different... but yeah, we can’t tell. No way we send Death’s Breath to *The Great Dragon*, right?”

He burst out laughing, as if it was hilarious. John thought that he actually forced it out, judging from his laughter. The assistants just giggled, and then stopped.

John cleared his throat, and then said, “I’d say that we should keep exposing the scale to Death’s Breath. Finding its limit, you know...”

“Oh, yeah, good idea. Let’s say, a week. Reberra, pour back Death’s Breath in.” agreed Professor Amber.

“Sir, I don’t think the room can hold out that long.” said Derrean.

“Not a problem. Just set it to transfer the heat and the acid that the room receive, to transform them into energy, or waste, whatever’s fine.” advised Professor Amber. “I think that’s all for this recording, don’t you think?” he looked at John.

“I agree.” nodded John, looking at the assistants, to be recorded. “We’ll continue next week, see if the scale’s damaged, unless we need more time.”

He gave them the cue to stop recording onto their minds. They all shut their eyes at the same time, for a second.

“More time?” asked Professor Amber, curious. Reberra nodded; the previous gas and the fire as well filled the room again. But John suspected that he was also suspicious to John’s decision. “One week’s not enough?”

“To test its durability, if we need to stretch it longer than one week. Isn’t that what we’re

trying to do?” replied John. He half-wished and half-thought that he would refute it.

“Fair enough.” nodded Professor Amber. “Very well. Have you set it up, Duvo?”

“Yes, sir.” said Duvo, the other assistant. “The heat goes to energize the building, and the acid as waste.”

“Good.” said Professor Amber.

“Make sure to litter it properly.” said John. “We don’t it to happen again...”

“Oh, you bet, sir.” nodded Duvo; his face turned more serious, frightened as well.

“Calm down, John.” chuckled Professor Amber. “It’s going to be alright.”

*FUCKING IMBECILE...!* “Well, excuse me.” Unable to hold himself anymore, John stormed out of the room.



He stood in front of a headstone, with his daughter at his left and his wife, a bit far behind them, waiting under a tree. It was sunny, but he didn’t mind it at all. He put the bouquet in front of it.

“I think it’s time to tell you...” said Arold, to June. “About Deen Lockard.”

She sighed, with sympathy. “Are you sure, Dad? You’re always...” she then stopped, looking unsure of what to say.

“Sorry, June. It took a while... *a really long while* for me to prepare myself...”

He pulled long breath in, and then out. “Do you know about the battles against the dragon?”

“Before surrendering to it? More or less...” said June.

“The last one was... years ago. Deen Lockard was one of them. A chemist.” said Arold. “It was the last, desperate attack. After that, there were only two choices. Surrender or death.”

“But it failed.” said June.

“Yes.” nodded Arold. “He was the only one that survived from the battle.”

June frowned. "The only one?"

"One of the hundred. Not only did they failed, he lost everyone. His friends, his only son... and he had just lost his wife to the dragon not long before..."

"That's horrible." sighed June.

"You were still a baby. You didn't see how he was when he returned, after losing his son."

"He saw his own son being eaten literally?!"

"I don't know. He already... *lost himself*, when he returned to the village." said Arold. "He just walked around, calling his son, and looking around. It was devastating. He won't talk at all; he only called for his son, Joulr..."

"Rugan's spear...!"

"We had no choice but th send him to asylum." continued Arold. "I originally didn't agree, because..."

He stopped for a while, before continuing, "Doesn't matter. I've always thought that it was a bad idea, anyway."

"Fair enough." said June. "If only they kept good eyes on him... he wouldn't kill himself..."

"This all started from the moment King Brice agreed to the dragon's pact." said Arold. "I wouldn't trust the kingdom to take care of him in the first place..."



"Here's tea, Professor Litten." Reberra came in, bringing tea onto his table.

"Thank you." said John. He opened his eyes, and sipped the tea. The mint of the tea refreshed his throat and his head, as well as calming himself.

"I don't mean to meddle whatsoever, but I don't think it's worth being mad and thinking that the whole day is ruined, just because of one person," added Reberra.

He put back the teacup and looked at the window. It was rather cloudy, which seemed to make the day grimmer. But he could tell that it was still calm.

"Sorry. About... it's not just about him." said John. "I admit... I'm a bit pissed when knowing



that the gas doesn't work."

"Oh..." responded Reberra, a bit surprised. "Yes. That's a shame."

He looked at Reberra. She smiled politely, and somehow, encouraged and comforted him. She continued, "Don't worry, sir. Even if it does fail, we'll find another way of its weakness."

John grinned. "Thank you... for the encouragement."

"Just doing a good thing, that's all. I think I would be just as devastated as you are." said Reberra.

"No, seriously, thank you." replied John. "I mean... not everyone can understand... everyone just worships that dragon... how ridiculous!"

"Fear makes people do irrational things." said Reberra. "That, and despair. They just do that."

"Fair enough." replied John. "That's interesting, have you ever experienced that...?"

"In fact, I have,,, not really a big thing, but, yeah, you can't think clear because of it." said Reberra.



"Granpa...!"

The room was only about two by two meters. There was only a bed, a chair, and a table inside. The whole room was white, with a single light bulb in the middle of the ceiling, not a window or a painting in the room.

Even Arold wore only white dress and white pants, with white shoes. John immediately took the glasses on the table, and put it on him.

"John! How are you doing?" smiled Arold, with weak voice. Though he was old and tired. with wrinkles on his face, his smile still didn't change.

"I..." John stopped, unsure of whether he should be honest.

"Sorry..." Arold gestured for him to sit next to him. He obeyed. "That must be a stupid question. Of course you're not fine."

“I... I’m going to miss your Granpa...” said John, more pathetic than he thought would be.

“I’ll miss you too, John.” said Arold gently.

“I should have been walking harder...”

“No.” cut Arold. “You’ve done your very best, don’t bash yourself, Never think that you don’t do enough.”

“But I still haven’t found it. If I had, you wouldn’t be here...”

“And it’s fine. It’s not easy, I know.” said Arold. “But it’s okay — you can’t punish yourself, just because of this, do you understand that?”

“Yes, Granpa...”

“Just promise me.” They looked at each other’s eyes. He tried to hold his tears; otherwise, it would blow up and flood like a blown dam. Arold, however, looked calm, and rather comforting.

“Aren’t you afraid, Granpa?”

“A little...” Chuckled Arold. “But mostly, no. *I rather can’t wait to see the dragon*, in fact.”

“Oh, yeah...” Smiled John weakly.

“Remember.” Said Arold. He no longer smiled. “Keep looking for the weakness.”

“Yes, Granpa.”

The door was opened. It was an officer. “Time’s up.” Said the officer, short, cold, and annoying. Before he replied, the door was already closed.

“It’s just... not even five minutes...” Grunted John.

He felt his hands surrounding him, around his neck and his body. Though it smelt a bit funny, the hug felt so warm and gentle. He also replied it, trying not to hug tightly. His sorrow disappeared; there was still a tad of fear as well, but seeing that Arold wasn’t afraid, he automatically felt the same as well. “Goodbye, Grandpa...”

“Goodbye, John.”

He walked toward the door, when the door was opened by the officer. He brought another

visitor for his grandfather. The officer was on his left, so he winked to John with his right eye.

# Chapter 5.1

“Are you sure about this?” asked the stranger, a bit nervous.

Arold stood up. His strength was weak, but thanks to his zeal, he managed to do it alone. “I’m the one who came up with this idea. What kind of question is that!?”

“Very well.” sighed the stranger. Arold lifted his hands to sideways, calming and relaxing himself. The stranger put his hands on his chest, and transferring the gas into his body, keeping it within a spell of containment.

“We don’t have much time, you know...” said Arold.

“Excuse me, this is not easy as eating.” said the stranger. “I admit, this is insane.”

“Fair enough.” said Arold. “Let me guess. Roven?”

“Who else? You can’t have safer and better containment spell from anyone else. Except Mirina, maybe.”

“I’m honestly surprised he can make it.” praised Arold. “How is it activated?”

“The moment you get into its mouth,” said the stranger. “You’d be dead when... sorry, before it blew up, so don’t worry.”

“Tell me. *When* or *before*?” asked Arold.

“Before. I misspoke. It’ll be nasty. It’ll get into its inside wholly.”

“Good.” said Arold, gladly.

“Unfortunately, other people will get it as well. So they’ll die by the gas instead, not the dragon.”

“That can’t be helped. They want to be eaten anyway.” said Arold. “And speaking of that, *how’s the infiltration?*”

“Still needs more time. But we’re definitely going to do it.” said the stranger.

“Very well.” responded Arold.

Just as the door opened, the stranger went into hugging him. Arold automatically pretended to hug him back. “Goodbye, Arold.” said the stranger.

## Chapter 6

“Why...?”

His left hand was bleeding quite rapidly, its blood dripping onto the ground. He quickly drank the healing vial from his pocket. The result worked instantly; his pain reduced gradually into nothing, and his blood stopped flowing.

“Why what?”

The kingdom knight in front of him stood still and strong, even confident. His both hands held swords. With helmet, he couldn't tell if the knight smiled with satisfaction, cruelty, and mockery, although it was more likely.

“Don't you have mercy...?” grunted the rebel. “Sympathy?”

“Well, in a way, yeah. But what can I do?” replied the knight. “It's the law. You don't break the law.”

“Then join me!” shouted the rebel. “We can find a way to kill the dragon!”

“Don't be ridiculous. There's no way to kill *Him*.” said the knight. “Hurt *Him*, yeah, but kill *Him*? Nah, that's impossible.”

He could hear some sense of respect and worship toward the dragon, from his voice.

“It's a long shot, indeed.” the rebel lifted his sword. “But nothing lasts forever. We just need to keep going on...”

“Oh, that.” chuckled the knight.

*He's been smiling!*

“That's like, the biggest philosophical bullshit ever. Or theological. Whatever.” mocked the knight. “Look at *The Great Dragon*...”

The rebel automatically spit on near the knight's legs. “You know, that's a serious insult...”

He shook his head with disappointment. "You can't be a hypocrite... not like this..."

"I'm sorry?"

His tone sounded normal, but the rebel sensed that the knight was triggered by his words. He decided to test it again, "You think you can insult me, but I can't insult you!?"

He raised his voice. "You really think this one dragon doesn't die? What about the skeletons in Black River? That's a fake!?"

As he predicted, the knight charged forward and struck him, no longer talking. He had anticipated it, by blocking the sword. The vial also restored his strength and speed, fortunately, for a quite long time.

"Let's see how long that vial can hold out." said the knight instead.

*Little did you know...*

The knight swung and stabbed with his swords. His strength and speed were indeed creepy, for the rebel. He could barely find a chance for himself to actually attack, rather than deflecting and drawing back, while the knight kept charging forward.

*I need to run...* thought the rebel. He started looking around.

Behind him was a river, about ten meters' wide. It was a bit rapid stream. It was either crossing across the river or getting carry the stream, but seeing the speed of the knight, he was certain that the knight would have an opening.

Behind the knight was the forest, which would make better choice.

*I need to switch position...* thought the rebel. But it almost seemed like the knight was aware of it.

His movement was abnormally light; even a simple walk was done by a small bounce. It was as if the gravity didn't work on him, yet he couldn't push him away. He could even flip himself with a single kick on the ground, swinging his swords and legs easily. The rebel suspected that it was his armor; the knight wore full iron armor, covering almost every part of his body, from his feet to his head.

Instead of intimidating, he was instead intimidated. It was now less than a meter for him to the river. He couldn't find an opening on the knight. He strength was still there, thanks to the

vial, but in a way, his intent to distract the knight and gave up his life on the fight already withered.

*And I'm not really good with swimming...* thought the rebel to himself. As far as he could tell, there was nothing and no one he could use to escape. *Fuck, what should I do?*

In a second, everything seemed to be out of control. He lost balance and fell down backward. That moment, he was on defensive position against the knight, and he kept it that way, despite that he was surprised and falling over to the river.

It turned out that the knight tripped him over with his legs. He spotted and realized it only after he fell down on the river, having his body soaked.

*No choice! I have to run!*

He pushed himself away with his legs, as powerful as the vial granted him, deeper toward the river. The knight, as he predicted, chased him toward the river. The best thing he could do was pushing himself away with his legs, and defending himself with his sword and his hand — he wore chain gloves as protection — all while maintaining himself from turning and drowning.

The knight didn't get into the river. He floated above the river, as if there was a rope that kept him from getting into the river. While the rebel was floating on the river, the knight now faced down to him and attacked him with both his swords and legs. The dangerous part was his swords, but his kicks were no less weak and annoying.

Almost as if the knight could hear his mind, he swung a kick, which made his position turned and lost balance.



"You're good?"

"More or less... Hurt..."

They both carried her on their shoulders into the big mansion. Harren had to push on her wound on the waist. It bled quite quickly, even though he clearly pressed on it tightly.

"Don't worry, we'll take care of that..." Said Louie.

Healers already stood by, ready to intercept them. The moment they entered the mansion, the healers lifted Pia with magic, and carried her along, faster than Harren and Louie did. They



two followed the healers onto the medical room, just few meters from the entrance, and put her onto one of the beds.

“This is no ordinary wound!” Said one of the healers.

“Yes! Something that keeps the wound open and the blood flowing!” Said Pia.

“Ugh! Why do I even push it?” Harren wiped the blood off his hand onto his robe.

Both of the healers put their hands above the wound on her waist. She could already feel the aura of magic from the healers, going onto her wound, as one of them said, “Careful, or it’ll bite you back...” It felt cold, but also hurt, which had nothing to do with the cold sensation. She couldn’t do magic, but even she could feel the magic of the healers, fighting against the other one in her wound, and even into her stomach.

Thankfully, Harren and Louie were beside her, holding her hands. She gripped on their hands tightly, and focused on those grips, such as how they also held tightly on her hands, how big and warm their hands were, compared to her cold-sweating, small hands.

“It’s that bad, huh?” Said Louie.

“Worse... Call Chief right now! He must know...!”

“About what?” Chief quickly entered into the room. Pia looked above from her position. Mirina and Roven was also behind him, as she predicted.

“Chief!” greeted Pia with relief. “Thank God! I... this is bad! They’ve found our secret about our main base!”

Chief immediately looked at Roven, who looked at him and Mirina back and forth. Even the others looked at Chief as well. They all had one same look on their faces: worry.

“How?” Chief looked at Pia intensely, before shaking his head. “No... that can wait. Get recovered right now.”

“What about the case, Chief!?” asked Harren.

“They can try.” said Roven, comforting. “If not getting way more desperate if they do know our main base’s true nature.”

“Yes... by the way, that doesn’t look good.” said Mirina, looking at Pia’s wound with

concern. It was a simple flesh wound by the spear, quite big, but it appeared that the spear had curse attached.

“This wound has spell on it! It’ll stay open, and keep the blood flowing out to death!” explained one of the healers. They still maintained on destroying the spell, but it felt even more hurt than before; she tried not to grunt.

“A powerful one...” said another one. “I’m sorry, I need help... we need help!”

“Good thing we’re here.” said Roven, rolling up his sleeves. “You ready, Mirina?”

“Anytime.” said Mirina. Without further ado, Roven and Mirina joined with the healers. She went to Pia’s left, while Roven to right, next to the healers. They both also pointed their hands toward her wound.

The aura felt even stronger, but also sharper, as if they put a handful stack of needles onto the wound. She couldn’t hold herself anymore, thus she left herself lost control, by screaming and rebelling. Mirina stretched her other hand, toward Pia’s chest. She realized that she held from rebelling against the pain. “Fuck... how much longer!?”

“Hold on.” replied Roven. “It takes too much time to destroy it. Let’s pull it out from her body instead.”

“It doesn’t want to...!”

“You focus on healing her. We can separate it from her body.” said Roven. “Do it fast, before the spell do its job.”

“Understood...!”

It did look weird from Pia’s perspective, seeing for people with their hands above her wound. Louie and Harren was still there; they gave space for Roven and Mirina, and stepped back. Chief also waited next to them, all looking worried.

It was vague intuition, but she could feel that they were about to succeed removing the curse from her body. It was like something big and spiky inside her stomach, about to be pulled out through her open wound at the waist, although she was aware that it wasn’t a concrete thing at all.

The worst aspect was the pin. She let the scream out, as loud as she could do, as Mirina

advised, "Just scream. Don't hold yourself." From the corner of her eyes, she could see that Louie and Harren looked frightened. Only Chief grinned to her as encouragement. She clenched her hands and stretched her legs. Because of Mirina's magical hold onto her, she could only move her head upward. Her eyes looked toward the light at the ceiling, but it didn't bother her at all.

The abnormal pain suddenly disappeared, replaced by her pain from her wound, and exhaustion all over her body. She stopped screaming, realizing that the hold on her body suddenly disappeared as well, but it turned out that the scream and the pain took so much of her energy, she couldn't rebel or even rise from the bed. She looked at them.

The healers still had their hands on her wound, healing it. Roven and Mirina, on the other side, was levitating a glass sphere with their hands. They then stepped away and let the healers do their job. Chief, Louie, and Harren took a look on what they were containing.

"What is this?" asked Chief.

"The spell..." answered Roven.

"The curse." corrected Mirina. "This is a nasty one."

"Really? It looks nice and fluffy..."

"Where? Let me see!" insisted Pia, about to stand up, but her body appeared to be too weak to even sit.

"You can't move yet!" Your wound is so bad! You're even almost dead by loss of blood..." said one of the healers.

"Here." Roven floated it to front of her, displaying it to everyone. He set it quite high above Pia. "It won't, like, fall down and get into Pia anymore, right?"

"Don't be ridiculous. It's one hundred percent secured." said Roven.

It was like a very small round fluffy pillow in green, inside a sphere of glass. Under the light, it appeared to reflect the light partially and weakly. *It did look cute...*

"Appearance can be misleading, especially those of spells." said Mirina. "Almost every spell appears cute and nice, behind containment or seal, but you'll never know until you sense it."

"So this is the curse... that was put on me...?" said Pia.

“What is it? Have you ever seen it?” asked Chief.

“No... this is a new one...” said Roven. He lowered it and looked with close attention. “Yeah, this is nasty...”

“How do you tell that? asked Harren. “It still looks cute to me...”

Roven rolled his eyes. “Duh. If you have it in you, you can plain out feel it. I thought that’s obvious for everyone.”

“What? I’m just asking!” replied Harren, a bit irritated.

“Your question is a bit obvious.” commented Louie.

“Mirina’s right.” said Chief. “Appearance can be deceiving. Think you can counter the curse next time?”

“I’m not sure...” said Roven. “Even by me... the best course to do right now is removing it f the body.”

“Hmm...” Chief frowned with concern, before finally saying to Pia, “You’re good now?”

“Yeah... now that the curse’s off...” admitted Pia. Though she was still weak, she felt so much better, enough to talk with focus. “They found out where our base is...”

“Did they know the details of our base?” asked Roven suddenly.

“They know enough that the base is mobile. Always moving. But not really detailed, I can be sure about that.” said Pia.

“Are you sure about that?” asked Roven insistent.

“How do they even know that?” said Mirina.

“They did suspect... that we’re mobile... we always managed to avoid them...”

“Too perfect, in fact, that they began to suspect.” said Mirina, nodding. “Of course...”

“So what? We give ourselves up?”

“That’s not what I’m saying.” replied Mirina. “So what’s the problem?”

“They figured out the way to track us... they don’t know what exactly it is, but they claimed... I found out that they always caught a small scent of the aura...” said Pia.

“I see. They realized it.” nodded Roven with grim.

“Wait. I thought that we’re completely undetectable...” started Harren.

“Where did you hear that from? It’s *almost undetectable*, as I said.” corrected Roven.

“They must have developed a new method of sensory.” guessed Chief.

“Perhaps we should make a permanent one?” suggested Mirina. “Just to make them think that they’re wrong, when actually they’ve been right.”

“Not bad.” replied Chief. “Although it’s going to take a while...”

“Even with Roven and Mirina helping?” said Harren. “I mean, they’re two of the most powerful sorcerers in the kingdom, if not the world...”

She could see Mirina blushed, almost like a ten-years-old child, despite her age. “Oh, Harren, don’t be silly...”

“Well, we can make it faster.” commented Roven, neutral. “Doesn’t change the fact that it’s going to take a while. This has to be perfect, or it’ll be vain and they’d see through our trick.”

Pia sighed. *He was still irritated about them...* “Thank you, Roven, Mirina, Evon, Lidia...”

“I still don’t get it, though... are you sure they didn’t mention something, like a spy, among us...?” asked Harren.

“I would know if they had any, Harren. Fortunately, they didn’t have spy on our side.” said Pia. “But that’s...”

Someone else entered the medical room. He instantly went toward Chief, but speaking for them all to hear. “Chief... we found Remen on the river...”

Hearing the name ‘Remen,’ Pia immediately rose from her bed, but her body was still too weak. “Hold on... you need to rest, completely...” said Lidia.

“How... how is he?” asked Pia instead.

“He didn’t make it. I’m sorry...”

She naturally shut her eyes. With her pain gone, and her strength gathered, just enough to think clear it, she held herself from crying, or even letting her tears fall down. She also breathed in and out, and clenched her fists. *I'm the only one...*

"It's not your fault, Pia." He felt Chief's hand on her shoulder. "We all know what we assign ourselves for."

She then opened her eyes. His words, somehow, calmed her, although temporally. "That's... not the only problem..."



"Are the preparations ready?"

King Brice stood at the balcony of the highest tower in the castle. The cold wind didn't bother him at all, with his long thick mantle warming him. His eyes were nailed on the sunset; it was about thirty minutes left for the sun to set down, behind the mountains.

*The mountain at the farthest left...* thought King Brice. He tried his best not to look at the very mountain, although the place was actually beyond the mountain.

"Almost, My King." answered Sir Terrace short.

"What about the rebels?" said King Brice.

"They won't..."

The door was opened. For once, he was surprised, so he turned back to look who was entering.

He sighed with stress. "Sir Amycus."

"My apology, My King..."

"Have you no sense of respect and honor to the King...!?" started Sir Terrace.

"Don't be silly, Sir Terrace. Of course, I have respect and honor to My King!" He then bowed down in a quick move, in front of King Brice. "Unfortunately, I come here to bring urgent, ill news."

"What ill news?" Asked King Brice, stepping into his bedroom.

“The transport station had been infiltrated by the rebels.” said Sir Amycus.

Listening to his report, both King Brice and Sir Terrace gasped. “How...?” began King Brice.

“I’ve been asking about that myself, too.” replied Sir Amycus. “The station’s severely damaged, as well as the backup port.”

“How damaged? What kind of damage?”

“Total wreckage and toxic gas. And persistent one, too. Even by now, they’re still working on getting rid of the gas.”

“Have they no sense of logic?! If we fail to deliver one time, even for a minute, His Greatness would be outrageous.”

“It seems like they’re originally to deliver the gas... whatever it was, specifically for Him only, like any before.” suggested Sir Amycus. “But somehow, they failed...”

“Good for them!” said Sir Terrace.

“What about the food delivery?” asked King Brice, concerned.

“We’d have to deliver the food traditionally... manually.”

“Impossible! We can’t afford being late on delivering...” said Sir Terrace, panicked. He even dropped his sword onto the floor.

“Food’s delivered. I’ve taken care of that.” said Sir Amycus. “What’s rather concerning was the fact that these infiltrators were, mostly, seniors.”

“What do you mean!?”

“People who had been working in the station for years. Lots of things run through and by them.” Said Sir Amycus. “They must have most certainly known everything. And I’m afraid, including the *food plan*.”

“Are you suggesting that we should put the *food plan* on hold?!” shouted Sir Terrace.

“At least to fool them. They’d try to wreck the plan.” said Sir Amycus.

“Where are these infiltrators?”

“Most already escaped, and some were dead.”

“You don’t think we’d interrogate these scums by scouring into their minds, you had to kill them?” scolded Sir Terrace, looking at him with powerful hatred. “Do you always have to play your enemies?! Like what you did to that scum, back in the river?!”

“I don’t see why we need to. There isn’t much essential we need to know about them, if not none at all.” replied Sir Amycus.

“I’d never understand why you could ever be a knight.” mocked Sir Terrace, shaking his head. “Such stupidity...”

“What would we need to know? Their base? Mobile. No point in pinpointing the location. And it’s indeed hard. Members? We know enough of their executives, including Roven and Mirina...”

Sir Terrace spit on the floor, as he listened to the names. He then quickly apologized to King Brice, “Apology, My King.”

“No need to spit just because of that, Sir Terrace. Especially not in here.” teased Sir Amycus, before continuing. “None of them are to be threatened, because either their families have been secured, or they don’t care at all. We know enough as well, that they’re are talented, powerful, skillful, and deadly. Objectives? Screw The Great Dragon and throw *figurative* middle fingers to us. It’s not that mysterious, really. We’re the ones that are mysterious. We’re the ones that are in critical position.”

“I’d expect you to keep ‘capture first, execution later’ mindset in the future, whenever you face an enemy, Sir Amycus.” sighed King Brice.

“If you say so, My King.” said Sir Amycus, bowing down. He saw Sir Terrace grinning, while looking at Sir Amycus. It wasn’t something genuine or friendly at all; it was rather that of some sort of satisfaction.

“Sir Terrace is right. We can’t postpone the plan. Our time’s running out, and *the food is thinning out.*” continued King Brice. “We have to make sure that they wouldn’t manage to wreck the plan.”

“With all due respect, My King, they would most certainly try to fail the plan. And they would succeed.” said Sir Amycus. “I’ve seen the wreckage on the station. *They’re not playing easy.* I’m sure they’re devising a perfect plan to fail us as we’re speaking. I’m still thinking that



we need to postpone it for a while, or at least, think it through again. Perhaps taking another direction..."

"Is that not your job, *Sir Amycus?*" started Sir Terrace. "*Ensure that the rebels won't cause more havoc toward The Great Dragon and the kingdom?*"

"Exactly." He smiled toward Sir Terrace. King Brice frowned with fear and concern: it was usually an indicator of him building and containing his rage inside, waiting for the moment to let it released and exploding. His hands were already onto his dual swords.

His memory of Sir Amycus *slaughtering* the rebels flooded his mind. Sir Terrace, however, didn't seem to notice the sudden danger of his smile. He quickly said, "I'd trust it to Sir Terrace. Do whatever you need, but my decision is final: it can't be delayed. Your job, Sir Amycus, is to hunt down the rebels, *alive first, for interrogation*. You can play them just after interrogation. Now leave me alone."

*At least, don't solve your problems in my palace...*

"Yes, My King." said Sir Terrace and Sir Amycus together, before leaving his bedroom.

*Finally, some peace...* thought King Brice. He returned to the balcony, to enjoy the sunset. It was now about ten minutes left to sunset, according to his prediction.

*Toxic gas... Death's Breath...?*

By recalling Death's Breath alone, he grunted with anger. He immediately called, "Luia!?"

A servant came into the room. "Yes, My King?"

"Bring me tacy! Ten times the usual amount!"

# Chapter 7

It was green, fresh, and had lots of green color, with bits of blue and white color.

King Brice walked slowly on the mountain, while enjoying the view of the forest and the fresh air. The end of his dark green mantle got dragged as he walked, sweeping the grass and leaves off the ground. His hands kept touching the trees' trunks, feeling its harsh surface. It wasn't as soft and comfortable as his dresses, but there was a certain trait of it that he loved. He even rubbed his hand against the trees, to feel the bark. Strong, solid, crunchy, and most importantly, real...

But the transition from green beautiful forest turned to desolate and grey ground, was drastic, insane, and unreal. There was a clear line between the forest and the bare ground, and he just noticed that the line expanded toward the forest, slowly, but surely. On the desolate area, there was only dry, grey dirt, already rotten and useless for any function but filling holes. The trees, the flowers, the plants, the mushrooms, and even the grass weren't there at all, as if it never existed. Not even a small chunk of rock.

King Brice realized that it was slowly engulfing a tree at the forest side; one side of it was literally turning to dust, falling onto the ground or being blown by wind, and eventually disappeared. Even the air was different. It felt heavy and almost unbreathable, as if he was drowning in ocean.

But the most confusing and scariest part was the fact that his sense of calm and peace were switched by fear and unease. It was flat ground, nothing one could use to hide, but he kept looking back and over his shoulder, as if there was someone watching him, toying with him and disappearing from his sight.

"Stop it!" shouted King Brice, before quickly adding, "I'm sorry... I just don't feel comfortable..."

He decided to keep walking forward, going ahead, toward what made him shivering in fear.



The rest of the peak of the mountain was covered in thick fog. He could imagine The Great

Dragon, sitting on the peak, looking down at him, through the thick fog. But the fog was just as grey as the ground, and he had never had magic inside him to see through the fog.

He stopped few meters from the fog, and shouted, "I'm here! Let's talk!"

He then heard footsteps from the fog, approaching and getting louder. He restrained himself from running away in fear, especially after seeing the one that approached him.

It was a human, wearing a knight armor, and holding a sword with his right hand. He walked just as normal as an ordinary person would. However, the normal parts stopped there.

His skin was almost as white as paper, while his eyes was just as white; there were no cornea of pupil whatsoever. He spoke with his own voice, without any other voices behind.

"We finally met, *King Brice*." Said Eddorn. "Not technically, of course, but this is a start."

"You..." he was about to say, "How dare you use his body!?" but managed to control himself.

"This?" Eddorn looked at his own body, and answered as if it was nothing. "This is just a vessel. *An appearance*. I figured that I might need some of these bodies. Just in case."

He gasped of utter shock. "*Other bodies?*"

"For something personal." chuckled Eddorn, but it sounded far from his *original* chuckle that King Brice had known. "Doesn't matter."

He began circling King Brice. He couldn't help but kept turning, his eyes set onto Eddorn.

*This is not Eddorn...! He's long gone...! This is just His play...!*

*Let's just get this done and be gone from this wrecked place!*

"We're here to talk about some issues." said The Great Dragon. "The rebels?"

"They call themselves 'The Last Fighters'." said King Brice.

"Highly descriptive. They are right, indeed." said The Great Dragon.

"Please understand, we're trying our best to fulfill Your quota..." spoke King Brice, respect and fear mixed into one. "But these rebels are not as easy to get rid of as we thought..."

“Apparently...” concurred The Great Dragon. “You seem to seek for My help. Are these people the same ones that gives Me a person filled with Death’s Breath?”

King Brice turned pale, on the brink of losing consciousness, because of the word ‘Death’s Breath,’ the fear of His wrath, implied in His tone, and the recalling of the incident. “Y-Y-Y-Yeah...”

“Hmmm...” he nodded, pondering. For a while, King Brice was slightly relieved. *Perhaps He is actually understanding...*

“P-Perhaps... if they happen to see your... *your wrath...* upon them, perhaps they would surrender... and realize how wrong...”

“No.” cut The Great Dragon, so sudden, he thought that He would kill him in an instant. He even stepped back, almost running away; it seemed that He was either not aware or ignorant about it. “I’ve seen them fighting in the station. They know what and who they’re facing. They won’t back down and give up in fear.”

“Really...?” asked King Brice, shivering in fear. He was thinking of asking how He could have known of the incident in the station, before eventually cancelling it.

“Fine. I’ll aid you for this one.” decided The Great Dragon. “Only because you people are just too weak.”

“T-Thank you, My Lord...” King Brice bowed down, kneeling and bowing his head down to the grey dirt; it felt somehow right and crucial for him to bow down, all for The Great Dragon to calm down. There was a certain, but weird relief, that no one else was there to see him bowing down to The Great Dragon, humiliating himself. He then stood up slowly, restraining himself from cleaning his hair.

“I’ll expect no less than three thousand people starting from tomorrow.” added The Great Dragon.

The sentence was almost like a literal punch, physically onto his gut, and mentally onto his heart. It made him stunned, unable to speak and move, he could only stand still.

He wasn’t sure of what happened, other than blankness for few seconds. The next thing he knew, he was hanging by his neck, onto Eddorn’s hand, few centimeters from the ground. His grip turned to be strong, choking him just enough. His neck also felt stretched by his body’s weight and the gravity, while his head stayed above and hung.

“Do you hear what I just said?” said The Great Dragon. He sounded calm, but fury and danger were so clear and obvious in his voice.

“Y-Y-Y-Yes...” King Brice tried to speak.

“Do you even understand it?”

“Y-Y-Yes...”

He let go of him. His neck was still in pain of being choked, even though it was liberated. He then said, “Come.”

He looked at Eddorn, who apparently walked away from the fog. He quickly stood up, and followed him, asking with confusion, “W-W-Where are going, My Lord?” His voice was still hoarse, although the pain slowly relieved.

“What? I’m offering you My help!” replied The Great Dragon. “This is My help!”

It took some time for King Brice to understand what he meant. He gulped, before saying, “You... you’ll come down to the kingdom... by yourself... with this body...?”

“This body is more than enough.” said The Great Dragon. “A strong knight, he was.”



Amazingly, the grass and trees around him didn’t wither to dust, as they both walked down the mountain, back to his wagon. The travel back from the mountain felt longer to King Brice, almost like forever, especially with The Great Dragon in front of him. As they were close to his wagon, King Brice hid his fear, cleaned his head, and pretended to act respectful, as if they were equals.

He heard The Great Dragon chuckled.

His guardians were smiling for one second, but then turned pale as well, when seeing them both. He was about to introduced Him, but He already said, coldly, “Yes, it’s Me. The Great Dragon. And yes, this body was of Sir Eddorn. Get used to it.”

“Y-Yes, sir.” stuttered Sir Terrace. He also bowed down, although not as low as he did. The rest of the guards followed.

“I heard you’re also planning on *increasing and aging the population drastically*, right?”

said The Great Dragon, looking back at King Brice.

“Y-Yes, My Lord...”

*How could He even know that...!? Did He look into my mind...?!*

A scroll popped out of nowhere at his hand. He then gave it to King Brice, which he accepted with shaking hand. “This should help *the plan*. It’s not bad. Just some corrections, that’s all.”

“I... yes, t-thank You, My Lord.”

“*And some favors as well. All are included and explained in the scroll.*” He then turned to Sir Terrace, and asked, “Now, where’re these rebels?”

## Chapter 8

With the chariot driving insanely fast, and the unpleasant, abnormal weather, she had to put up a spell to protect her face from the sharp coldness. “How much further?” asked Mirina.

“Shouldn’t be much longer...” answered Fortu, whipping the horses.

She summoned her sword, the White Pin, onto her right hand, and held it tightly. Fortu himself already summoned his spear... “I always love that weapon... and I got stuck with this spear...”

“Really? Right now?” scorned Mirina.

“What? Relax! No use to be panicked!” replied Fortu; he even looked calm and relaxed, while whipping the horse to run faster.

They were riding through the forest, across the dirt road. The leaves hadn’t turned yellow and fallen off the trees yet, although she suspected that it should have already been done. The sky itself was clear blue, with clouds all over the sky, and the sun was high, right above them.

But she realized that it slowly turned from green and brown, to grey.

The whole forest, as they went forward, transitioned from green and beautiful, to grey and dead, with fog, even though the weather was clear. Even the air felt unpleasant, in the way she couldn’t explain. She could see Fortu also turning pale, as they entered the dead area. The horses were about to riot and turn back, if not by Fortu whipping them harder and keeping them in line.

There was a pillar of fire ahead of them, bursting up from the ground. It took just a second for Mirina to realize that it was more than a mere pillar of fire.

“It’s here...” said Mirina with dread. “They are facing against the dragon...”

“No. We would have seen the dragon from far away. It must be its doll, or something...” refuted Fortu. “Just get ready... we can’t ride the chariot anymore!”

They both jumped off the chariot, and continued running forward, while the horses stopped, and freaked out by the aura. They tried to turn back by themselves, but split up and

went in separate ways, even though they were bound to each other with the wagon. As result, they whined and pushed the wagon backward, which just moved a bit. “No time for handling the chariot...”

“Agree.” said Mirina short.

The path turned to left and right, but they went straight forward and broke through the trees. The closer they got, she noticed that there were sounds of clanging swords, roars, and fire bursts, turning louder and, somehow, scarier, as they approached. The air also smelled drier and fouler, and the sensation of fear grew more immensely. Her sword, pointing out at her right, happened to slice a tree by accident, but the tree turned out to be soft and weak, less sturdy to cut, as if it was of sand.

“Let’s jump in and strike, surprising it.” Fortu’s spear sparked, about two thirds of it engulfed in pink fire.

“If it doesn’t know yet that we’re here.” replied Mirina. With her sensing spell, she could tell that they were just few meters left...

With the trees being easy to break, they broke through them, and jumped into the battlefield. Mirina threw the sword to right in a spiral move. The Pin, as she wished, flashed toward the enemy, spinning into spiral, while the thread, sharp, unlimited, and almost invisible, connecting the sword and her right hand, floated toward the enemy.

Fortu jumped even higher, piercing with his fiery spear. The fire from the spear burst down into a thin, but hot pole of fire, even Mirina could feel the heat. The fire pole struck down within seconds, toward the enemy...

It was a knight, seeing from the armor *he* was wearing, covering from neck to feet. *He* also held a long sword, heavily tainted in blood and rust, but even from such a distance, she could see how the sword was incredibly sharp. It was indeed an undead, seeing how pale his skin was, and how plain white his eyes were, without pupils at all. The face seemed familiar, although she couldn’t be certain about that.

*His* mouth, however, was wide open and torn over cheeks, and his jaw was lowered beyond normally. As result, fire burst out from inside, through the mouth. While *he* breathed fire toward Lucius, who blocked it with his shield, he was pushing with the sword against Kivi, who could barely hold the press.



As fast as Fortu attacked, the knight was also fast avoiding the fire piercing strike, but also no longer pressed against Kivi. At the same time, he blocked White Pin from stabbing his head, and shifted the fire breath from Lucius to the thread.

*He knew...!?* Mirina could feel the heat spread toward her hand. She pulled the thread off the fire, while focusing on pushing with the sword instead. Fortu tried again, making a fire slash off his spear, about three meters' long. She pulled Kivi and Lucius away with her thread.

The knight burst red fire against the slash. Although the slash insisted on charging forward, it eventually was pushed by the breath, and then broke. Fortunately, Fortu already landed on the ground.

Without a break, or at least a bit of introduction, the knight breathed toward them. Lucius immediately shielded them all. It automatically emitted protection spell all around them, although it didn't stop the fire from surrounding them completely. Amidst the fire, she could tell that the knight instead deflected her sword, and stepped back.

"Thank God you're here..." shouted Lucius.

Before he continued, she suddenly sensed imminent danger, closing and charging toward them. It was rather a matter of instinctive decision-making, where a slight of doubt would be fatal. She stepped out of the shield, and with her left hand, cast a spell to blow him back, while with her right hand, setting up the thread to make a slicing net. *Come on! I'll mince you to pieces!* Smiled Mirina.

But as she suspected and feared, the knight drew back, just as instant as he charged forward.

*What, he can see the thread, but is weak against it?*

Fortu showed up far enough behind the knight, and made as plenty slashes as he could. As counter move, he sucked the fire slashes into his mouth, and leaped off away from them.

"Kivi, get out of here!" Mirina took the chance to tell her, "We'll handle this...!"

The slashes *he* breathed in turned into fire breaths instead. While Kivi ran away toward where they came from, Lucius charged forward in flashing speed, using the shield as protection. Mirina followed behind him, and set up spikes of the thread, all around the thread.

*I think he's afraid of my thread...* contacted Mirina to Lucius and Fortu.

*What? Why...?* thought Lucius.

He punched on the ground. With a single punch, it was blasted and destroyed; there was even energy released through the chunks of dirt and rocks, powerful enough to shake their balance, even though they were few centimeters above the ground. But Lucius leapt off and kept charging forward, so Mirina set up more, longer, and bigger spikes of thread, curving over and around Lucius' shield, toward the knight, ready to *grasp on him*.

The knight burst fire behind him, to open way for him, and drew back, to avoid the thread. But he also threw his sword toward Lucius' shield. It didn't break the shield; it instead stopped their momentum, and even pushed them both a bit.

*He's afraid of the thread! That must be his weakness!* Thought Mirina. She stretched the thread toward *him*, but *he* simply avoided, or blocked it with his sword; apparently, it could work similar to hers.

*Or the doll's... remember, we're not fighting against the dragon itself...* replied Fortu. He made more slashes before landing, significantly hotter and more powerful than previously. As usual, he breathed them all into his mouth.

*Remind me to equip poison onto my spear...* said Fortu. "Lucius, with me."

*I'm not sure poison will do any good to undead...* added Lucius.

*No, but we can infect the muscles or bones. That would be really toxic.* said Fortu. *Fire's just not good...*

*Be careful. He might be listening...*

Lucius then went along with Fortu, while Mirina stepped back and focused on striking with the thread. They went side-by-side and held each other's hand, repeatedly switching roles: Fortu struck with piercing and swinging movements, and Lucius acted as protection and slamming; both of them kept the knight busy from striking her. Mirina used the thread as long-range attacks, mostly from behind the knight, while also provided them to draw back whenever necessary.

It appeared that he opened space behind him, probably five hectare, larger than she thought, thus giving *him* free space to dodge her thread. The fire already finished engulfing everything on its path, leaving dead, grey-colored dirt, open. *I need some time to cover the whole area...* thought Mirina, as she already started pulling the thread all the way under the ground. The White Pin kept spinning around the burnt area, as fast as it could.

*Hopefully, he doesn't know it...* thought Lucius.

While covering the ground, the knight swung *his* sword toward them, after slashing through the ground below him. The swing tore the ground open, and by it, throwing chunks of stone and dirt toward Lucius and Fortu. It was fast, fortunately enough for Lucius to switch and protect. Mirina was rather concerned that *he* might accidentally got the string. *Did he know that I'm setting up the thread underground...?*

*How much longer?* said Fortu. The knight kept fighting with fire breaths and the sword. The only thing they could do was charging and shielding, as Fortu's spear couldn't do anything at all.

*Soon...* said Mirina. By her prediction, it was supposedly enough length to anticipate the knight's movements. But she nevertheless decided to prolong it, just in case.

*I spot something incoming!* Said Lucius suddenly. *Small, fast, and... it's not good, whatever it is!*

She looked up. With the grey sky as the background, it was easy to spot, because there was nothing else. It seemed to be a bird from a distance, but when she put her sensory on, the bird turned out to emit a strange, disgusting aura, the kind she had never imagined before in her life, much less encountering it.

It dived down toward the knight...

That's enormous... must be for aiding the knight...

*Alright! On it! I'm ready! Get off!*

As White Pin burst out of the ground, aiming toward the dashing thing way above them, the circles of the thread popped out of the ground, immediately turning into a giant dome and trapping the knight. She also pulled them both away from the dome. *I should add some more...* thought Mirina to herself, as she added the length further.

It was quite challenging for Mirina, having to focus on shrinking the dome, leaving no gap for him to escape, adding more length, and piercing whatever the dashing thing was. It obviously had its own mind, because it repeatedly avoided the stabs of her sword.

*With that size, it could slip...!* While the sword kept aiming at the bird thing, she tried to cover any available gap of the dome.

There was a very bright red light from inside the dome. It turned out that the whole dome of the thread was filled by fire, which went even beyond. Before she drew back, a shield was thrown ahead of her, protecting her from the fire. It took some time for her to realize that it was Lucius' shield.

The heat spread all over the thread, and toward her hand. She had to set up spell, to keep the heat repelled from the thread. She also realized that the knight was holding the shrinking with his sword and brute force. *Yeah, he can't stand the thread..*

*I could barely see it...* thought Lucius. They both went up, to destroy the bird thing as well. This time, Fortu shot the bird with fire burst from his spear, which grew and expanded bigger. She was quite sure that the bird thing was engulfed by it, but on the other side, she was a bit frightened, seeing them both way above the ground, without shield, or any kind of protection. *Okay, I still have my thread at them...*

*It's not working... I knew it...!* The bird flew away from the fire burst, unscathed and fast. It circled around the dome...

*Fuck!* cussed all three of them.

*You covered all the gaps, didn't you?* said Lucius.

*Still a bit more...* said Mirina.

*It can't get to Sir... the knight, at all cost!* screamed Fortu.

## Chapter 8.1

As he saw closer, Fortu realized that the bird was no ordinary bird. It was a sort of a dragon, with the size of an eagle, with the dragon-like scales, reptile-like head, and bat-like wings. As it stuck on the knight's shoulder, he could feel the enormous surge of power already inside the body. Its color, however, was dark brown, contrast to the white color of the knight, or the grey color of the surrounding, almost like mud color.

"Fuck...!" cursed Mirina. She kept shrinking the dome anyway. The thread was almost invisible, although sometimes he could see it glittering even under the pale, weak sunlight. As the dome shrunk, the ground was sliced to minces of dirt. He guessed that it also went underground.

But the knight, grinning with intimidation, walked toward them; he didn't even bother blocking the thread or breathing fire. He simply walked toward them in relax, no longer taking it seriously. It alone gave to him that he was already at huge advantage, with the bird thing giving him enormous power surge.

"I bet he's going to phase through the thread..." predicted Fortu.

"Fortu..." advised Lucius.

"That power surge, you can feel it too, right?" replied Fortu.

The knight phased through the thread, as if it was just an illusion, like what Fortu predicted. "Not good..." cursed Mirina. She decided to cancel the dome and pulled out the thread back to her. He walked steadily and quietly, even though the ground was minced to bits.

"Mirina Flint, The White Pinner." said Sir Eddorn. It was exactly his smile and his voice, the one it sounded like before he *died*. "And... I don't who you two are, but no wonder they fear you people."

Fortu looked at Mirina, who stayed vigilant and ignorant. It seemed that she didn't recognize who he was. "You... you were dead..." started Fortu.

"You know him?" asked Mirina, looking at him.

“I’m surprised you know me...” responded Sir Eddorn. He stopped, giving a distance of a hundred meter.

“I know I’ve seen his face somewhere... Sir Eddie, or something...”

“Sir Eddorn.” corrected Fortu, with grim. “One of the last fighters sent to defeat the dragon.”

Mirina just gasped with shock; she indeed hadn’t realized who he was, while Sir Eddorn chuckled. “Isn’t this already obvious, with the white skin...?”

“Is it you...? Or it’s...?” Fortu couldn’t make himself continue. Although it was more likely, it sounded worse and worse the more he thought about it.

“Doesn’t matter.” said Sir Eddorn, lifting his sword. Fortu, Mirina, and Lucius responded by standing in defensive stance. He could feel massive amount of energy already emitting within his body, and toward his sword.

*Mirina, at my right, and Fortu, my left!* said Lucius. *We need to stick together.*

It was about a hundred meter, when he swung his sword, and made a huge energy slash, approaching fast toward them. It was brown as the color of the bird behind him.

In a second, Mirina and Fortu switch places, as Lucius suggested. He himself stepped forward, and stuck his shield on his chest. It was round, curving, and huge, from wrist to shoulder, and it stuck on his chest by magic, without disrupting his movement. The slash hit the shield, and though it’s powerful enough to shield them all, it pushed him backward. Mirina and Fortu held him by his hands to stop the momentum: Mirina from his right side, and Fortu from his left side.

*Locked!* said Fortu. They all together casted binding spell on their hands, so they wouldn’t be accidentally separated.

*This is basically you fighting him with Fortu’s spear and White Pin. Don’t hesitate.* added Mirina.

Following her advice, he swung both his hands forward, against Sir Eddorn, as if he held both the sword and the spear. Mirina threw the White Pin, as fast as a blink, and Fortu burst fire from his spear, as big, hot, and powerful as he did previously.

As reply, *Sir Eddorn* swung for another slash. From its appearance, there was nothing, but

Fortu knew he did make a slash, the kind which was invisible.

*Something to repel the attack?* thought Fortu.

*Your attack. He can't do anything with my sword.* responded Mirina.

The fire burst went straight to Sir Eddorn, which he avoided, but the invisible slash simply passed through it. They bounced back, replaced by Lucius, and let him set up the protection spell of the shield. Mirina's sword bent and flashed toward Sir Eddorn from his left. He breathed fire to his behind; the fire instantly destroyed the other part of the forest, expanding the barren side.

The bird thing was the one that grabbed the sword with its beaks. She kept pushing her sword, and the bird thing kept biting the sword. As result, Sir Eddorn was pushed along with the bird thing to left. Fortu instantly shot another fire burst, and it managed to hit his chest. His hands were pulled to his back, tied by her thread.

*We got him!* shouted Lucius.

*Maybe you should aim his head... or multiple vital points of his body...* commented Mirina.

In the next second, he, and the bird thing, seemed to explode into mud, a bit darker than the dark brown color. It's within the radius of ten meters, nowhere close to them. Fortu realized that Sir Eddorn and the bird thing simply exsuded the mud from within their bodies. He was too excited to think of where it came out from.

But Fortu realized that it wasn't mere mud. It was a sort of magical energy, similar to his fire burst and his slash, just with the appearance of mud. What startled Fortu was the sensation the mud gave to him. The mud, almost physically, gave aura or echo — he couldn't be sure of which one was the correct term — of utter, unreasonable fear and disgust, as a stinky stuff would do. He noticed that it also gave sense of numbness.

The most interesting, and weirdest, part, was the sensation of pain it gave: even though it didn't made any contact with him, his hand, holding his spear, felt unpleasant tingling sensation. It was like stretching his hand toward big fire: it was warm at first, but between being safe and being burnt, he could feel the early feeling of pain and heat, and sense of warning toward the coming danger, that the sensation would increase and appear into actual pain.

He looked at Lucius and Mirina: they appeared to feel what he felt as well. Lucius was the one most scared among all three of them; he was certain that Kivi would be shocked to death, should she have stayed with them. They all said nothing, but without needing to speak, they leapt

back quickly, as fast as possible, until they were safe from the sensation. It appeared to him that the sensation was a sort of attack just within a small radius.

*I should have imbued poison on my spear...*

Sir Eddorn and the bird thing seemed to be still *alive*, but probably severely wounded, as he weakly and slowly rose among the mud. The bird's beaks were cut clean by her sword, which had already returned to her. It was clean, unaffected by the aura of the mud. However, none of them continued attacking. They rather stood by and watched with attention.

*So this is the power surge from the bird... said Lucius. That's... disgusting...!*

*No. "Disgusting" is nowhere close to describe it. It's... toxic... contagious... dangerous...* replied Mirina, putting it correctly. *I've never felt or seen this kind, not even from the dragon...*

"Too much..." Fortu heard Sir Eddorn saying, in really low voice. Mirina and Lucius happened to hear it too.

*It's not healthy for himself as well, that's for sure. We should keep fighting, forcing him to use it, until he can't hold it anymore...* suggested Mirina.

*Let's keep a distance from the mud. I'm not sure the shield could take it.* requested Lucius.

*If that's the case, you keep attacking, Mirina.* Said Fortu.

*Good point.*

She made a huge slashing swing of the threat, with her sword. Fortu could see the thread, although almost invisible, curving toward Sir Eddorn, expanding, and even slicing the ground. He shot fire bursts, to close and block his movement.

Sir Eddorn seemed to be in unbearable pain, but then leapt backward, far as a hundred meter. Fortu tried to limit his movement, but he moved faster than he anticipated; some bursts were simply swallowed.

"Oh, terrific!" Fortu broke his binding with Lucius, and threw more rapid and wider attacks. He saw that she also broke her binding, and threw more attacks. Lucius simply stood by, watching on him, Mirina, and Sir Eddorn, ready to throw his shield for protection.

After seconds of avoiding all the attacks, without any attempt to attack, he finally attacked, by breathing, not the red fire, but the very mud thing toward Mirina. Lucius threw the shield to



protect her, either by reflex, or for other reasons.

It did shield her, but he noticed that the mud moved around the shield, to engulf and swallow the shield wholly. Mirina, also noticing it, decided to dodge with her thread.

*It's swallowing the shield...*

*I thought it could protect from any kind of attack...*

*Well, before this, we had never known such a corrupt energy, no?*

The *mud* breath became more rapid, and wider. The shield itself fell onto the ground, permanently *corrupted*, as Lucius suggested, and without anything else as protection, they had to dodge every *mud* attack he threw. Lucius attempted some protective spells, only for testing *the mud* itself, but none of them worked against it; it simply swallowed the spells, and integrated with them. It didn't change the spells, but rather *contaminated* the energy imbued with the spells. From sensing it alone, it almost felt like turning the spells into literal big sacks of poop.

*It really doesn't work... it swallow everything!* said Lucius.

*Mirina... it didn't swallow your sword, isn't it?* said Fortu, as he realized it. *I mean, your sword even were sunk in the mud for a while...*

*You're right...* admitted Mirina. She simply threw the sword toward Sir Eddorn. Despite that he avoided it, the White Pin kept chasing him, while the thread kept attempting to block him. He could do nothing but avoiding it; he even forgot bursting the mud breath.

*Keep limiting his movement.* thought Mirina. *Even if it's just fire bursts, just do the best you can do.*

*Right away.* responded Fortu, making more slashes.

## Chapter 8.2

Roven approached his colleagues in fast pace. He noticed that they looked at each other, and himself as well, rather concerned. "What is it?" wondered Roven.

"Oh, yeah, you haven't known..." said Gavour. "The dragon attacked..."

"What?!" startled Roven.

"Yeah... not indirectly, though... it used an undead body, Sir Eddorn..." said Gavour.

Roven immediately shut his eyes, holding himself from losing control and crying. Gavour continued, "It attacked Kivi and Lucius. Mirina and Fortu were already there, they were fighting against... *him*, as we speak... but from what Kivi said, it was a really fierce one..."

"Should we help them?" suggested Zarc.

"And abandon our plan? Fuck no." refuted Roven. "We'll have to trust them for handle him... an undead body... we have our own mission, remember?"

They all nodded in agreement. Their response alone encouraged himself, as he grinned and said, "Right. Remember our plan. We must succeed..."

As they said, the station was insanely crowded, but rather by soldiers. At least only two out of ten in the station were mere passengers, getting on their trains; Roven could tell that they all were nervous. They all avoided the black train, as lots of soldiers stood still, guarding the train, and keeping the people away with their swords or spears, and fierce faces. For every less than a meter, there was a standing soldier. They all looked everywhere wildly, almost as though they were expecting things going wrong.

Rocks and cement became the main pattern in the station, including the floor. They were cut and polished perfectly, smooth and clean, and even partly glittering. The sun bathed half of the station; despite that it was quite sunny, it looked somehow pale. Roven for once thought that there was something wrong with his eyes, that someone altered the light into pale-like.

Roven carried his bag, and went toward his train, just the closest one from their target. The train was also crowded, as every passenger walked through the corridors, and looked for their

compartment. Almost everyone even had to levitate their bags way above them. *What... there aren't that many, right?!* wondered Roven to himself.

Eventually, after passing by the ocean of humans, he managed to get to his own compartment. It was already crowded by adult men about his age, leaving only one spot for himself. He simply moved his bag into the luggage above his seat, before sitting.

He took his novel from his pocket, and started reading, but his eyes pried onto the gentlemen around him. Those near the window nailed their look outside, way above the station, toward the sky and the barely visible mountains. The others decided to read books, or to smoke with their ridiculously-shaped pipes. They all appeared, predictably, grim and pale as the sky.

*None of them seem to be skillful sorcerers... just ordinary people...* sensed Roven.

The train shook in one sudden move and a loud sound, before slowly moving forward. It gained speed, from a normal walking pace, and increasing gradually. The station felt as though shifting away, replaced by the scenery of the mountains and the sky, including the swarms of the soldiers.

As they departed, the tension and the silence lifted.

"Finally..." said the man near the window. "It feels like ages."

"Are you nervous by them?" the one next to him chuckled.

"You have no idea... why are they here, anyway? What are they guarding?"

"A tribute to The Great Dragon, perhaps. I heard that they were making a special concoction for... *the food*, to drink."

*I have even never heard of that.*

"What? What for? Making *the food* more delicious!?"

"Even if that's the case, why would they need tons of soldiers and a whole train for that alone? This is not the station to The Great Mountain, right?"

"I'm just guessing... it's just a rumor, anyway."

"A dumb rumor, that is."

They all laughed off the joke, while Roven just stayed still, reading the book and waiting for the moment. The train was already out of the station, in the speed of about a hundred kilometers per hour. *A little bit more...*

“In all honesty, I’ve never seen them like that... so many soldiers for guarding a train...”

“Must be guarding it from the rebels. They’re pretty serious.”

“Oh, yeah, of course. That makes sense.”

Roven noticed that each of them secretly set up a spell to record everything they were seeing and hearing, as he felt very little sparks of casting spells, almost easy to miss for those without sharp sensitivity. *Oohhhh... they’re about to talk some sensitive stuff...* teased Roven.

“Ah... fucking rebels... causing nothing but problems and fear and panic.”

“I admit, they do cause fear and panic. For a reason.”

“What reason? They just struck The Great Dragon, without thinking the consequences! Remember when they attempted to attack The Great Dragon with that gas? The whole village was burnt alive!”

“I mean, that the reason is, they feel pressed, threatened, ruled with tyranny. At least, to them. I’m just saying, by the way.”

“Since when does reason matters, when it’s just wrong?”

“I’m just saying... we need to learn the why. What caused it, where it comes from... perhaps we can do something about it. Fix the problems from the roots, you know.”

“Whatever. Nothing justifies sacrificing villages to His fire. Period.”

*It’s time...* Roven kept his book in his pocket, and walked out of the compartment. He could tell the others looking at him with suspicion, but he nevertheless neglected them.

With the train already departed from the station, the corridors were empty; everyone was inside the compartments, and no one walked across the corridor but himself. He kept walking forward, toward the engine room. He sensed the spell of prying eyes, following behind him, through his own compartment. *You think I couldn’t tell that you’re watching me?*

*No matter. You can’t do anything for it.*

Reaching to the first carriage, he summoned his *cane* onto his hand, and tapped it on the floor, as he walked forward. All energies from the whole train, any kind, were sapped into the black, half-round stone on the top of his cane. He could hear thumping sounds from inside compartments, some with weak groans of fatigue. The spell of prying eyes behind him gradually dissolved into nothing.

As he reached into the engine room, around the coal carriage, he took off his disguise. The train engineers were already faint on the floor. The engines were still running, on the speed of two hundred kilometers per hour. *Controlled with magic, only for the engineers. No problem.*

He lifted the main engineer's hand, and pointed it toward the engines, while the stone of his cane on his head, inserting some of his energy just enough, without waking him back. Through the engineer's energy, he slowed down the train; the beat and the work of the engines' sounds slowed down as well.

He looked out, and spotted away fireworks, toward which the train just went. Even though it was bright and clear blue, he could see its dark red color, contrast and strong, visible even under sunlight. As the train gradually slowed to stop, he pointed his cane forward.

He pulled his breath in and out, and closed his eyes. To put it easier for him, he recalled all the practices he had done for months. *You can do it...* he encouraged himself. He let the sense of emptiness from the stone, flowing and associating with his own energy, but not too much to the level where his body could be destroyed.

*Just like Ethereal Spell...* thought Roven to himself. *Become one, but not too much...* Roven told himself, and thus, convincing himself to do it. *Control it... AND OPEN!*

Slowly, but surely, a black hole opened in front of the train, big enough for the train. The train itself was swallowed into the hole, now with slow speed, and almost stopped. The mountain, the sky, and the forest, shifted into their base, a gigantic mansion, and blackness, but not without light. It slid right on their own self-made railroad, inside *the dark storage*. There were already about fifty people standing by next to the railroad. Despite the excitement, Roven maintained his focus, and let the train passed through the hole until the last carriage.

Just after the whole train entered the black hole, he shut it down. One of them then jumped into the engine carriage, "Well?"

"Well what?"

“Is there a problem?” asked Scort. He grabbed the engineer’s hand, and pointed his own toward the engine, changing the engineer’s *signature*, with his own. The train pulled the brake, and quickly stopped.

“Well, overall, the hijack’s fine, obviously... but Mirina and Fortu are dealing with the dragon... its doll, to be exact.”

“Oh, yeah, I heard that.” said Scort. The rest already moved the faint passengers out of the train, by making a trail of floating passengers, into the huge mansion. Scort himself moved the engineers out, joining them with the others. “From what I can tell, that’s not good at all... what can we do about it?”

“Unfortunately, we have our own mission to do. I believe they can handle it.” responded Roven. He returned back to focusing on opening the other end. *Okay... let’s do it again...*

## Chapter 8.3

He sighed heavily. It was probably the first time she had seen him sighing with such reluctance.

“Please! You have to help us...” begged Kivi again; she even almost used the word ‘must.’  
“You saw it...”

“Yes. I know... I don’t want to risk my position here...”

“It won’t, believe me.” said Kivi. “We wouldn’t ask you this if we could handle this by ourselves, you know that. *But you saw it.* It keeps spreading, as we speak, right now, and if we don’t act soon, it will keep spreading even to the kingdom, and kill everyone!”

“The problem is... if that... *thing...*”

“The way I see it, from what you showed me, not even containing it alone is enough. Not even with the ivory flasks...”

“What? Are you... are you, for real?”

“That thing, *that energy*, it...” he paused for a while, sighing and wiping cold sweat off his forehead. “I need to be there to be certain, but if I’m to guess professionally... it’s a godly energy...”

“What kind of god has that kind of nastiness...?”

“I don’t know... by ‘godly,’ I mean that it’s omnipotent... absolute... no humans... I think, not even people like Mirina can resist it...”

“But her sword can... it’s made of substance outside this world...”

“Yeah, but White Pin is only designed for physical offense. This is nowhere close to ‘physical.’ It’s not designed for other kinds of offense.”

“The more reason we need your help. Please...”

He sighed. “Is this a choice, where I can say no, anyway?”

Kivi was silent for a while. From his look, it seemed that he was rather pressured to say yes. *Did I actually force him on helping us?*

“No... not morally...” even Kivi sighed as well. “I don’t know what will happen if it gets to the city, but I’m sure it won’t be good.”

He grunted, “Fine. I need your help for this.”

“Of course. I’ll be glad to help you. What kind of help?”

“A distraction.” said Mr. Lips.



*On the second thought...*

She strolled slowly across the pale white corridors, having her eyes scanning through the name plates on every room. None of them had glass windows to look through. *Chemistry testing room... where is it?*

The most distinct part of the corridors was the smell, which was weird to her, although she knew it was the kind of hygiene. Its stench alone was too sharp for Kivi’s nose. She had to put up spell to cover the smell. She passed by a pair of scientists, who were looking at a clipboard and discussing in seriousness, wearing white lab coat.

*How could they stand the smell...?*

“... If there were side effects?”

“Supposedly, there’s a chance of mortality...”

*Let me guess. The fertility elixir?* thought Kivi, with rage. *So it has a chance of mortality.*

*But, honestly, since when do you care about side effects?*

She had to bite her lips, to hold herself from stabbing him. “Good afternoon, Mr. Lips.” greeted both of them to Kivi.

“Good afternoon...” she threw her thin smile, with his face. *You sick white dickheads...!* The couple passed her by, and continued discussing the side effects. Kivi fixed her white lab mantle, and continued searching. *Focus. Chemistry testing room... where, where, where...?*





It took ten minutes for her to search the room, as she eventually found the room. She took the totem Mr. Lips gave her, from left pocket, and put it on the door to unlock and open it.

It was a small room, with two giant wardrobes. Inside it were protective wearings, which was simply transparent hazmat suits, fully covering from head to toe. Next to the wardrobe, was another door.

*You must use the hazmat suit, and go through sterilization room, for a minute — the door will open after it's done...* she recalled Mr. Lips telling her about the room. The door had no glass to peep through, so Kivi had to set up spell to sense anyone's presence around her, as she wore the hazmat suit.

*No one's around... good...*

The sterilization room was dim and tiny, about one by one square meter. As the door behind her closed, she noticed that the room showered her, with water and dew. She had a feeling that it was more than mere water and dew. *Man, they took this seriously...*

The water and dew stopped spraying, as the door ahead of her opened. She had no trouble walking with the hazmat suit; it rather felt to her as if it was just imaginary, non-existent suit.

The next room, where they usually commenced testings on chemicals, was gigantic. It was probably about the size of their mansion base. She found two big round flasks, containing blood red and pink-colored liquid substance, in front of long desks filled with plenty of chemical equipment. It looked partly weird, but also somehow interesting. It was also a dark room, where the only things enlightening were glows from the chemicals in every flask, and magical brightening around the desks. It reminded her to rainbow, but black sky as background.

*They all have labels on them. Pour retrixine in a big measuring flask. Find gargoyle blood and benzondixe acid, mix them both into the flask. Each one three hundred milliliters. Then get out of there immediately.*

It took a shorter while for her to search for it; she collected everything she needed in less than two minutes. Even with the spell of sensing the surrounding, she still looked around over her shoulders in concern, in case someone suddenly showed up. *Still no one around...*

She looked at the door. *I suppose the door can't be opened immediately...*

For testing, she ran toward the door, went into the sterilization room, and tried to open to the hazmat suit room. But as she guessed, both the doors didn't open; it instead sprayed water and dew to clean the suit, although she hadn't made any serious contamination.

*Guess Mr. Lips forgot about this issue... I need to set up timed and automatic mechanism.* She returned to the lab, and set up the mechanism for all three flask, to mix them all into one flask.

*Five minutes should be enough...* thought Kivi. Two of them were floating above the *retrixine* flask, ready to pour out after the time ran out. As soon as she finished it, she quickly went away.



*Fuck, two people are coming this way...*

*I need to hide...* So she decided to make herself invisible, as she entered the sterilization room. It took a minute to sterilize, as the procedure, but it rather felt forever to Kivi; she kept forcing to open the door. *Come on, come on, come on...!*

*How big is it?*

*The entire facility... that should be enough for the distraction...*

She tore the hazmat suit open, and kept it back in the wardrobe, not even bothered with keeping it back neatly.

As the wardrobe's door closed, two scientists walked in. For a second, they both stopped talking, and looked at the wardrobe with suspicion. Their eyes then looked around, searching for anything suspicious; one of them even went to the peep in the sterilization room.

*They suspected.*

*They alerted the whole lab...*

So without a doubt, she summoned her club, and hit the peeping scientist right at his head, with a single hit. Even though it was also invisible, the second scientist, realizing what happened, casted a wide attack over all corners of the room. Although she was pushed away quite harshly onto the wall, she threw the club toward his head, as strong as she could. As it hit his head, even weakly, the scientist already fell down unconscious, before touching the ground.

She could already hear running footsteps from afar, but closing in fast. *The guards... about twenty people. They're really serious about the facility...*

It was a matter of making decision in a second, she had to force herself to put it in action. She made them invisible as well, and levitated both of them out of the chemical testing room. He put each one of them on each end of the corridor, leaning on the wall, a bit distant from the room. Using the scientists' energies, she set up powerful paralyzing spells on both ends of the corridor. *That should do it...* thought Kivi, as she finished the spells, and left immediately.

Just when she took off her invisibility, the guards showed up ahead of her. Some of them carried staffs, while others swords, but they all looked ready to kill, judging from their faces. She couldn't help but gulp in nervousness, and automatically stepped aside. Two of them immediately came toward him, "Mr. Lips, did you see anything suspicious?"

"N-No... wha... what happened?" asked Kivi, genuinely panicked.

But it didn't stop them from suspecting *him*. The one with sword pushed her against the wall, put it on her neck. As she complained, and cursed with Mr. Lips' bass voice, "What the fuck...!?" but the other one moved his long staff, few centimeters in front of her face, as if to scan...

*Shit! How could they...!?*

She could tell the disguise about to be lifted from her face. Before they react further, she summoned the gas bomb onto her right hand — it was simply a black ball, about the size of an eyeball — and dropped it.

The whole corridor, and beyond, was covered with black, stinky gas, covering their sight and smell, as well as disrupting their sensory magic for a while. She kicked the two, and ran away, throwing away her disguise.

*Maybe I should throw more...* thought Kivi to herself, as she paused for a while, and threw two bombs to the guards.

There were other two guards ahead of her, as she turned left to escape. Unlike previously, before they responded, she moved firsthand, by leaping forward, spinning around the corridor, and passing over them, while throwing the sleeping darts onto their back. Both the guards instantly fell down, sleeping.

As she searched for Mr. Lips around, she then encountered some scientists. With her

wearing black robe with a hood, the scientists screamed and turned back, running, as if they saw a horrible misfigured entity. *Not good...* thought Kivi, as she put up invisibility back on herself.

She heard sounds of magical explosions from nearby, which was quite loud. *Ha! They got into our trap!*

She began encountering other scientists, running toward the exit. Fortunately, she was invisible, and agile enough to avoid clashing them, even though she had to crawl on the ceiling. Her eyes couldn't help but scan for every face of the scientists, looking for Mr. Lips.

*No, no way he escaped... he's not a coward.*

Eventually, all the scientists and the staffs left the building. She could hear lots of chatter outside the building, not in details, but simply obscured mumbles of fear, concern, and confusion. From inside, she simply caught the footsteps of the guards, running all around the corridors. It was then the moment when she noticed that doors of each room dissolved into walls.

*Security protocol... no one enters or exits... that's good.*

She encountered another five guards, who happened to turn their backs to her. She threw them sleeping darts on their backs; one of them happened to turn, as he realized his colleagues falling down, but Kivi already hit him. She then carried two of them along, unconscious, with levitation, when she heard a person coming from behind.

"Kivi!" called Mr. Lips, as she turned back.

"Ugh! I almost threw a sleeping dart to you! Where were you?"

"Hiding — what are you doing with the guards?"

"Figures we may need to blow the walls... the doors were gone, right?" said Kivi.

"No need." said Mr. Lips, swinging his hand down. The guards were put down on the floor. "I have access to call the doors back during emergency, with my totem. Come on, we don't have much time." He summoned the transparent hazmat suit from the air, and threw it to Kivi. "Wear that. You'd need it. And help me get them all out."

## Chapter 8.4

The blackness and the mansion shifted into the bright, sunny sky, and the panorama of the mountains. As the train just started, it already gained high speed.

“I admit, it’s not as immediate as I imagined...” said Scort.

“Don’t worry. We have enough time.” assured Roven, looking at his watch. “Actually, we’re just few minutes late...”

“See?!”

“Calm down, we’re fine. We made it.” said Roven. “The real problem is what’s coming...”



They managed to catch up with the black train, their target. Both the railroads shifted closer to each other, and the trains flashed forward in high speed. There were about twenty soldiers, patrolling and standing on the roof — even though the speed was quite high — and even more inside. They were already in alert when their train came closer.

Roven looked at the sky: there were only few birds flying around, passing over the trains. *Looks like they didn’t watch over the sky.* “Okay. Are they ready?”

“Yeah.” said Scort short. He simply pulled the train whistle, which was already modified. Instead of train whistle, it blew a huge, loud and long bass sound of horn.

All the carriages of their train were *literally* torn open, huge enough for the rebels to jump across. They all jumped across to the black train: seven of them on the roof, while the rest flooded the carriages, through every narrow window. Having surprise attack, lots of the soldiers were already taken out, while only few of them still stood.

Scort smiled with satisfaction; in minutes, there were only few soldiers remaining to take out. All the soldiers on the roofs were out. But Roven immediately went up, and looked around with suspicion and concern. *It’s too easy... where...?!*

“What is it?” Asked Scort from inside. He saw that the rebels — almost all of them —

jumped back to their train; they all looked scared. One of them, which Roven didn't recognize, went to him, saying, "We have problem!"

"That's more like it." said Roven spontaneously, in relief. "What is it?"

Before he even mentioned it, Roven spotted something from inside the black train. It was something of liquid substance, as black as the train, and it moved quite fast through the carriages, from behind to front. It quickly covered the entire carriages, even including the remaining soldiers of theirs; there was one rebel left behind, but he was pulled into the substance by his leg.

"That..." answered the rebel, "is something I have never known about at all..."

In seconds, the black substance filled the entire carriages, leaving no space to get in. Filling all carriages to the corners, it looked solid, as if water filled the carriages and froze to solid ice in a blink.

"What is that... *who is that*, Lord Roven...?"

"Roven's enough, thank you." Corrected Roven, in full alert. "I'd guess it's a new knight..."

The black substance *popped out* big spikes, through the windows, onto the train. They were just as big as the windows allowed by size, but it was enough to impale the whole train, and dropped it off the railroad.

It was within a second, but Roven was ready. She stretched his right hand, and *the shield*, in his right hand, automatically protected the train from the imminent attack. The spikes could only hit the invisible, cylinder-like shell, without inflicting any kind of damage. Their carriages reformed back to their normal shape, when the spikes were retracted back.

"I did hear that they raised some new knights, but to think they put one up onto this task..." said the rebel.

"This one must be good." Continued Roven. "I'll take care of this, don't worry."

He jumped across to the black train. The railroads of both trains then began shifting away from each other. He spotted from his corner that Scort was redirecting the railroad back to stay close, his hands stretched to front. The rebel returned to the carriages.

The black substance crawled to the roof, few meters from Roven's position. It then

reformed into a shape of a body, but that was all it had done. *It* didn't show *its* true form.

*"Roven... I know you..."* responded the substance, with male, but heavy and inhuman voice.

"A new knight, aren't you...?" Gussed Roven. He put his left hand behind, preparing a spell to cast.

*"Leave this train. I'll let you live, and your people too..."* said the shade, ignoring Roven. *Doesn't look like a young man... but...*

*Maybe I can still persuade him...* "I've come this far to ruin the project. I'm not going anywhere." Said Roven. "But you, on the other hand... it's not too late yet..."

*"I'm loyal to my kingdom, and will always have. And you should be, too..."*

About twenty spikes came out of the train, curving toward him. The most troublesome part, was its speed and suddency. Roven was almost killed, if not by his reflex to cast out his shield. As offense, he cast a spell of absorption toward the knight, he held a nearly-transparent bubble on his hand, and pointed it to him.

All the spikes were instantly absorbed into the bubble, and when he was about to do so to him, the knight stepped back, away from the range. Although he managed to absorb some, it appeared to be a ball of the same black substance, contained within the bubble. For few seconds of absorption, he already got a plenty of his energy.

*This is unlike any other...*

The knight then burst out the substance, as big as the train, toward Roven. It was too many for him to absorb in once, so he jumped back to his train, by his reflex, absorbing just a portion of it.

His instinct told him to attack, but he tried again, "Don't you have families? Your grandparents, or anyone with immense debts, all thanks to this kingdom?"

He didn't attack. For a while, Roven thought that he was on the brink of ambiguity, but he realized that he didn't see his face at all. "I get that you love this kingdom. I love it, too."

*"Yet you join the rebels..."*

"Because they've been lost and blind, and you know it. They deliberately put everyone in the kingdom on their leash, by putting them in huge debts. Millions of pounds, for food, house,

education, and whatnot, but it's fifty years to pay all the debts. What kind of kingdom is that?"

*"It's still my kingdom, nevertheless. Our kingdom."* replied the knight.

*What a naive knight... they're all pretty much naive or something...* "So you're just following your king, without telling yourself what's right from wrong? Did Bryce brainwash you?"

*"Have you never thought that your oh-so-called leader might drift your morals and thoughts off the rail? Or perhaps... your own consciousness?"* replied the knight instead.

*Useless...* The wind blew quite hard, also because of the speed, and for a while, feeling frustrated, he nearly lost balance. From his corner of sight, he noticed that the railroad was drifting even further, Scort had to completely move it by magic. "Okay, that's it."

He inserted the bubble into the dark storage, at the end of his staff, and had it absorbing his energy by force, in much more rapid pace. He couldn't be sure, but he rather suspected that the new knight was frantic for a while, as he let a huge amount of his absorbed, before shielding himself against it. He made a round cylinder-shaped shield, all over the train, also to protect it.

"Too late." Roven casted a weakening spell, using the knight's own energy, which made it more powerful than ordinary. It did manage to weaken the protection, to the state where almost the entire shield was blown off. The knight then reformed the shield, as well as making offense, by piercing his train with more spikes. He put up his shield back onto the train; the spikes stopped midway, before even touching the train.

"More." Roven decided to concentrate, and pulled more of his energy by force. He already took plenty into the dark storage, before he held his own from being absorbed. With the knight holding himself against the absorption, Roven could then only absorb just small chunks of his energy, which was already enough.

*A bit, for normal sorcerers, is a great amount, for this knight...* concluded Roven in awe.

*But I would have sensed him in the first place...*



## Chapter 8.5

The smoke was green, and it spread all over the corridors quite fast. Soon enough, the whole facility was, likely, covered by the smoke.

“You haven’t told me what the smoke does.” asked Kivi.

“It increases the rotting process on any living organism. Even if you don’t have any rot in your body.” said Mr. Lips. “It just makes you rot to death, in seconds. Even by one touch on your skin.”

She wanted to say, “That sounds scary...” but she could only gulp in disgust and shudder.

They simply walked through the gas, as they wore the transparent hazmat suit. She could hear the people outside staying out of the facility, screaming in panic. The only two people in the building was her and Mr. Lips; the guards happened to escape as well. The gas looked rather like fog, before she acknowledged the true function of the gas.

He then continued, “And in case you forgot, we have tried this gas. No go as well.”

“Oh... fuck...” cursed Kivi.

“In fact, I don’t know if we could even find a way to defeat the dragon...”

“Don’t say that. We’ll never know.” said Kivi. “If we have to, we’d go to another world, and find something powerful to kill the dragon.”

“Even the chances for that are... well, *obscured*... we’re literally walking in the dark here...” said Mr. Lips.

“Have faith, Mr. Lips.” said Kivi. She tried not to sound exhausted, but it just came out naturally, the way she hoped not to. Mr, Lips simply said nothing as response, and continued on.

It made her recall the fairy tale her mother told her once, when she was a child. It was about a haunted hospital, where there was no one, and the hospital was eerily wrecked. The difference was, the white light was on, nothing was broken, and it was simply green smoke, which stayed on the floor. However, she genuinely felt scared, the very same feeling, at the same level,

with the one she had, when she suddenly encountered the dead knight,

“Did you recognize the knight? The one the dragon used?” said Kivi suddenly.

“We’re here.” responded Mr. Lips instead.

They stood in front of plain white wall. “But we need to do it fast, before the green smoke gets in the room, and potentially destroys everything.” Warned Mr. Lips.

“Is it possible?” Kivi looked down at the smoke. She swung her legs on the floor. The smoke seemed to be fast-spreading. “Even I’m not sure I can outrun the gas...”

“That’s why I brought this.” Mr. Lips took a small glass flask from his pocket. Inside it was a light blue liquid substance. “This will hold the gas for a while.”

“Okay...” responded Kivi. As he put his totem the wall, it turned into a big round door of iron. The opening itself was loud, enough for everyone in the facility to hear. As the door opened, enough for them to enter, he threw the flask onto the floor, quickly went in, and immediately closed the door back. The flask caused another smoke, in light blue color, making a small area of circle on the floor. As it meet the green smoke, it steered away from the radius. It then turned back into a wall.

“Don’t worry. I’ve set up the deafening spell, just in case. They can’t hear it from outside, anyway.” said Mr. Lips.

“Why does it have to be loud, though?” Asked Kivi.

“No one can enter the room without anyone knowing.” Answered Mr. Lips. “Only those with certain high clearance can access this room... we’re basically giving ourselves death warrant...”

It also had rooms for wearing hazmat suits, and sterilization, although a bit bigger than the previous room. Difference was, it was bigger, more lightened, and it had low, but deafening buzz sound. Kivi suspected that there was space distortion skewed on the room, and somehow, even more intimidating than the “chemist testing room.”

There were lots of spheres, but and small; all of them were connected to each other with pipes. The smallest one was about the size of a human head, while the biggest one was about three meters in diameter. They all were stacked on the wall, from top to bottom. There were also runes and buttons on every pipes. There were made of glass, iron, copper, gold, silver, ivory, and

many more.

“What do you call it? ‘Containment library?’” recalled Kivi.

“Yeah. To contain, and to search for.” said Mr. Lips. “What we need, is to take the ivory ones...”

He went toward a small flask, about the size of her head, just less than one meter from the floor. “And remove its content to elsewhere.”

“You don’t have spares?”

“Not at this moment. They’re making some, but we don’t have that much time for now.” said Mr. Lips, looking around. “So, we need to find replacement flask for boldic acid...”

“Boldic acid!?” shuddered Kivi. “But only ivory flasks can contain it...!”

“Yeah...” Mr. Lips pressed some buttons on the pipes around the ivory flask. The locks on the pipes to the flask then unlocked, releasing the flask from its position. “We’re gonna have to dump it away outside, after we get out of here...”

Kivi was thinking of filling it inside one’s body, like what they did to his grandfather, but then scratched it off her head. *No... where would it go, then?* “Alright. So we’re done here?”

“Not yet. There are some things we need to do...” started Mr. Lips.



The blue smoke started to spread from the chemical testing room, all around the facility, negating the green smoke. Slowly, but surely, the rotting smoke dissolved and disappeared, although they hadn’t reached to the entire facility.covered the whole facility.

“Are you sure you want to come along? You’ve done enough...” repeated Kivi.

“Yes. I need to see it myself...”

Kivi and Mr. Lips, both wearing masks and black robes, stood, peeping through a window. It was now more than just scientists and sorcerers outside. There were civilians as well, watching with curiosity and confusion; and there were even reporters, watching and recording all around the facility, and fighting for the frontiest place against each other. The kingdom’s soldiers — there were no longer facility guards — were already going into the facility; they all wore the same

transparent hazmat suits.

*They must be going from behind as well... from every side...*

“Alright, then... are you ready?” Asked Kivi.

“No... does it have to be like this...!?”

“Unless you can move fast around them, or you decide not to come along, what choice is there?” said Kivi. “Just hold tight.”

“This is so embarrassing...” he could see Mr. Lips blushing. She summoned a small light red vial, about the size of her thumb, and drank it in a gulp. She could feel extra strength in her body instantly.

He jumped to her back, his hands wrapping around her shoulders and neck; at the same time, she held his legs with her hands. With the vial, Mr. Lips felt almost weightless, as if there was nothing on her back. “Are you sure you could do this?”

“Of course. I’ve done this many times.” assured Kivi.

The front door were blasted open by explosion, but Kivi was ready. She *shot* the bomb before the entrance, with swinging her leg, as her hands were holding him. It banged with continuous blinding light and deafening sound, and temporal paralyzing effect for anyone around the bomb. It took some seconds for the soldiers to stop the effects of the grenade, but that was all she needed.

She ran toward the entrance, and leapt far over the soldiers, escaping from the facility. With extra strength from the vial, she could carry Mr. Lips on her back, and leapt about ten meters forward without breaking a sweat. She caught one of the soldiers, even though he was blinded, could still shout, “THEY’RE ESCAPING!”

The whole front of the facility was surrounded by civilians, reporters, and the remaining soldiers, leaving no gap for her to slip through. As they saw two black figures out of the buildings, the civilians screamed and ran away, while the reporters moved forward; the soldiers pulled out their swords and staffs, ready to charge. She shot more bombs toward all of them, about ten bombs in a swing. *I’d need to make more...* thought Kivi, as she turned away to avoid being blinded.

For a second, she saw that they were all inside a transparent light blue dome, from the

ground to about fifty meters above. She realized that the dome was cast by the soldiers to prevent invaders from escaping. *Must be a big one, to cover the entire facility...* thought Kivi.

“How do we...?!”

But before Mr. Lips finished his question, there was a deafening sound, a sort of clash; she could even feel the ground even shaking by it. Everyone was stunned and perplexed, including Kivi and Mr. Lips, they all looked at the source of the sound, which seemed to be just few meters away.

The next thing they knew, the dome then crumbled down and dissolved to nothing, all in seconds. Everyone was still perplexed, wondering what caused the sound. Kivi herself was perplexed as well, she was almost too late to recall what she was doing.

With the dome being down and dissolved, she flashed away from the facility and the soldiers, jumping over everyone surrounding the place. The soldiers were about to stop them, but Kivi and Mr. Lips were already far away and invisible from their sight, thanks to the light red vial.

“Where are the knights? The facility’s being robbed...” wondered Mr. Lips.

“Probably dealing with the train issue...” guessed Kivi.

The crowd appeared to be bigger and more than she thought, there was no way to go through them without being caught. She had to climb up to the rooftops of the houses to avoid the crowd, all standing with confusion and panic. By her estimation, she predicted that there were over two thousand people, trying to get a good look on what happened to the facility. She was even thinking of blending with the crowd and watch the situation at the front seat, when she remembered that she was carrying Mr. Lips.

“We’re out. By luck...” said Kivi, still running on the rooftop. She tried her best not to make loud sound.

“But... who destroyed the dome?” said Mr. Lips.

“I don’t know... I didn’t have time to contact for reinforcement. Maybe someone on our side...” guessed Kivi. “We’ll deal with that later. We must get there as fast as possible...!”

## Chapter 8.6

*“That’s... dark storage... and light shield...”*

*Third carriage from behind! I’m definite on it!*

He could hear the *black* knight starting to concern, from his tone. He now tried to push the train off the railroad, but to no avail. He pushed by repeatedly battering with his energy, at every side of Roven’s train. His light shield completely protected — with another word, rejected — the attacks, while his dark storage kept absorbing his energy. The knight himself also held his own energy from being absorbed in huge amount; as result, Roven could only absorb small amount, one at a time. But even then, it was already plenty, compared to a normal sorcerer. *This guy is formidable.*

“Yes. So, eventually, I’ll win.” taunted Roven, standing on his side. “Do you want to keep fighting a futile fight?”

*Fortunately, there’s still time... otherwise, we’d utterly fail...*

*“Do you?”* asked the knight back. *“I can do this all day, and the reinforcement is coming.”*

*Reinforcement is coming. Are you done yet?*

*Yeah, but until he’s lowering his shield, we can’t do anything... it’s too thick.*

*Great...* swore Roven.

But then he started to look around...

“Yeah, but can they deal with this?”

In a surprising instant, he cast a massive explosion.



He pointed his cane to front, swinging the dark storage at the head of it. It was ten meters in front of both trains, but with even a portion of the amount of the knight’s energy he absorbed, it went too powerful than he expected. The radius of the explosion was up to fifty meters, and

the depth was likely over ten meters' deep, according to his prediction. Everything in front of the train, from trees, dirt, and even railroads, were blown off to complete oblivion. He had to use his light shield to protect himself and the train from the destructive debris.

As both trains pulled brakes immediately, Roven launched other explosions at some of the carriages, all in ten seconds. The knight, seemingly stunned and perplexed, didn't immediately hold the train off the railroads. As he blasted the knight's shield with the explosions, Roven also absorbed more energy from the knight, especially on the third carriage from behind. It was easier with both the trains already stopped.

The black shade wrapping the train drastically reduced, to only a mere blanket. As he kept distracting the knight, Gavour and Zarc jumped onto the carriage, cut the locks between the carriage and the others, and then jumped back, as the targeted carriage was pulled off the train by levitation. It curved over his own train, and was thrown away from the black train; at that time, the black shade formed a big crawling hand, to grasp the carriage.

Roven immediately threw his light shield between the train and the hand, but he happened to sense other streams of his energy, flowing underground.

*Shit, he's playing wide...*

***WE'RE LEAVING! GET THAT CARRIAGE!***

Streaks of his energy, about a meter's wide, emerged from the ground, and stood all around both trains, intimidating. They all stood about twenty meters from the ground, almost forming an open dome of shadow. Seeing the streaks, he could almost hear what the knight was thinking in his mind.

*No one's leaving, until I get the carriage back, away from lots of you.*

***PULL THAT CARRIAGE BACK!*** Shouted Roven to everyone, as he shifted the protection to upon the train.

It was thrown away quite far from his train. The streaks began attacking the train, so Roven shielded the train. But while the rebels pulled the carriage back, some of the streaks pulled the carriage away, against and stronger than their levitation.

***"I HAVE UNDERESTIMATED YOU!"*** the knight spoke, loud enough for everyone to hear, which made it hundredfold creepier. ***"REST ASSURED, IT WON'T HAPPEN AGAIN!"***

“SAME!” shouted Roven. His right hand was stretched downward to his train, and his left hand held his cane, pointed toward the black train. For once, he let himself lose control, and set loose the hold on the storage...



With his hands being small, it was a bit too big for him to hold, so he had to take it from the floor, with both his hands. It was completely black, glittering, and it turned to be heavier than he thought, so he lifted it as carefully as he could. It was solid and real, but for some moments, he could feel as if he was on the edge of ocean without border and bottom.

“SEVEN CHEERS FOR ROVEN!”

Everyone around him shouted in deafening cheers of excitement, gathering around him, lifting and throwing him up. He had to hold his stone close to his heart, so that it wouldn't fall down. “Wait, wait, wait, let me put the stone down...” But they didn't listen, with their cheers being louder than his voice.

Just after they were done cheering him, Lupy shouted, “Alright, alright, that's enough.”

They put him down gently, all still grinning of excitement, but Roven still held his stone onto his chest. “Are you all insane!? What if it breaks?!”

“They're not of glass, silly.” said Lupy. The other nine black stones floated above his right hand. “Drop them from the edge of the sky, and they won't even scratch when they hit the ground.”

Roven looked away, trying to hide his blush. *Of course... it won't break.* Thought Roven to himself. Lupy continued, “I've never thought that it's possible, much less actually successful.”

“Especially when it's done by a twelve-year-old boy.” said Pia, clapping her hands. “We're all outshined...”

“Actually, I didn't think it could work too...” said Roven.

“We all are.” Lupy snapped his finger. Nine people stepped out of the crowd, and stood on a line. The only one he knew among them all was Fortu; he winked to Roven.

“I think we all agree, that he deserves his own creation.” said Lupy, responded with nods and mums of agreement. A strong wave of pride and excitement flooded in his mind. He still



grinned widely, proud of his own achievement, although there was a bit of annoyance in him. *Do you have to...?*

“This... is a huge step for us.” said Lupy. “A big milestone for everyone of us... scrap that” they all laughed. “A milestone. We’re still far from our goals. But, hopefully, these stone can help us to achieve them, one at the time.”

Another wave of agreement. “I gladly present these dark storage stones... black diamonds...” grinned Lupy. “To our stars... our most trusted, talented sorcerers.”

“Not to you, sir?” said one of them.

“No, thank you. You ten will put better use of it than me, I’m sure of it.” replied Lupy. He floated the nine stones to each one of the sorcerers. They all accepted it gracefully, as if it was a really precious and expensive, white glittering diamond.

“Now...” said Lupy; the excitement turned in a blink to seriousness. “I must advise, as useful and powerful they are, these are also really dangerous stuffs. This is a black hole we’re talking about, after all. Never let the stones loose...”



With the stone let loose, everywhere, *anywhere* he pointed his cane at, was flying, being pulled by force, and into the stone; they simply were shrunk to tiny size as they approached the stone, and then disappeared into the blackness of the stone. There was no exception, from a squirrel hanging on a tree branch, to the black train itself, including the knight himself and his energy manifestation. It was loud and scarier than anything he had imagined; there was a tree flying toward him, and as he thought that it would hit him, it instead shrunk as small as pebble, and went into the stone.

But the sensation he was feeling, both physically and mentally, was absolutely strange, and new. It wasn’t painful as he thought, as he couldn’t even describe it to simple words, except “extremely unpleasant.”

The knight turned out to be quite able to defend the train, attack the rebels, and take the carriage, all at the same time. Just then, he got resistance from the rebels’ levitation: although the knight pulled quite far from them, the rebels managed to grasp back the control over the targeted carriage, which was slowly dragged back close to them.

*More...* he told himself. The inexplicable sensation grew intense and widespread inside his

body; he even suspected that his eyes turned black as well, having the aura of the dark storage more loosened and dominant through and in his body. The ground itself, with which the knight anchored himself to, was as well absorbed, chunk by chunk. He could sense the knight's energy going and rooting deeper in the ground.

"NO WAY!" screamed Roven. He spun the cane slowly in front of him, clockwise, for wider range of absorption. Slowly, but surely, the hole on the ground grew bigger, as more and more were absorbed into the stone, although the knight kept digging and rooting down further. He looked back for a while; the rebels managed to drag the carriage just few meters toward, while the knight kept holding on the carriage with his manifestation of big hand.

That was when he realized that it didn't seem to have limit of range in absorbing.

The knight and the black train already sank down into the hole. It became a sort of recent and giant, unnatural valley of dirt. Roven still stood on his train, but the stone kept absorbing everything it was pointed at. As big chunks of dirt were absorbed, the knight rooted deeper for anchor, thus making it even deeper. He realized that the rebels eventually could only hold the carriage from being pulled by the knight, instead of pulling it away from the knight's grasp. There was already lots of amount of the knight's energy absorbed into the cane, but it seemed that the knight also had unlimited amount of energy himself.



*This is not good... and I spot the kingdom's reinforcement coming!* Told Scort.

## Chapter 8.7

She thought that she had been used to hear screams of pain and anguish. But it turned out that she was still in a long way from being ready.

It took few minutes for herself to noticed the very disgusting energy, already over Lucius' right hand. It started from his middle finger, but quickly spreading almost onto the elbow. Even as she looked at it, the spread was already on the way toward the upper arm.

Even she couldn't be sure of what was in her mind. With her sword attacking Sir Eddorn, she used the thread to slice his right hand, clean.

"RRRAAA...!!!"

"TAKE HIM OUT OF HERE! I'LL HANDLE THIS!"

Fortu didn't refute. He bounced toward Lucius, who was still screaming and holding his right upper arm. From her corner of eyes, she noticed that Lucius almost grasping for his cut hand. However, the lower part was already *covered* with the disgusting energy, it *literally* turned to brown, as the mud from Sir Eddorn, and rotten as a dead part of body. "Come on, Lucius, *it's not your hand anymore...*"



There were only Mirina and Sir Eddorn, in the middle of grey, flat and desolate ground. The trees were cleared out for an area of about square kilometers, and even beyond, as he burst fire engulf and destroy the trees. She noticed that sky even seemed to be more *grey* than previously.

The most troublesome issue was, *the disgusting mud* was everywhere around. The *mud* breath didn't go away like his usual fire breath; it stayed and puddled almost every spot of the ground. There were only few spaces for Mirina to stand, and they were narrow. Her sword floated next to her; it honestly eased her to know that her sword wasn't affected at all by *the mud*.

Sir Eddorn himself already looked tired, close to being defeated. He no longer stood straight; he leaned down, as if an invisible heavy burden was on his back. *The energy... whatever it is... seems to backfire...* thought Mirina. As for herself, the battle and the sword began to

exhaust her energy, body, and mind as well, she could hear her own heavy pant.

“You look tired, handling that energy...” mocked Mirina. “You need a favor?”

*“Give me... yourself...”*

His voice was no longer Sir Eddorn’s, or even close to anyone’s. It was hoarse, abnormally loud, and low, inhuman in the most possible way. What scared Mirina was rather that he didn’t sound hilarious or sarcastic, despite not having normal voice to talk.

*“And everyone else...”* Continued Sir Eddorn.

Fear, along with sense of curiosity, poked her. “Why...?” Mirina walked closer, while looking around. There weren’t much spaces left free of the mud.

*I should lure him to talk... while I prepare a blow...*

*“Doesn’t matter...”* responded Sir Eddorn instead. *“Surrender...”*

“At least... tell me, for once, what does those people you eat do with it... *why are you even here?* There are worlds that just consist of food, it would feed you for the rest of your life.” insisted Mirina, while she was preparing a spell of massive blast on her hand. She tried her best to hide it from him.

*“While I explain everything, ans you prepare to blast me?”* said Sir Eddorn. *“I know what you’re planning.”*

*Damn...!* “Okay. You got me. Congratulations. But... in all honesty, still, you haven’t answered...”

*“Perhaps you can guess it yourself, as you surrender to me.”* Teased Sir Eddorn.

The conversation ended short, and was continued with the battle, again. He *puke* the *mud* onto his sword. Mirina could already tell that he was imbuing the sword with the energy of the mud. *Good Lord, not the mud again...*

He did exactly what she was afraid of. The slash he made, with *the mud*, was about five times bigger than previously, and even much more rapid. As result, she jumped backward, outside *the dangerous area*, and shot the sword straight toward the knight, breaking through the slashes. She could feel them more powerful, as the sword needed more power to break through.

*I need to do something...* thought Mirina to herself, as the sword kept aiming to stab him. She was about to ask the others, before she realized that they were already off, and she was alone. *All by myself... but what...?*

The slashes and swings became much faster, more rapid, and more dangerous, she had to keep drawing back, while Sir Eddorn kept charging forward. She noticed that the fear and unease, the feelings she had when entering the grey zone, was gone, but instead overcome by exhaust. There was also a slight of relief, as she didn't the others around. *They already went away to safety...*

She recalled the forest, long time ago when she took a relaxing stroll: it was peaceful and beautiful, especially when the sunlight reached through leaves and bathed on the ground. They all were ripped off and replaced into greyness and ash, thanks to the aura of the knight.

But seeing and feeling the aura of the mud, she resisted herself from puking, and even giving up...

*No... I have to keep going...* swore Mirina to herself. *The only way is to buy some time until help comes, or until he runs out...*

Without sun on the sky, it was hard to tell how long they had been fighting, but she suspected that it had probably been hours. She aimed to cut his head off, either with her sword or the thread, but even though he looked tired, he could still avoid with remarkable speed, all while breathing out and slashing *mud*. The same thing, unfortunately, applied to her: she attempted to strike him in wide range and with huge attacks, but her own energy depleted as she did it, and she still had to conserve her own focus, just to avoid all the *mud* attacks.

She noticed that his attacks became weaker, although too slow and almost too hard to notice, but it still that he was still capable of fighting. On the contrary, she had to cut trees by herself to widen her own area. She could already hear her own breath, actually running out and exhausted. *Keep going... you can do this...* encouraged Mirina to herself, against the depressing aura from the knight.

A fire slash came out from behind her; this time, it was gigantic. At the same time, Sir Eddorn swung a big slash of *mud*, which looked really odd. Both slashes, of brown and pink, clashed with and cancelled each other, even with loud voice of two clashing iron bars. As Mirina turned back, she saw Fortu coming toward her, and grabbing her hand. His spear was thrown a bit far away from him.

“I can’t fight him, you know that.” said Fortu quickly, giving her a huge power surge. It flew from him, through his hand, and then went inside her. “But I can help you.”

He then ran back to grab his spear, and ran away. She could see that he gave her almost all of his energy, as he ran really slow, clearly exhausted. On her side, the exhaust and discouragement from the knight’s aura disappeared, replaced by refreshment and strength, as well as an idea.

With her senses, she noticed that Sir Eddorn jumped forward, but way over Mirina. His sword was held in backhand grip, as if he was about to stab someone.

*Good. You think I wouldn’t notice you...* commented Mirina.

She called her sword back in an instant. As he was still in front of her, she threw the sword onto his head, and made a really tight and narrow slicing net with the thread onto his body. With the extra strength, she pushed one hundred percent of it into the sword and the thread, to accelerate its speed beyond previously.

*Shit!*

She jumped back, because as she, *finally, sliced Sir Eddorn to millions of bits, the mud* splashed all around. She didn’t think that it would splatter with such density, with the speed of the sword and the thread. As result, some of it got onto her.

*Fuck-fuck-fuck-fuck-fuck...!!!* She still had enough energy of her own, so she ripped off her cloak by force with her telekinetic.

## Chapter 8.8

“ARE YOU SURE ABOUT SENDING THE REINFORCEMENT!?” taunted Roven to the knight. “BECAUSE I CAN SUCK THEM ALL INTO THE STONE, AND IT’S OVER!”

The knight remained unmoved and dauntless, although he couldn’t tell if he was taunted. The rebels themselves, behind Roven, still pulled the carriage with levitation against the knight; now there was no bit of movement of the carriage. The most concerning, to Roven, was himself letting the stone set loose.

Even though the crater was about a hundred meter, and counting, the stone still sucked everything Roven pointed at. It was already large enough to make a lake in the middle of the forest, and soon, a little sea. There happened to be a flock of birds passing by, but they unfortunately were in track of the stone’s unlimited range.

“*Your legs are shaking.*” said the knight simply. At first, he thought of it as a mock, but then he realized that he was telling the truth.

His body could no longer stand up straight. He widened his legs for better balance, but his body started to bow down a slight. His eyes even felt heavy, as if he was about to pass out. His head started to feel vertigo; he looked at the result of the absorption, which looked to spin counter-clockwise in his point of view.

“*How long can you hold on the absorption?*” mocked the knight, which somehow sounded more annoying than before. He could even imagine the knight, likely few years younger than him, smiling in mischief. “*Because the moment you take a break, I win.*”

*Fuck...*

*I agree. We need to do something new, and fast.* Said Gavour.

Roven looked back to the rebels. They seemed to start being exhausted for pulling the carriage to themselves.

*We need to get the carriage, fast...* pondered Roven to himself. *I can still help, but not while dealing the knight...*

Something then clicked in his head.



Using the remaining of his own energy, he *rejected* himself off his train, way over the rebels. The cane was switched, from being pointed at the knight, to the carriage itself. With the dark storage aiding the rebels, even for just a second, the carriage was off the knight's grip, got dragged, and eventually went into the stone.

The drag was by the stone alone, as the rebels, at the same time, turned back and set up stunning spell against the knight, *switching their roles*. After the carriage was completely in the stone, he sucked most of the rebels as well, and stopped the absorption.

Even though the absorption stopped, the sensation was still there in his body. He instantly fell down, no longer having strength to even stand up. Gavour caught him and carried him, probably on his shoulder. Though his sight was in blur, he saw that there were about five of them, including Roven himself.

He heard an unbearably deafening, and long sound of roar, he had to cover his ears. Gavour, however, didn't stop running. "KEEP GOING!" shouted Gavour, even though it was almost unheard of for others. He saw a silhouette of Gavour throwing something off, followed by a flash of blinding light. Only for a while, the roar was replaced by a high-pitched shriek, which was unexpected at all. That was when he could feel that they were moving again.

Judging from the wind, it appeared that they decided to leap forward instead, few meters in an instant. He himself was too tired to see clearly, so he took a bit from Gavour, just for better focus. "What's going on...?" Said Roven, still weakly.

"The knight's chasing us..." said Gavour. "*Oh, that's not good...!*"

They all were covered by a shadow. It took some seconds for Roven to realize that it was gigantic, and way above, but moving slowly. He couldn't help but turn back to see what it was, when Gavour and the others leapt ahead for quite a distance.

It was perfectly round, black, and, by his estimation, about half a kilometer in diameter. He couldn't tell how high it was to crushing them onto ground, but he could tell that it fell down fast.

They all were very fortunate, because it was just a second away from being crushed. The wind by the fall also played a good deal, as it pushed them off. The trees, anything else, and likely the carriages as well, seemed to be completely flattened, and the ground itself was shaking. The



crushing sound was louder than anything he had ever heard, he was certain that it was heard across the entire kingdom. They all had to use spell to protect their ears temporarily from being permanently deaf.

“Reinforcement...!” said Anol. Roven followed at where he pointed at.

It was a flock of flying doves, each one had up to four people on it. They were coming fast from his left. Although he was tired, he could still see far ahead to see who they were. Most of them were mix of chemists and sorcerers with long staffs, with few archers.

*Long-range... they're staying in a distant...*

But there was only one person that approached them.

*“Leaving so soon!?”* mocked the knight, louder than before. *It seemed that his voice volume increased along with his current size...*

“YOU DON’T LOOK GOOD, ROVEN! PERHAPS I CAN GIVE YOU A HAND?” mocked Sir Amycus loud.

His mock was then followed by nearly-blinding light behind him. It was of lots of colors, coming from the sky, Sir Amycus himself was covered by the light. It turned out to be thousands, if not millions, of shooting spells, as they approached closer. The speed alone was fast, and they all were heading toward one direction.

Roven lifted his hand, casting his light shield, in a huge radius from their position. He made it into a sphere shape, in case the knight attacked from below as well. All the shooting spells stopped at and bumped with a sort of invisible wall, and then exploded. Somehow, he felt a bit better as he used the shield; he stood by himself, without holding onto Gavour. “You’re feeling good now?” asked Gavour, looking at him.

He wanted to say yes, but he noticed that it was just enough to stand still, although his energy slowly replenished and his body *getting better*. His hand was still pointed up. “Not enough to fight back yet...”

“Okay, we don’t have to fight back...” they all stopped running. The light completely covered them by sight, so they couldn’t see what they were doing outside. He could only sense the forest, and everything else, were burnt to cinder by millions of the spells.

*Must be mixture of spells and potions to burn everything fast...*

“Then we most certainly must escape. Now, how would we do that?” asked Gavour.

“Play dead? I mean, we make them...” started Anol.

“We tried that. You know that.” said Zarc. “They can’t be fooled on that anymore.”

“So we keep running, until they lose us?” replied Anol. “Because that’s a really long shot to happen.”

“How many are they?” asked Roven.

“I guess a hundred... you can’t fight them, especially with your condition! What did you do? What were you thinking?!” scolded Gavour.

“Keeping that knight from being wild... we’ll talk about that later! Now, the only way we can do is keep running. I still can’t run, so I’d keep up the shield...”

“Then what?”

Before he replied, the blinding light was no longer there. Apparently, the shooting spells stopped in an instant. “No time! Run!”

Gavour and Zarc naturally carried Roven together, and with others, continued leaping forward, as fast as they could. He kept his hand lifted up. The protection spell from the shield moved along as they leapt.

“My cane...!?” said Roven in panic, as he realized that he didn’t hold anything.

“With me, don’t worry about it!” responded Anol. He was holding Roven’s cane, with dark storage stone still intact on its head.

Without any other blinding light, they all then could see what they intended to do with them. The spells *roasted* the entire forest to cinder. As they moved, the protection spell didn’t filter the cinder and its heat, so they could feel the intensity on their feet, although they protected their own legs with spell.

*Not even bothered to question... Must be Amycus’ order...*

They kept going toward where they went, when they saw another blinding light at their left. “What were they thinking? They can’t break through the shield.”

“They’re not aimed toward us...” replied Roven, half-dreaded.

The shooting spells, about millions as well, were shot from the flock above, but toward a wide area, just few meters ahead of them. He then noticed that the direction of the spells shifted quite fast, at to Roven’s right, but he already understood what they intended to do.

“They plan to surround us...” concluded Roven.

“But what for?” wondered Gavour.

“They must have thought that the shield only works against magical attacks, not naturally harmful conditions...” guessed Roven. “They thought of suffocating us with fire and smoke...”

As they moved forward, the fire and the smoke were pushed and filtered out as well, by *the invisible wall of the shield*, leaving the forest half-burnt. The only remaining thing from the filtering was the heat from the trees, which was no problem to them at all.

“They’re clearly testing the capabilities of the light shield...” continued Roven.

*So the light shield negates the effects of the the dark storage... interesting!* His body was no longer feeling *empty* — he honestly couldn’t tell what it was with better and more precise words. He slowly gained strength, although he was still weak to leap forward fast by himself.

“Yeah, but then, what’s next...?”

*Follow the blue light!* Said a familiar voice.

There was a flash of blue light, at their right side. It was simply a flash of light, and they all instantly knew that it was friendly. “There! That way!” Shouted Anol, so they changed their direction and turned sharp to right.

*Did you get the substance? Where are the others?*

The blinding light still attempted to bombard through the shield, but Roven and the others kept going toward their destination.

*They’re all in the stone! Mission is success!* Responded Roven.

*Good. Just keep going. I’ll handle this.* Said Lupy.

## Chapter 8.9

“Oh, Lord...”

Mr. Lips could only stare at the damage done in the forest. It was nowhere close to anything he had ever imagined.

The ground was desolate, grey, and *obviously dead*. It was purely flat, as if someone grinded the ground flat for constructing buildings. The trees were grey and dead as well. It was square kilometers' large. As he touched a tree next to him, with a bit of force, the tree tumbled down and turned into dust, before even touching the ground.

“Can it be restored?” asked Kivi.

“Yeah, restoring, regrowing, cleansing... I wouldn't worry this... *manifestation*. What I'm worried about is...”

At the middle of the desolate forest, was a huge lake of *something that looked like mud*. The diameter was over half of kilometer, but he noticed that the width kept expanding.

The most concerning part, as he suspected from Kivi's experience, was the *overpowered* aura of corruption and malice from *the mud*. Even though they stood far, he could feel the aura creeping all around, toward them all. For some unknown reasons, the energy grew stronger and infect *everything around* wider. In a way, it even almost encouraged him to go into the lake, despite that there was no one whispering at him at all.

“This... whatever this is...” said Mr. Lips, full of disgust. He even stepped back few times.

“Mr. Lips.” Called someone from behind. It was Mirina and Fortu, showing up from behind. They both went toward him and shook his hand. They obviously looked tired; he could even hear their breaths. “Thank you so much for coming up, with such short notice.”

“W-Welcome...” stuttered Mr. Lips, nervous.

“Where's Lucius?” Asked Kivi.

“Back there. Shocked, but okay.” Mirina pointed behind.

“Shocked? What happened?” Asked Mr. Lips.

“His hand got... *infected*, with the mud. That thing...” she swept her hair to back, subtly frightened. “It infect in seconds... we have to cut his hand...”

“What...!? *That fast...!?*” He couldn’t help but have chill in his bones all over his body.

“Yes. Unfortunately, I didn’t have other choices. If I didn’t...”

“He will die.” Said Kivi. He frowned as he turned to the lake of *the mud*, looking at it with disgust as well.

“That’s why we called you here. Can you handle it?” said Mirina.

“Yes...” responded Mr. Lips instantly, looking around. “It has to be all of us, at once...”

“I’m all ears. So what do we do?” Asked Fortu.

From his magical pocket, he summoned a gateway, a gigantic standing donut-like circle made of marble, with lots of carvings around it. On the middle of it was a big hole, with nothing at it. It bumped on the ground with loud thump voice. There was a big dark green stone on the top. “This kind of energy, not even ivory flask can hold it for long.”

“So we need to contain it, and then throw it away.” Gussed Fortu.

“Exactly.” grinned Mr. Lips. “Simple, but one tiny mistake, and it would be fatal.”

“Even you don’t know what that is, do you?” Asked Fortu.

“Well, it’s not certainly from this world. That much we all already know.” Said Mr. Lips.  
“And it’s *powerful*.”

“Agree. We’re having insane time with Sir Eddorn...”

“Wh... Sir Eddorn?!”

“Yeah. The dragon used Sir Eddorn’s body as puppet.” Explained Fortu.

“He’s alive?!” asked Mr. Lips.

“I know it’s unbelievable, believe me, but... *he’s not*. It’s just a doll to the dragon, controlled remotely.” Answered Fortu.

“You recognize him?”

“Granpa used to tell me everything about... before the dragon happened... including Sir Eddorn.” Responded Mr. Lips.

Mirina pulled a deep breath, and shook her head, for unknown reason. “I’m really sorry. I do.” She looked at Mr. Lips, and then held on Fortu’s shoulder, to comfort him. He replied by holding her hand.

“Well, he’s long rested. That’s the bright side.” Said Fortu. It sounded like he encouraged himself more than others. “Now we need to focus on *this monstrosity*.”

“It’s going to take a while for the ivory flask,” he called the ivory flask onto his hand, “to absorb the energy, one hundred percent of it. Even then, it can only hold for... I don’t know, seconds, perhaps...”

*“What?! Even with ivory flask?!”*

“Even with ivory flask. That’s why I take the gateway along with me.” He tapped on the gateway. “We use this to dispose of un-recyclable stuffs. The moment it’s done, we’re throwing it away, for good. And then, we might have to destroy the gateway...”

“What? What for?”

“just in case, we don’t want it return back here through the stone...”

“That’s impossible. Right?” said Mirina.

“Well, theoretically, indeed, but this is not ordinary usual case. I say we’re not taking chances.” said Mr. Lips grimly. “I’d like to test it, but I suppose now’s a bad time for that...”

“Okay, that’s a smart plan.” Said Fortu. “How long does it take? And how much energy does it need, because we’re already exhausted.”

“I don’t know... fortunately, it doesn’t take much to open the gateway.” Said Mr. Lips. He put the flask on contact with his forehead, concentrating on setting commands for the flask to do.

*Absorb the energy, don’t let any bit left, and quickly flew toward the gateway, before it leaks...*

And then he threw it far away to the lake, with a bit push of magic. The flask landed right on the middle of the lake. He then returned to the gateway. "Right, now we open it. I need your help, Kivi."

"Sure." Together they touched the gateway, and tapped their energy onto it. The stone on the top started to spark with light, the same color with the stone. The view through the hole started to distort, and slowly transform into a smoke in the same color.

"I'll call Lucius, for extra energy." Said Mirina. "We can't help, unfortunately..."

"Or we'd pass out." Added Fortu, as Mirina went back to call Lucius.

The smoke at the hole became clear and visible, but the lake apparently just shrunk a bit. The flask was still absorbing.

"What if this fails?" asked Fortu.

*Then we'd need to move to another world and abandon this one...* but Mr. Lips decided to not answer. He saw that Fortu suspected the worst of his silence.

But he then recalled what he just thought about. *Move to another world...*

"What do you think of... well, *running away...*" Mr. Lips embraced himself to ask. "I mean, just... leave this world and disappear from the dragon... no need to fight against *it...*"

"And what? Abandon *our home*? Leave the dragon roaming around freely?" teased Fortu. "Either it ruled another world, which would be horribly ignorant... or it would find us again, either by accident or by intent. Is that what you mean?"

"It's just a thought..."

"Mr. Lips," called Kivi. "It's almost time..."

She pointed at where the lake was. It was now just a puddle, about big as the biggest flask they had back in the facility. However, he could see from afar, that half the body of the flask already turning black, the same tone with the mud's color.

"Mr. Lips!" Called another voice from behind. He didn't really recognize him, but he guessed that he was Lucius; Mirina helped him walk by carrying him with her shoulder.

His eyes were automatically nailed at Lucius' right hand, as it stopped before elbow. The

end of his right hand was just clean round of flesh, indicating that his right arm was recently amputated.

“I... what’s going on here...?” Said Lucius. He looked excited to meet him, but then dazzled and concerned seeing the puddle, the flask at its middle, and the big gateway.

“We’re getting rid of *the mud thing*.” Said Mr. Lips. “We may need your help with opening the gateway.”

“Yeah, right, sure...” responded Lucius. He tapped on the gateway with his left hand. The smoke finally materialized.

“The moment the flask pass through, we need to shut down the gateway, and destroy the stone.” Said Mr. Lips.

“Yeah, don’t worry about that.” said Mirina, summoning her usual, thin sword.

From afar, he saw that the puddle of *the mud* shrunk, faster than at first. However, most parts of the flask was already dipped in with *the mud*. He realized that the flask was about to *break* just by holding *the mud* inside.

“The flask doesn’t look like it’ll hold...” said Mirina, concerned.

“But... it’s ivory flask, it can hold boldic acid...!” Complained Lucius.

“Well, you know that this is something far worse than boldic acid.” Replied Kivi. “*Godly powerful*, in fact, as Mr. Lips said previously.”

“*It’s going to break...*” said Fortu, dreaded. Even his humorous and friendly smile turned pale and grim.

“Don’t worry. The gate is already open. We just need to act fast after it flew back...” *Hopefully, nothing’s wrong...* “Is anyone else coming here?”

“No.” Said Mirina. She immediately looked around, scanning for unwanted presence, for few seconds. “We’re alone, and safe.”

“A little bit more...” Fortu stepped away, a bit too far from the gateway, but Mirina followed as well. The flask was almost done absorbing *the energy*, but at the same time, it was also almost broken and converted along by *the energy*. He saw that only a dot of the flask was remaining to be converted.



*Come on...! A little bit more...* wished Mr. Lips.

"I hope it's not going to be broken when it flies here..." said Lucius.

As ordered, the moment the flask was done containing the energy, *one hundred percent*, it flashed toward the gateway. It simply flew into the smoke, and disappeared.

"NOW!"

They all stopped tapping onto the gateway. The smoke suddenly disappeared, thus the gateway was shut. Mirina used her sword: it literally floated and flew as she controlled, and gouged out the stone off the gateway. He could see thread, connecting the sword with her right hand, almost invisible. Before he knew it, the emerald-like stone was sliced into bits of dark green rubble.

Mr. Lips scanned around, in case *the mud* happened to leak out of the flask. "We did it. *It's gone...*"

They all celebrated it with sighs relief and weak cheerful shout. If any, they all looked tired of exhaustion and tension, including even himself. "*It's fucking gone...*"

"Good. *Finally...*" Said Fortu. "Let's just get back to the base..."

"Wait, what about the forest? What do we do with it?" Said Kivi.

"It's reversible, right?" Said Fortu to Mr. Lips, "Either leave it for the kingdom to handle, or send our people to fix it. With all due respect, I'm beat."

"Agree..." said Mirina.

"Right... we're done, aren't we? It's getting dark..." said Mr. Lips. The forest was still desolate and *grey*, but the sky slowly cleared out of the grim clouds. It turned out that the time was already dusk, and the sun almost set down. "I need to go back home..."

"Don't worry, it's over." Said Kivi.

"You got the wagon back, do you?" Said Lucius loud.

"I have, obviously." Replied Kivi. She shook Mr. Lips' hand again. The others followed as well; Lucius had to shake with his left hand, "Sorry for the left hand..."

“Again, thank you for the help...” said Kivi.

“You’re welcome...” together, they left the forest, and followed Kivi to the wagon, a bit far ahead. Mirina carried Lucius, although he seemed to be no longer weak. Fortu and Mr. Lips was the last to follow.

“You really think that we should just... leave and hide...? Just like that?” asked Fortu, out of the blue.

Mr. Lips sighed, while his mind tried to form his sentences well and properly. “I... I don’t mean to disrespect or belittle, but... if you could barely defeat its doll, how would you *actually* defeat the dragon in the future?” Said Mr. Lips, a bit nervous. “Especially against that... *that disgusting thing*... how would you fight against it...?”

## Chapter 9

“Why?”

He simply stood, with his hands at his back, while in front of him, was Amycus, wounded, exhausted, and pissed. Seeing him usually smiling in a sinister way, it felt really weird and out-of-place for him to see him frowning with anger, and leaning his body down with exhaustion.

“I mean... I know you’re following the king’s orders. You’re a royal knight. I respect that, but...” Lupy nodded, and walked left, slowly to surround, and *talk to him*. He could tell that Amycus focused so hard to resist his *influence*.

“This... impossible... you don’t...” cut Amycus. Even his breaths seemed irregular and out of control. Lupy could only guess what he meant to say about.

“Don’t... what? *Don’t have magic?*” said Lupy. “Just because none of you have actually seen me in a fight before?”

He leapt forward, most likely by extremely forcing himself, to charge at Lupy, who simply avoided it. His movement was much slower, and it was simply a predictable, sideway swing of his right sword, while his left sword wasn’t used at all.

“Ugh... fuck...!” he could hear him grunting in pain and exhaustion. He completely leaned with his swords.

“Perhaps I should rephrase that... *have you never thought of those who lost their families and friends?*”

“Spare me...” scolded Amycus, but weakly.

Lupy recalled one of *his library of memories*. It was as clear as reality, he could even see the trees being shaken, feel the wind on his face, and hear the screams of the mother and the children.

It was automatically, *and intentionally* as well, projected onto Amycus’ head. “You can’t ask to be spared about this. This is serious.”

He *actually* fell down, his legs, somehow, no longer strong for standing. “I happened to pass by this family... I was buying some food. These soldiers pulled the old couple, both a grandmother and a grandfather, out of the house, and separated them from their grandchildren.”

He screamed, but *it was useless*. “I didn’t see where their parents are, at that moment. Because, from what I’ve heard from around, after that, they turned out to be long gone. These children... two boys and a girl, they couldn’t be older than eight years old... I know, that moment, they only have their grandparents left with them...”

Eventually, for some reason, he stopped screaming. Lupy continued, “Their pain, both the grandchildren and grandparents... *it was immense... powerful... maddening...* like someone’s been constantly screaming right next to you, for years, nonstop. You get sick of it...”

The screams turned out to be replaced with grunts and gasps. “I could only stand and watch, while that emotion... those emotions, *they flooded into me...* they’re seared onto my memory... *my library*, permanently. That... is one of the things you have done. Do you understand now?”

Amycus stared at him. It was to tell what he was thinking from his face, but he could sense apathy and ignorance, resisting against sorrow and anger, although it was already weak. “I know it’s a tough choice. At least for King Brice. But I noticed that it changes... it’s no longer about rescuing the people from the dragon...”

*Almost there...* He slowly approached him, but still on alert. “But you... do you think it’s a good thing to do? Even though you *don’t have a family...* is it wrong to say no to the dragon, when it asks for your life?”

“Y-N...” struggled Amycus.

“Is it wrong to say ‘I don’t want to give my life as your food,’ to the dragon?” Repeated Lupy.

“GET OUT OF HERE!” Screamed Amycus. He swung, with both swords, but it was blinded, random swings, Lupy simply jumped back.

“You know... it escalated beyond control.” continued Lupy. The memory flooded his mind again, as well as Amycus’. “I could only stand and watch... because before I even acted...”

It’s as though Amycus was wrapped in a very thick, untearable blanket, and *his influence* tried so hard to destroy and break through it. However, he could feel that the blanket

was about to be torn.

“The grandfather tried to run away, but one of the kingdom’s soldiers... for a reason, I think he tried to stop him... but he didn’t think thoroughly, that it was just an old man.”

“Don’t...” said Amycus. He already lied downward on the ground, his hands no longer held his swords.

“He stubbed the old man, with his leg. Sideways.” Said Lupy. “They had a garden at the front of their house. Between the road, which was quite wide, and the garden, was a solid fences of rocks.”

He paused for a while, and closed his eyes, as his tears rolled down. “Can you see where I’m going here?”

“Fuck...!” resisted Amycus, so weak that he could barely hear it.

“It was awful when the soldiers took them by force. But when his head hit the rock... *you can hear its sound...*” continued Lupy, maintaining his voice steady.

*Success.* Thought Lupy: the blanket was torn apart to pieces, and *his influence* swarmed and attacked into Amycus’ heart. He was aware that it happened simply because Amycus didn’t have strength to hold it anymore.

*Good. Now, for his heart and mind...* He stood still, and continued, “It feels like the world sounds so loud everywhere, you can only hear your own voice... your head was so filled with pain and sorrow, as if they force to fill it with too much water... so it’s about to explode...”

Amycus started to sob. As his defense broke down, his emotions and memories also flooded onto Lupy. The first thing he saw from his memories was the moment he cut the rebel’s hands and legs, piece by piece, while the rebel was already wounded and lying open on the ground, all while laughing...

*He was really a mad person...* “The soldiers themselves, on the other side, felt guilty as well... they just hid it from their surroundings. But the family...? You have no idea...”

*Wow... fortunately, I’ve seen worse... otherwise, I wouldn’t be able to stand it...* “I’ve seen that you have done yourself some serious scores. You obviously enjoy it... *but you obviously don’t understand them.*”

Ignorance, coldness, and stubbornness shifted into regret, sorrow, and disbelief. However, he was well aware that the emotions were still there, submissive from the dominant emotions. *Very few are hard to be changed permanently... this one is a special case...* Lupy told himself.

“I know it... can’t be helped. You’re born this way... but, now, have you ever imagined... can you now understand how it feels like...? Can you imagine that, maybe, if you were in their shoes...?” Said Lupy. Even he himself started to feel sympathy.

“I didn’t...” Amycus spoke louder than previously, since he didn’t focus on resisting anymore.

“Now that you have, do you regret it? Do you wish, if only you could undo what you have done all these times?” Said Lupy.

He didn’t respond; he kept sobbing with regret, but Lupy found agreement from his heart. “If that’s the case... stand up and grab my hand. Allow yourself a new book. A new start.”

He gave his right hand to Amycus, open, ready to hold and grab his hand, while his left hand, behind his back, was ready to summon a blade. Amycus himself looked up; his eyes were still watery, but he saw that his hand moved a bit, seemingly about to take his hand.

It was undetected at all, until he saw an arrow flashing from his left, toward his palm.

He pulled back his hand, and jumped back, when something emerged from ground, and was about to slice him. For his corner of eyes, he spotted that it was a human-sized wooden doll, with simple, straight, polished, and oval-shaped body and limbs. But long, scythe-like swords were attached on its hands.

He ducked, escaped his clench, and drifted away from the doll. He saw another doll taking Amycus away; he seemed to be still confused and emotional to even swallow what was happening. They already disappeared from sight into the forest.

“Puppetry.” nodded Lupy, impressed, as he landed. He also looked around, if there was anything else around. He realized that there was just a tiniest bit of scent of magic inside the doll, which made it hard for him to sense.

*Part of the reinforcement...? A new knight, supposedly?*

*Did they just happen to send this knight, or they suspected... no, Amycus would have known, then...*

The doll stood still, without even moving an inch. It had holes, which apparently functioned as parts of the head: two at the eyes' position, one at nose, two at ears, and one at mouth. The holes were completely black, he couldn't see anything in the holes.

*"You supposedly don't have magic..."* said a girl, which likely came from the hole of the mouth. The voice sounded clear and real, as if she was actually there.

*She can't be that far...* "Surprise, surprise." said Lupy, grinning.

"Anyway, I've seen your capabilities and I can say, your cheeky tricks can't work on puppets." said the girl, obviously victorious and satisfied.

"Yeah... except..." said Lupy, standing still and calmly.

*Perhaps it's time to test it...*

He grasped on his own anger — his memory of the grandparents was still fresh in his mind, so it was his first choice to take — which he imagined as water in a bucket, and then *splash it onto the doll.*

*"It can."*

It was actually hard, a d a bit weird, as it was rather one-directional exchange, so he didn't get any feedback whatsoever from the doll. Nevertheless, he kept pouring his anger toward the doll.

The doll was still, but after *being splashed with his anger*, it started to shake. Gently at first, but then growing intense. As the doll had its own, *independent emotion of anger*, he *whispered.*

*It's really uncomfortable when you're controlled, but you can't move by yourself.*

The anger became raw and independent, although it now relied on Lupy giving strength. It looked around wildly for a while, and then leapt to its back, looking for the puppeteer. Lupy simply followed, by walking slowly behind.

*Good.* Grinned Lupy, as he summoned his own dual swords. He simply left Amycus' on the ground. *Let's see who this new knight is.*

## Chapter 10

She threw the ball, as high as she could upward, and with a push of her magical energy as well. As it was about to fall down, it exploded into a huge firework of multiple colors.

But ahead of her, she saw a bright glow of yellow, orange, red, *and brown*, coming toward her, and growing brighter, more intense, hotter.

Avoiding the fire breath, she *swam* herself underground, which was like falling down to a pool. It was right before the whole forest was sprayed by fire into instant cinder. Even few meters under the ground, she could sense the intense heat from the fire, she had to dive in deeper, to escape the breath.

But she also sensed *something else* from the fire. It was strange, new, and she instantly knew that it was *extremely lethal*. It even went down to the ground, *as if* it was chasing her. So she swam down as fast as possible, away from the surface, and *the weird energy*.



She popped out, on a hill above the city, far from where she was. She sighed in relief, realizing that *the energy* simply sunk down, and expanded all around. But it was just a second, before seeing the true horror, far ahead of her.

He had never thought of how huge the dragon was, but now, as she saw it, the size turned out to be, most likely, huge as North Mountains, reaching over a thousand kilometers. The wings, the neck, the tail, the claws, and the body... she even almost believed that the dragon happened to enlarge itself up to one hundred times.

*The mountains literally have become its bed...*

The city, which was already massive and surrounded by the forest, was lit, as the dragon kept flying over and breathing fire on it. The city was more or less ten times the dragon, but it had no trouble to fly around and breath fire and *the weird energy* all around, turning the city into burning desolation. And with the sky slowly going dark, the city became a sort of gigantic fireplace, brightening the surrounding. She could even hear their screams of fear and pain from afar, although weak.



“That’s up to a thousand kilometers...” stated someone with terror, behind her. She sighed in full relief, seeing the rebels, and even Mr. Lips, although he only recognized Kivi and Scort.

“Thank goodness you came!” She came out of the ground and ran toward them.

“How long has it been, Silia?” Asked Mr. Lips.

“Just recently, but we need to do something...!” screamed Silia.

“About one third of the population is already out, but the rest...” Kivi looked ahead, and then shaking her head of terror. She didn’t continue, because it wasn’t necessary.

“I can see they’re still alive! We must rescue any single one of them, as many as possible! Mr. Lips, we need your advice! Scort, stay with him! The rest, rescue the people! I’ll try to lead the dragon away!” Shouted one of them, whom she didn’t recognize. He then said to Silia, “How many people can you carry underground?”

“Two... but I’m not good yet...” replied Silia, nervous and fast, “And I need to hold hands and concentrate...!”

She then tapped on her shoulder, “Then just rescue one by one! All lives matter! All hands must be on deck! GO!”

As he shouted, all the rebels, including himself, except Scort, went fast toward the city either by running, flying, or jumping. Silia, reluctantly, dived in and swam following them. She saw from her corner of eyes that Mr. Lips only stared at the city, but she knew that he was thinking of the best solution.

Despite that she was underground, from her point of view, looking up and around was clear as air. The dirt around her body simply moved aside, and returned as she moved forward; it became fluid as water, with her magic emitting from her body. With a single butterfly-style swing by both hands and legs, she already advanced forward for up to five meters. However, it wasn’t as fast as the rebels’ speed.

*Remember, no matter what, don’t get in contact with the energy, and don’t rescue those who have been infected with the energy!* She heard the leader of the group by telepathy. It was sudden, and she didn’t expect it, so she was surprised, she almost stopped swimming and drowned.

*What... what is that energy?!* Shouted Silia. She kind of hoped that no one bothered to

respond.

*The dragon's. Answered Kivi. I don't know what that is, no one knows what that is, but it's godly and deadly, it can break through and destroy any kind of defense, as far as we know, it can't be healed or restored, once you get infected, and it's very contagious. Avoid it. That's all that's needed to know.*

*Are you... are you serious...!? You just said we must rescue them!* Shouted Silia.

*Not if they're already infected... we're rescuing them from the fire and the energy, whatever that is...*

*There must be a way to help them! We can't just abandon them burnt to death...!* Replied Silia.

*My friends just fought against the dragon today, through its doll. Said Kivi. One of them got the energy on his finger — it was manifested in form as mud — and it instantly affected him — they had to cut his hand clean, before it got to his whole body.*

*No way...* was the only thing Silia could say.

*His shield was instantly broken, and we knew that it was impossible to cure or restore the damage. Continued Kivi. Same thing goes to the people infected by the energy. The fire we can still handle, but the mud...*

*It's nothing like we've ever encountered. Continued another one. Or anything we've even imagined anywhere.*

*So, as I said, don't get in contact with the energy, and don't rescue anyone already infected.* Repeated the leader.

Silia grunted of frustration. For a moment, she even thought of turning back and going away from the city and leaving the rebels...

*No, no, no! I can do it... those people need help...!*



It turned out to be quite a hectic practice. She had to swim around the city, looking for anyone still living, *and uninfected*, to pull down along, and then carry them far away from the city to safety. Often times, they were panicked and rebelling, until she insisted with loud voice, "CALM

DOWN! I'M SAVING YOU!" Only then, after seeing her face, they relaxed and stopped rebelling. And furthermore, she had to concentrate on equipping the victims, the perk of breathing underground, part of her magic, as her own breathes already came in naturally.

However, she was fully aware that it couldn't be helped from their perspective.

Every building around her, as far as she could see, was being engulfed into fire. Each building was up to three floors, and the first floors were the only ones still left from being touched by fire at all, while there were no longer third floors. Every time Silia temporarily emerged from the ground, she could feel the heat, pretty intense, meters from the fire. Often, she found the people she rescued wrapping themselves with their hands, and also looking around, as if there were feral wolves around them.

Quite an amount of them still survived, but she sensed *the weird energy*, already inside them, and *infecting* them in fast pace — personally, she didn't have any better choice of word to describe it — all over the body, but also the energy as well. Seconds later, they stopped moving, greatly shook, and then fell down, already lifeless. The energy even sipped out of the body and slowly, somehow, infecting the ground around as well.

*He's right... gulped Silia. I'd end up like them too, if I...*

At some areas, the fire and *the weird energy* actually imbued with each other. It made the fire dark-brown-colored as well, instead of only red-orange-yellow-colored, which looked funny and weird, but by magical energy sensory, she was certain that *the energy* was dangerous.

She happened to encounter her friend, Martin; he was running as fast as he could, repeatedly looking back over his shoulder.

So Silia showed up from the ground, so immediate that he screamed out of shock. Silia quickly calmed him, "Don't worry! It's me...!"

She soon realized that he was being chased by something behind him.

It shaped like a human — *it was a person* — but it was completely covered by mud. It took short time for her to realize that, magically and *physically*, *the mud was constantly emitted from the body itself*.

"RUUUNN!" Screamed Martin, clearly frightened to death. Silia herself, by response and reflex, grabbed him by his leg, and pulled down, descending down for meters. "Don't worry, *it can't...*"

But from below, they both heard reduced sounds of the ground being punched. They both naturally looked up; the *infected* was punching on ground. With just a single punch, the road, where they were under, cracked into half a meter, and *it* also dug down, literally with only two hands. It was the first time in her life, seeing the ground being cracked and broken from below — it appeared like a huge chunk of cracking glass — and it looked weird, even abnormal to her.

She thought of waiting and witnessing of what would happen next, but Martin shook her up, and said, “WHAT ARE YOU WAITING FOR? COME ON!”

“I — yes...!” So they both sank down, away from *the mud thing*. She saw that *it* still punched down, even though they were already far away from the point. “*What the fuck is that thing...?!*”

“I don’t know! I saw Simmy when I was running... she was already covered by that mud thing...!”

Martin paused for a while, as if it was intentional to shock Silia to the core. *No... not him... “That... that was him...?”*

“I don’t know what... the next second, he was... he went on rampage, and he saw me...”

*Hey, you! What’s your name?! Silia called the leader.*

*Arvour. What is it?*

“He was emitting that thing from his body...”

*What the fuck is that thing...?! I mean, what does it do to the infected!?*

“I think he wanted to... I don’t know, he wanted me to get that mud thing too...?!”

“I’m asking my friend about that, hold on!” Said Silia to Martin, as she dragged him across underground. She held him on her left shoulder, while his right hand swam forward.

*I’d be frank, I’m not sure either... said Arvour.*

*I suppose it’s a sort of necromancy...? Resurrecting dead people, but not their lives and consciousnesses...?* Said the others. Soon, it became a mild debate, despite that they were rescuing the people.

“Friends... who?” Asked Martin, curious.

*Necromancy doesn't affect living people. It barely scars them.*

"You don't know these guys." Answered Silia short.

*I said it's a sort of necromancy. Or something that's not necromancy, but works similar to. Who knows? That wretched beast thinks it's all powerful, it thinks it can just come to our world, claim it, eat us, carry that poop, and literally poop it on us. Best that the mud thing eventually kills it.*

*You think the energy is going to kill it?*

*Mirina said it herself, remember? It's troubling the dragon, clearly. Even I can tell that it's out of the dragon's league. A bit...*

*It doesn't matter what it is. Now, we can only focus on rescuing everyone we can rescue. I've managed to lure the dragon out of the city...*

*How're you doing?*

*Pretty good. The dragon's annoyed, that's for sure.*

*How do you actually lure the dragon out of the city...* wondered Silia. But at that moment, she couldn't help but be rather focused on getting Martin out of the city.

However, while they were heading out, there was another old man, already exhausted from running. Aside from that, he seemed to be unharmed yet. It took just a second for Silia to recognize the old man.

"Uncle..." squeaked Silia.

But Martin insisted, shaking her shoulder. "Come on! We have to go!"

"But..." She also found that, from afar, another *zombie* was approaching him. The distance was safe, but with her uncle already panting loudly, and *the zombie* closing up fast, it was simply a matter of time.

Martin still insisted on Silia. "WE HAVE TO GO NOW!"

"BUT WHAT ABOUT — !"

"WE CAN'T SAVE HIM, COME ON!"

Martin now literally, either by intent or be accident, had his saliva splattered on her face. But she could only stare at them both repeatedly, frozen underground. She was thinking hard of what she should do, in fear and panic; she knew what she would have to do, but her problem was to choose.

“I...”

“FOR FUCK’S SAKE...!!!”

“I’m sorry...”

She, carrying Martin, soared upward, and threw Martin away to the surface. He himself was surprised; he could only let him be thrown up. Meanwhile, Silia turned sharp toward her uncle, leaped forward, caught him, and then sank down with him, just before *the zombie* touched her uncle.

“Wha... Silia...!?” Gaspd her uncle, as they went underground. She didn’t bother saying anything to him; she simply went down and away, holding her uncle tightly, no longer looking up. She heard sounds of muted cracks from above, but only for a second; it then stopped abruptly, and then was followed by a loud, muted sound of a man’s scream.

“What the... what are you doing...? What about him?!” Asked her uncle; even so, he held tight on her shoulder.

“I can’t carry two people...” Silia then stopped. She could feel her tears about to come out and roll down, if she explained further. Her uncle, somehow, understood that, and stayed silent, as they went down further.



From a glance, there were way more than a hundred thousand people, watching the city wrecked from the forest. The age was various, from fifty-year-old adults, to infants wrapped by clean cloth, on each their mother. They all expressed same emotions, the logical and understandable ones for the current situation.

She and her uncle popped out from underground, which startled some people around. She added quickly, “I gotta go...”

“Just be careful, alright?!” Said her uncle. It did make her look back to him. He didn’t say anything else, and he didn’t look mad or demanding; instead, his face alone looked sad and

sympathetic, his eyes straight toward hers.

“Sure... I’ll will...” and then swam down, leaving them all.

That was when Mr. Lips contacted her, *Silia, where are you?!*

*Right! Right! I’m going now...!*

*I need you to take me to the lab branch, near the centre of the city! I have a solution!*

*What?! What kind of solution?!*

*I’ll explain it to you later! Pick me up! You know where I am!*

*And you’re sure that it would work?*

*Oh, don’t worry. I know it will.*



## Chapter 10.3

At one point, from below, he saw one of the rebels rescuing a group of six survivors, at the same time. From his hands, he fired onto them with a sort of thick, nasty spider web string, and then pulling them off by flying away. The rebel had a pair of big grey wings, and he could lift them all, without any problem whatsoever. It did look weird, as if he was a combination of a human, an eagle, and a spider.

*That's... actually normal, compared to...*

She carried Mr. Lips along, while swimming across underground. Thankfully, he helped along by swinging his legs as well. As result, they could swim forward faster than she did alone. It was a bit difficult for her to find the branch, in the middle of the burning city.

Also occasionally, they encountered some of the infected. Just like what she saw, they were also covered, and even *literally emitting the mud thing*. She noticed that they had quite considerable amount of speed and strength on each one of them, seeing how fast they ran and how they could break through the buildings easily.

But even with enhanced and sensory sight, she couldn't see their faces, or anything beyond *the mud thing*. In a way, they did appear like a split army of undead.

"Have you ever seen anything like this...?" Asked Silia to Mr. Lips, naturally. It became a bit awkward for her to stay silent along the travel.

"No. This is the first time..." replied Mr. Lips.

"Okay, that's a good plan, I guess..." Said Silia. "But what about the dragon? Are we to use the same tactic for the dragon as well?"

"I don't know... we'll see about that, after we're dealing with the city..."



It took some time for them to get to the branch, but most importantly, they arrived, safe and sound, to the targeted place.



It was the only building among the city, which was not engulfed in fire; there were only few small parts on the building that were burnt, but it didn't spread. It was on par with other buildings around it, which made it appear more like a really flamboyant and exaggerated mansion, than a laboratory branch.

The problem was, the building was surrounded by *zombies* — she had no other choice of word for that. From below, but after circling the building around, she predicted about two hundred, reaching to either destroy the building, or climb up. However, it seemed that, somehow, the building was magically fortified to hold against the immense power of their punches and kicks, although it did cracks on them.

Silia and Mr. Lips peeked a bit far, but still within sight. They looked from the ground.

“The building happened to be built with a mix of pure granite and amphi...” said Mr. Lips, stunned and awed by the building's resistance.

“Yeah, well, it won't hold forever.” Replied Silia, a bit pessimistic. “And I can't cross into the building. How are we going to get in?”

“We're gonna need to distract them.” Said Mr. Lips.

The moment he said it, her heart dropped down. She already knew what kind of distraction was necessary. “No...”

He looked surprised, but nevertheless continued, “Unfortunately, I'm not that skilled in combat situation, or anything close to it...”

“Sweet. I'm gonna lure all these zombies out of the building, and potentially get infected...”

“Come on, you won't get infected. You're *undeniably* fast, and you can sink in any time you think is necessary.” Said Mr. Lips, encouraging. However, it didn't feel encouraging enough for her.

“Okay, where would I put you? I can't carry you along...”

“Just that building.” Mr. Lips pointed at a big house, across the branch, quite close from their position. “After you lure them away, I'll go and unlock the branch.”

“You better be...” Growled Silia. She went toward the building he pointed at. “I can't ascend up there... not yet, while carrying you.”

She put Mr. Lips back on the surface of the ground. Without further saying, he quickly got into the building. She waited until he *actually* got in, before she started the distraction.

*You can do it, Silia. You can do it...*

She moved using her hands and legs, swinging them as fast and forceful as she could. She went to the street in front of the branch at first, dove a little, and emerged in a jump.

“FILTHY PIGS!” Shouted Silia, as loud as she could. It was done just once, but managed to distract attention of all *zombies*. As they ran to catch her, she swam away, and led them off the branch; she stayed on the surface, so that they could see her.

But as she turned left, there were some zombies coming her way. The worst aspect of it, was that they were so close, they could bump with each other if she didn't have good reflex.

With such a close distance, she could *actually* see and smell them up close. They were *literally, and completely* covered by the energy, which did look like mud; she couldn't see the faces at all past *the mud*. It did smell rotten, as if they were indeed decomposing bodies, but aside from that, it also smelled something else, the kind that she couldn't tell. Somehow, something far worse than the smell of decomposing bodies.

There was barely any room for fear in her heart. With hands, she pushed herself back, away from the zombies, but also, accidentally, blasted a big size of ground ahead of her off. The zombies, as result, were thrown and blasted off. It did managed to get distant with them, but she realized that it barely scratched any damage on them.

*Not good! I have to swim away!* She continued swimming away, and distracting all the zombies, as far as possible from the branch. As she looked back, she saw from far away, that Mr. Lips already ran toward the entrance of the branch.

She intended to swim back to Mr. Lips, before quickly dismissed it. *No, no, no! Not yet...!* There were now up to fifty *zombies* behind her. She realized that their speed was unusually fast, more than normal speed of a running man. But without carrying any burden, she could swim fast enough without being caught up. She kept leading *the zombies* away from the branch lab.



The entrance of the branch laboratory was almost *infected with the energy* as well. It was weird, ridiculous, and unreal to her, seeing that the energy, in the shape of mud, get to infect even inanimate stuffs, but it was exactly what they were seeing, as they entered the building.

Only a small gap of the entrance was still uninfected; fortunately, the infection was somehow moving slow on the building.

“Watch yourself. Never get in contact with *the mud*.” Said Mr. Lips, after she entered through the wooden door.

“Not even a single dot?” Grunted Silia. The moment she stepped her legs into the building, she knew that she wasn’t able to sink down the ground, due to the magical restrictions inside, as well as the anti-magic material. “What if there’s a zombie inside? I wouldn’t be able to go down and hide...”

“We would have known that.” Said Mr. Lips. “Before this, they actually asked a favor from me. There was... well, a lake of this energy...”

“A lake?!”

“*Mud lake*, you’d call it.” Replied Mr. Lips.

There were no one else inside, as far as they could see. The magical emergency lights kept blinking and spinning; although it was enough to brighten the corridors, it rather actually caused dizziness on Silia’s head. She intended to walk really slow, but Mr. Lips instead walked fast, not bothered at all with the loud sounds of his walking. He looked at the rooms’ name plates, one by one, while Silia kept looking over her shoulders, and at the corners of the corridors.

“The amount of the energy... and the toxicity... anyway,” continued Mr. Lips. “When I got there, one of the rebels have his right hand cut...”

“Because he got a dot on his middle finger, Kivi told me already.”

“So you see, this is... unnatural...” said Mr. Lips. She guessed that he was also looking for the right word to describe it. “Can’t be too careful...”

“Yes, I know that.” Said Silia, rather indifferent. “Let’s focus on looking for all we need...”

“Right inside.” Said Mr. Lips.

It took shorter than she thought, and unlike what she had imagined. The “disposal room” board name was next to its wooden door, almost as if it was an ordinary office.

“What?! This is the room?!” Said Silia shocked in disbelief.

Mr. Lips grinned. "From the outside, yes. From the inside..."

... was nowhere close to the outside, but that was all she could say.

There were lots of big and deep holes on the floor, hence the large area of the room. Each one was about five meters' wide, and three meters' deep. On the surface, was set a thick circle of metal, carved with lots of runes around it, but it was just as thick as the floor to the ankles. It would be easy to push an unaware person into the hole.

They all were deactivated, as none of them were glowing; the only thing as source of light, was the emergency blinking light, which didn't do much help in the first place. One thing that stood out from the circles, every single one of them, was a stone on each one. She noticed that it varied, from small to big, from pale to glittering, from perfectly round to abstractly-shaped.

"What's that...?" Asked Silia, as he took a red unshaped stone off one of the metal circles.

"This is, basically, where we open the portal to, which is one of many uninhabited worlds." Said Mr. Lips. He continued picking up other stones. It seemed to be stuck on the circles, until he plucked it out. "We can't open portal randomly to any world as we please; we might even open one to our own world."

"So... this is the guidance..." said Silia.

"Exactly." Said Mr. Lips, grinning.

"So... how much power do we need to activate... for the whole town...?"

"Immense." Said Mr. Lips. "Fortunately, the rebels have plenty of energy to spare. We can use it to energize opening the portal, as big as the city..."

"Okay, but, still, do you think it could work?"

"It's literally *teleporting tons of poop into a desolate world.*" Said Mr. Lips. "But, for extreme safety, we'll probably have to destroy the stone..."

"What?!"

"We don't know if it's contaminable, even if it's through the stone..." said Mr. Lips, as he took another one. It was blue, and it shaped close to a hexagon. He inspected it up close. "Since it can infect so easily, I wouldn't be surprised... this will be a good chance to test it... come on."

“And that’s it...?”

They just got out of the disposal room, but they could hear already footsteps coming toward them. It sounded quite plenty amount of feet, and seemed running in hurry.

They both already knew what it was.

“Fuck!” They both said the same curse, at the same time; they even ran away at the same time, as fast as they could, toward the same direction: going away from where the sounds came from. Unfortunately, Mr. Lips was slower than Silia.

*HELP! WE’RE ABOUT TO BE SURROUNDED!*

*Right! Said one of the rebels. I’m on my way! Try to find a window and signal your position!*

“Window-window-window...!” They both looked around wildly, looking for windows, when it’s obvious that they were in closed corridors.

He could already hear Mr. Lips’ pant. “Come one... *where’s the stones...?!*”

“Pocket...” panted Mr. Lips, but nevertheless, he reached into his pocket on his pants, to make sure that the stones were indeed there. “I’m not used to run...”

*Fuck...! I can’t swim inside either! “Is there a way to lift up the building’s restriction?!”*

“Surpass my authority...” Mr. Lips still panted. The footsteps got louder.

*How the fuck could they actually...?*

“Must find window...”

“Can’t you enhance yourself?!”

“Not enough power...”

“Oh, of all times...!” For a while, she considered lifting and carrying him, but she left it off her mind; it would be inappropriate, even though no one else’s around, and she would rather preserve energy for swimming on ground.

They kept running; Silia held his hand, often times pulling him, while Mr. Lips himself kept struggling to keep running. Both their eyes kept turning around to find where the windows are. Despite that the footsteps were quite loud, they didn’t see the zombies around yet.

“Don’t tell me they can get invisible...!” Said Silia.

“No, they can’t... they better not... there’s barely any window in this place...” panted Mr. Lips, but even then, he wasn’t sure either.

“We have to... what should we do?”

But as she turned back, she saw *the zombies* already. They were at least twenty, and they stuck together. The moment the zombies saw them both, they ran toward them, as if they stole something valuable off the zombies. The only good thing from the situation, was the distance, but for only a few seconds.

And this time, she was certain that she wouldn’t be able to phase through them.

“Use this!” Said Mr. Lips, handing her something small. It was unshaped, but the white glittering color made it look beautiful, she almost mistook it as a diamond. “Open the portal!”

“I don’t know how...”

“Tap onto it... NOW!!!”



## Chapter 10.6

The problem was, they were falling down. Apparently, they were from the cliff made of chemical junks; the height could be likely thousands of meters from the ground. They were falling toward the ocean of *hazardous junk*.

It was the first time she attempted in opening portal, and it succeeded in the first try. It turned out to be easier than she thought; she simply needed to tap on the stone, catch *a sort of thread* — she wasn't sure if that was the right word — and opened it for them to pass through.

Exactly below them, happened to be a lake of green liquid, with some brownish residues. She didn't really pay attention on chemistry, but she guessed that it was impure, mixed boldic acid.

“Oh, no... that's boldic acid...” said Mr. Lips loud, proving her prediction.

“What's that residue?! Don't tell me it's *the mud!*”

“No! That's sulfatric benzine! Just almost as hazardous as the acid!” Replied Mr. Lips. “I hope your intangibility can phase through it!”

“It can! Hold on tight!” She tightly hugged Mr. Lips, who also hugged her, and then activated her skill, to swim harmlessly in and on the ground.



As her legs were about to touch *the ground*, the junks shifted aside, giving them space for sinking. Automatically, their fall slowed down to safety, as if they were falling into ocean.

However, instead of the brown color of the dirt underground, she witnessed *billions of nasty and disfigured junks*, which they were swimming in, from top to bottom. All kinds of colors were there, but nowhere close to giving the sense of beauty. Parts of them were unused chemistry, solid equipment, but there were also puddles and pools of chemicals.

The worst part was, they somehow mixed with each other; some were half-liquified, some were disfigured, some were even exploding all the time. They were all abstract and random,

mixed to each other, having no pattern whatsoever. Even underground, she could smell all the mixtures of the junks.

She quickly pushed herself, and Mr. Lips, who was still holding tightly, onto the surface. From her corner, she could see that he was almost puking.

*No, no, no, not another junk added here...* resisted Silia, holding her own puke.

She meant to resurface, but it turned out that she pushed themselves too much. They basically *blasted themselves* upward, way too high, up to a hundred meters from the surface. The junks all around them were blasted, spread all around, almost like ripples and splashes of water. They were fewer, but with some junks following them up to the air, it still grossed them both.

“HOW DO WE GET OUT OF HERE!?” screamed Silia, frustrated. No longer holding breath, she got to smell the stink of the place.

“WE NEED TO FIND A PLACE TO LAND FIRST!” replied Mr. Lips, just as loud.

“Land-land-land...” they instinctively looked and turned around, looking for a safe land to land. From such a height, they could indeed find safe spots. However, they were too far for them to reach, without *having to swim again*.

“HOLD YOUR BREATH!” The panic and screams came back again, as they quickly fell down, back to *the junks* again. For a while, she noticed that Mr. Lips’s charisma and maturity were gone.

“OH, FUCK, PLEASE...!”

This time, the moment they went into the junks, she dashed herself, and Mr. Lips, toward the closest safe land she previously saw. As she swam forward, the junks shifted aside, without even making any contact with them. She also noticed that she couldn’t look up at the surface above, like what she could do on the ground, so she had to swim on the surface.

Still holding each other, she leapt forward few meters, exactly landing on the safe spot. It appeared to be something big, flat, and made of metal, but completely untouched by the chemicals around it.

Soon as they landed safely, they naturally fell down, lying down of exhaustion — although she wasn’t tired yet — and shock. But even then, with the stinky smell from everywhere, she honestly couldn’t rest.



“Okay...” said Silia, still lying down, “How do we get out...?”

“T-Try...”

So eventually, he puked. She kept her sight looking at the sky, which was just as blue, cloudy, and pleasant as their world. *Too bad the land's not as beautiful...* thought Silia. She decided to focus on the sky and the clouds over the sound of Mr. Lips' puking.

“Try...” panted Mr. Lips finally. He sounded tired by the puking alone. “Tap on... the stone...”

“What?! What if the zombies are still there?”

“Not big enough... I mean, use it to peep...” panted Mr. Lips. “See if they're gone...”

“How about you just do it?” Silia threw it near Mr. Lips' head. “That was luck, but I'm not that professional, I'm not like Roven, or Mirina, or... those top-notch skilful rebels...”

“I'd gladly... but I'm not in good condition...” said Mr. Lips.

He slowly rose, “You don't have to be as great as them to do it... but, wouldn't it be nice to prove to yourself, that you turn out to be a well-capable sorceress...?”

“Well, yeah, but, at least, not now!” Scolded Silia. “Now, we're on a grave mission to rescue the people, clean the — no, *get rid of the mud*, and handle that dragon issue... why is it even here? What's going on?!”

“If I'm not mistaken... the rebels were having the fight...”

“*With the dragon?!*” Said Silia. The thought alone gave Silia creeps. Her imagination went wild already. *How could they even fight against the dragon, such a size..?!*

“No. It used a doll as substitute...” explained Mr. Lips.

She sighed in relief as response. Although her worst thought turned out to be wrong, it also felt slightly anticlimactic. “Oh...”

“But... that's when we first learned about the... *the energy...*”

“*The mud* thing? Yeah, it emits energy as well...” said Silia. “I've never seen anything like it...”

“No one has ever even imagined anything close to it.” Concluded Mr. Lips. “Before, we did

have some ideas to kill the dragon. Small chance, but we could try. But this... our chances fell down..."

"To where?"

"Zero, perhaps... we can't keep teleporting any infected people and buildings..."



"Impossible... there must be another way..." said Silia, but even then, she was doubtful as she said it herself.

"Maybe, but then again, if there's any... which is *a big if*... we haven't found it..." said Mr. Lips, grim.

"We'll all find a way, alright?! Everyone and everything have weakness! We'll figure it out!" repeated Silia. "Starting from getting out of here. I still think that you would do it better..."

"You know... when you say that now's not the time..." said Mr. Lips. He rose slowly and sat down. "Crisis is oftentimes the best way to test yourself... better than practices..."

Nevertheless, he grabbed the stone, and put it into his palms of hands. He shut his eyes and concentrated; Silia simply waited with sullen look, pondering about what he said.

She then looked around her; she pinched her nose, to cover it from smelling the stink. *This is... what, hundreds of years of junk disposal... on one of the disposal worlds...?*

"It's safe." Said Mr. Lips suddenly. "They're gone. But the stone is surrounded with *the mud*..."

"Then, how would we get out of here...?"

"It's alright. We get there. Just be careful not to stumble down or something." Said Mr. Lips. He handed the stone to Silia. "I'm not strong enough to open the portal... not for now..."

"Fine." Said Silia. She snatched the stone, and held it with both hands. She attempted to repeat what she accidentally did under pressure. *Tap on it... find its thread*... "It's... tapping on the stone, and... find the thread between this and the one at the other side, right...?"

"And then, go through the thread. Or widen the thread into a tunnel. Whichever is fine, but

the former would take less power.” Said Mr. Lips. He also held her hands quite tightly. “Picture it in your imagination, if you have to.”

It was hard for her to imagine, considering that she had never done this before. Nevertheless, she did manage to tap on the stone, and find the thread, somehow linking both stones between the one on her hands, and the other on the other side.

*Right. Now...*



For a very short moment, it felt like they were about to be pressed on every part of their bodies, before the sensation disappeared. With her eyes closed, she saw red blinking light repeatedly, so she opened her eyes.

“We made it.” grinned Mr. Lips, confirming her guess. “You did it.”

They were sitting on the floor, still holding to each other, but worst part of it all, surrounded by *the mud*. It’s not only on the floor, but also on the walls and the ceiling. It was almost like the zombies exploded and stained half the clean and white corridor.

“Not even the branch’s restriction can hold *the mud...*” commented Mr. Lips. As he said so, she paid attention at *the mud*.

“Is it... *moving?*”

“Spreading. Yes, we need to get out of there fast.” Said Mr. Lips.

They both quickly stood up, and looked around them, looking for safe steps. There were indeed some parts of the floor which was still clear of *the mud*. It wasn’t far off, so they could jump over without getting in contact with *the mud*. She noticed that not all corridors were stained with the mud. The most fortunate part was, it didn’t drip down from the ceiling onto the floor.

“Hear anything?” Said Silia, as they both finally got out safely from *the mud*.

“No...”

*Where were you? What took you so long?* Said one of the rebels, out of nowhere.

*We went into hiding... we almost encountered the infected...* responded Mr. Lips. *We’re*

*fine, we're not infected...*

*Thank goodness... I still sense those muddy people inside the building.*

*How could they even get in...? asked Silia.*

*I saw that the entrance was broken. Horribly. I suppose that's how they got it. Anyway, find a window, so I can pick you guys up. Said the rebel. Better hurry...!*

*On our way... so they both walked faster, and swung their heads around wilder. Her own eyes turned left and right, just for looking for a window. "Don't you know this place?! Can't you just tell the nearest window?!"*

*"I don't know this place that well! I've just been here few times — and we don't have time to dig down my memories just for that!"*

*"THERE!" While she listened at him, her eyes spotted something new from the white corridor and red blinking light: it was a dark square, with a bit of reddish glow. Although she wasn't sure if it was indeed a window, she pointed at it naturally and spontaneously.*

*Good! Signal for me which window!*

*"WAIT-WAIT-WAIT...!"*

*Mr. Lips stopped her, but they were at the door already.*

*The window turned out to be inside a wide room, with open door; it was dark, so she couldn't tell what kind of room it was. However, she heard from inside the room, that they weren't alone.*

*"RUN!"*

*It was the first time she heard they roared... and it struck straight to her heart.*

*The roar was really low and bass, nowhere close to a bass-voiced singer. It was harsh and animal, and really loud, since they were in a closed room. It felt almost like a giant wave of water coming out of nowhere, crushing them in every dot of their bodies, with massive pressure. She even thought that the roar shook her bones as well.*

*She couldn't tell where they were exactly, but she could tell that there was more than one. For once, the fear *actually* attacked her. She didn't wait for Mr. Lips anymore, and it seemed like*

he didn't as well.

*JUST FUCKING COME IN AND SAVE US! WE CAN'T GO FOR A FUCKING WINDOW!*

*Hang on! We're working on it!*

But they were too occupied to even reply, or ask about what he meant. They tried to run as fast as they could, but they're already exhausted, and *the zombies* ran quite fast, faster compared to normal speed of a running person. She attempted to *swim down to ground*, before she remembered that the lab branch had set up magic restriction.

*I don't want to die like this...!* Thought Silia to herself. Before she knew it, her tears already rolled down her cheeks.

But along with it, she recalled what she did just less than half an hour ago, toward Martin and her uncle.

*Is this how he felt, when I...?!*

*The zombies* were already close to grab them both, while for themselves, they had to force their legs to keep moving, even though they couldn't run fast.



Just when *the zombies* were about to make contact with them, *they* were instantly pulled back.

It turned out to be one of the rebels she saw previously, when they were rescuing people. He shot thick, nasty spider webs from his hands, onto the zombies, and pulled them back, with a single pull, far away from them both. The rebel turned out to have small wings as well, just as wide as his shoulder to another.

They fell down, of relief and joy. Just as she took some time to breath for herself, she felt something grabbing her legs. That was when she looked at what touched her.

The zombies already ran chasing toward them; it seemed that the pulling wasn't quite effective against their abnormal strength. But the rebel already anticipated it: he shot more at their legs, sticking them on the floor, while at the same time, dragging both her and Mr. Lips, into the previous room.

His flight movement was fast, they could only scream,

“AAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAA...!!!” before even saying anything. Before they even know it, they were already outside.

That was when she could see and understand what happened, after she wept out her tears. The room was blasted: the window became a big giant hole, almost as big as the wide room itself. Below, on the ground, was another rebel, stretching his hand toward the hole.

“They got to disable to restriction temporarily,” said Mr. Lips, more to himself.

When she looked up, as the rebel lowered them quickly and steadily, she realized that the wings, which was bat-like, became wide and large, each up to two meters’ wide. She could even hear the sound the wings being flapped, which was loud, for such big and thin wings.

She spotted that *the zombies*, likely those he was dealing with, showed up to the room, and jumped ahead to catch the winged rebel. He, anticipating this as well, let them all three falling down. Fortunately, they were close from the ground already, so it wasn’t a problem to them. *The zombies*, missing this, instead fell toward a building across the street. He didn’t waste it; he shot another string, onto the other rebel, and then soared up high to the sky, carrying them three. In seconds, they were already high, far from *the zombies*’ reach.

“Apology for the tension... that was difficult...x said the rebel with them.

“Did you *actually* disable the restriction...?” Asked Mr. Lips, awed.

“Temporarily. It’s a strong restriction...”

“Where were you two? I couldn’t sense you for a moment...” said the winged rebel suddenly.

“We’re hiding. That’s all.” Said Silia instead. She looked at Mr. Lips; it wasn’t embarrassing, but looking at his face, they silently decided to deem it unnecessary to tell, and keep it as a secret.

“Well, you better get the tools ready. After all those insanities, if we have to go back...” said the winged rebel.

“Don’t worry.” Cut Mr. Lips. “We just need the inter-world mediator stone, the portal spell, and sufficient amount of energy. It’s all ready.”



There was no more frightening moments after that. They landed on the forest, safely far

from the city. As their legs touched the ground, he instantly let herself sinking into the ground. It never gave her any sensation, but it was the first time she felt so comfortable *to swim in the ground*.

“You two okay?” Asked one of the rebels, so she resurfaced. He seemed to be the second in command of the rebels in that place. Kivi showed up and stood next to him.

“Yeah, barely...” said Mr. Lips, tired.

“Where’s the people...?”

“Already safe and far away from here. We took them into one of our secret safe houses, under the mountains. Not sure if the dragon’s in mood for melting mountains...”

“Is everything ready?” asked Mr. Lips.

“Yes. We got the plan back and forth, and it’s ready. Immiront and the others are luring *the zombies* and keeping them in the city, using illusion.”

“What about the energy...?”

“Done.” Another one showed up from behind. He showed them a small black glittering stone on his hand. It seemed similar to the stones they took from the lab, but Silia had a strong conviction that it was way different from the other mediator stones.

“Ah, yes. The dark storage...” grinned Mr. Lips.

“D-Dark storage...?” stuttered Silia, thinking if she misheard it. “The... *one of the forbidden magical tools...?*”

“One and the only.” Said the rebel with the stone, smiling at Silia. “You know this stuff?”

“Are you kidding?! That’s... I thought that’s a made-up tool...!” she rose from the ground to take a closer look to the stone. It seemed easy to break, seeing it glittering.

“Then why would it even be called forbidden?” chuckled Kivi.

“I... no, I mean...” blushed Silia. “I... it just sounds impossible... this can contain *almost everything...?!?*”

“You can have lots of chats about it later.” Said the second in command. “Now, get ready.”

“Yes.” The rebel with the stone looked back. There stepped forward another rebel, but it was instantly obvious that the rebel was different from the others. Some of them even gave way for the rebel to come forward.

The rebel, unclear if it’s a man or a woman, wore a long black robe, gloves, and a mask, completely concealing even a bit of the skin. Silia looked at the chest, and found that there didn’t seem to be breasts. *A man...? But why did this one hide himself? None of the others were...*

The masked rebel and the one with the dark storage, went to front, and began silently enchanting. It was invisible, but she could sense powerful energy from the stone, flowing, forming a sort of rope; it moved fast and wide, about to completely surround the big city. Seeing the speed, it would take about a minute.

She also sensed that the portal spell no ordinary, daily-use kind. There was something from the spell she couldn’t explain, but well knew, that it was not some mere people could cast. She thought of asking who the rebel was, but seeing how tense they were, Silia decided to postpone it for a while.

“Will they stay in the city, not leave?” asked Mr. Lips.

“Leave it to them.” Said the second in command. “Our job now is to make sure no one from outside is interfering, like the kingdom’s knights.”

“They wouldn’t interfere, right? I mean, we’re saving the city...” said Silia.

“We’ll never know. If they thought slaughtering us is more worth it, they’d do it. Simple as that.”

She couldn’t help but gulp in fright, hoping that there would be no knights of the kingdom they needed to handle.

“Would this plan actually succeed?”

“I told you.” Grinned Mr. Lips. “It will. The only failing factors would be from outside, and we’re to make sure that *it would never happen.*”



Even with the muting spell on his ears, the dragon’s roar was still loud on his ears.

He hid in the middle of the forest. With the density of the trees, and the darkness of the



night, as well as the dragon's panic — although he couldn't be sure about it — he was completely covered.

*It didn't use its nose at all... thought Arvour, confused.*

He peeked from the corner of his eyes. The dragon now simply flew around, way up high, looking furious, confused, and even in pain. It sounded similar to animals which were in pain.

*How is it? Are you okay? Asked Pater.*

*Yeah... but... as much I'd like to kill the dragon... I can't find a way to calm the dragon down...*

*Yeah, I get that.*

*How is it there? Everyone's saved? The city's purged?*

*All done. City's deported out of this world. No casualties from our side.*

*D-Deported?*

*There's no other choice. The disgusting energy has spread all over the city. We need to get rid of it, or it'll spread all around the kingdom...*

*I understand. But wouldn't it already spread all around the kingdom? How long has it been since the dragon were here?*

*I don't know, I suppose it's just recent... we've never seen anything like this before... it would have already spread all around, and we would have known way long before.*

*Fine. We'll discuss that... and investigate that later. Now... about the dragon...*

# Chapter 11

Jeremy could only look at the board, just next to the entrance of the castle. He was the only one at that moment.

*Why...?* The sun bathed him into sweating his own dress, but his eyes were as if being fixated by someone else's spell onto the board. Specifically, the collection of pictures, of wanted rebels. He was staring onto a picture of a young woman, with long wavy brown hair, and brown eyes, with a needle-like thin and long sword on her right hand. He just noticed that there hadn't been much differences from the last time he saw her.

*Why do you have to...?*

"Mr. Earton?" called a soldier. It was sudden, and he was focused completely on the board, so he gasped in shock, and even jumped off.

"Sh... I'm sorry, yes?"

The soldier kept a flat face, saying, "They're ready to see you, sir."

"Yes... I see... I mean, of course..." stuttered Jeremy.

The castle of the kingdom was huge, about five meters from the ground, and it was shut, until the soldier walked toward it. The wooden gate automatically swung open, just enough for both of them to pass through.

The wide brick road was quite long between the entrance to the castle, because the garden alone, behind the tall walls, was immensely dense and huge. It has tons of various kinds of plants, from beds of small flowers, to dense trees as tall as three meters.

It was pleasant alone to see the garden, full of colors. Between the road and the garden, was torches set on poles, one per every meter. He could sense a powerful spell from the poles, functioning as invisible fences between the road and the garden.

*If only I could touch one of the flowers... just a bit, a single one...* sighed Jeremy with jealousy.

It probably took about ten minutes to get to the castle. From the outside alone, there were lots of towers and turrets everywhere, as if they were randomly stuck onto the castle as they please. He couldn't help but be nervous, as he looked up to the gatehouse, as he noticed that there was a knight on the left side, seeing from the armor he wore. The knight appeared to look down; as their eyes happened to meet each other, he instantly looked down.

The soldier, surprisingly, led Jeremy, not through the main hall, but instead turned right, and eventually headed to a small door. It turned out to lead them to the garden, the very place he saw when followed the soldier. It literally looked like a forest, dense with trees, bushes, plants as tall from his head to his waist, and flower beds.

There were animals in the garden as well; as they entered, the fireflies flew from the plants nearby, and flew around above their heads. It wasn't a bother, as they were silent, and made no contact whatsoever with both of them.

The soldier led him through the garden, into an open space in the middle. It was a place full of flower beds all around. He could sense a spell covering the whole space, as if there was an invisible greenhouse, keeping the space warm. Every flower in the space was beautiful, most of them he had even never seen in his life, but he then noticed that there were two people in the space. One of them, was watering the flowers, and wore a white long cloak, so long that it touched the ground; the other one was simply standing behind the man with white cloak.

Panicked, Jeremy immediately bowed down, having his head touching the ground. He heard the soldier saying, "Your Highness, Mr. Earton has arrived."

"Thank you... please stand up, no need for that..." said King Brice. "Mr...?"

"Mr. Earton." said another one, who he didn't recognize at all. He slowly rose, and looked at them.

King Brice looked tired, depressed, and even *older than usual*. His face alone appeared sullen and weak, as if he had been through heavy exercise. However, the pathetic appearance stopped only at his face; his hand held the watering pot firmly, and his body stood up straight and strong. Next to him was a knight in armor, standing solid, strong, and strong, looking calm, but also cold. He didn't really recognize the knight, although he had seen him several times.

"You... w-w-were calling me, King Brice...?" said Jeremy.

"Yes. You were a friend to Mirina, weren't you?" said King Brice.

The question was calm and friendly, but direct, immediate, and somehow, really cold, as if he alone was a rebel being interrogated. He couldn't help but be shocked, to think that he would be asked regarding her, instead of the overpopulation potion, or the failure of the key material's delivery. "Y-Yes, M-M-My King..."

"What kind of a person is she?" said King Brice. "I just want to see her from every perspective I can see."

He no longer watered the plants. As the knight swung his hand, three chairs and a table, as well as crackers and three cups of tea. "Where's my manners? Come, come, sit."

Jeremy walked really slowly toward his seat; he even had a thought of running away, or passing out by the anxiety. King Brice and the knight, on the other side, happily grabbed crackers and sipped their tea with relaxation. "Allow me, this is Sir Clarton. You probably have seen him..."

"Nice to meet you, Mr. Earton." Greeted Sir Clarton.

"N-Nice to meet you too..."

"So? About Mirina...?" asked King Brice back, seemingly impatient.

"She... uh... it's... it's been a long time..." stuttered Jeremy, while his mind worked hard on recalling his childhood past with her. "Uh... she... was a really smart student, along with me and Roven..."

"Ah... Roven." cut the knight. "So you know him as well?"

"Uh... well... yeah... we know each other... but I'm closer to Mirina than to Roven... he's not really... uh... *friendly*..."

"How so?"

"He's a... he likes to break the rules, and pranks on others... but, well, he's brilliant, academically..."

"No one's denying that." commented Sir Clarton.

"I imagine he's a bit annoying?" guessed King Brice. "A massive bully in your school?"

"Uh... well..." His heart, somehow began pounding with fright, because he didn't want to misspeak. "In a way..."

“Relax. We’re just having a friendly conversation.” said Sir Clarton. He didn’t smile, or wrinkle with anger. He simply looked at him with calmness, and even a sort of ignorance, but somehow, Jeremy felt even more anxious and tenser.

“Very well. What else? About any of them?”

“Uh... well... Roven’s... he’s not really close to his family... it’s a bit tense, between them, in fact...”

“Makes sense. He was a bastard.” said Sir Clarton. It was a normal conversation, but it felt sudden to Jeremy, he was stunned by it alone. “I’m rather fond of something between only you and him. Something private about him. Maybe he told you about his mother’s identity — *his real mother* — or, perhaps he had taken you to a place he liked to visit, a place with important, sentimental value... something like that.”

“No, I apologize, we’re not that close...”

*There was one thing... what we all three did in the school...* thought Jeremy, but he quickly stopped thinking about it. *No!*

*But... they’re asking for hidden details to me... perhaps I can share a bit, without mentioning myself...*

“I... well, I remember that one time, when we had biology class with... Mr. Svylsan... the class was dismissed way earlier...” started Jeremy. He started having a cold sweat. “So we had lots of free time in the class. I...”

*Hhhhhhhh...* sighed Jeremy in his mind. “I... I saw him, and Mirina... they left out of the class, no, I mean, they talked to each other first... uh, they were whispering...”

At this point, part of his mind began to wonder the point, or even the purpose of telling them the very one thing that happened long time ago, far from being relevant to the present. Nevertheless, he continued, “Then, after that... *they left out of the class...* it took some long time, so... well, I was kind of suspicious...”



“You’re really going to... what? Join the merry band and let yourself be killed by the dragon?”

They were in a middle of the forest, only both of them, by themselves. He had naturally checked around if there's someone else around for eavesdropping. However, he was aware that it wouldn't be able to sense Roven's presence, should he use the ultimate spell...

"Wha... what are you saying...?"

"You don't have to! It's all on your face! You're... you're doing something with Roven! You're about to do something bad with him! Something to do with the dragon!"

"What are you even talking about?!"

Her tone sounded to mock him, but he could see her face displaying the complete opposite effect. She looked frightened; her eyes began avoiding to look directly onto his eyes, and her breaths became short and fast, no longer normal and calm.

"You know exactly what you're talking about. You're never the same anymore since we overheard Mrs. Svylsan yesterday." Opened Jeremy. "You really don't want to tell me?"

"Well, about yesterday..." stuttered Mirina. "I was shocked too... we're all shocked! I... I don't like all these regulations and stuff about the dragon... but I can't believe that they want us to — to worship it..."

"So you want to kill the dragon?" Jeremy himself realized that it was a far jump, but it was the only logical possibility he had in mind regarding her.

She sighed out of frustration, but her face still expressed fright. "This is not going anywhere. I gotta go."

He knew, at that moment, that he was telling the truth, but he couldn't *actually* stop her. So before Mirina walked away, he said loudly, no longer bothered if there was someone else around. "Yeah, you're going to join those rebels, alright. You're not fooling anyone."

For unknown reason, she stopped for a while. On one side, he smirked in satisfaction, seeing that he guessed well about her. But on the other side, he rather worried to the fact that she was indeed, at least considering the option.

She sighed, and turned back. "What is it with you, Jeremy?"

"You can't be serious, about breaking the laws...!"

"I haven't said anything about breaking the laws. Why are you assuming that?"

This time, there was no fear or concern on her face. Her tone and her face sync on expressing the same emotions, which he hadn't expected at all: exhaustion and indifference.

However, it annoyed him.

"Don't you pretend that you're innocent! You're going to join with them, become enemies with the kingdom, and kill the dragon, right?! At least, can't you be honest with me?!" said Jeremy in loud voice, about to lose patience.

"Okay, let's say, just for example, that I was." Asked Mirina. "But, then again, have you ever thought that, maybe — just, maybe... the laws are never in the right place...?"

"You're insane..."

"This dragon... look, calm down. Just think about it..." said Mirina. "This dragon came in our world, out of nowhere, and it just claimed our world as its own. Its everlasting cuisine... can you imagine that? Do you think some people would ever just accept that?"

"Well, no, but what can we do?!" Shouted Jeremy back. "The dragon is *insanely invincible!*" He gave intended pressure for the word. "We can't just, like, join in a merry band and march forward to stab its head, and expect that it would succeed at all! Much less breaking the laws of the kingdom! You'd be a fugitive!"

"No living beings are invincible. Even a dragon has weaknesses. Remember that skeletons they found far away..."

"We don't even know if it's true! Someone could just make that up...!" Replied Jeremy.

"Come on, Jeremy. For once..."

"NO! YOU'RE LISTENING TO ME FOR ONCE!" Screamed Jeremy. "I DON'T KNOW HOW HORRIBLE IT IS TO GO AGAINST THE DRAGON AND THE KINGDOM, BUT WE ALL KNOW IT'S BEYOND OUR OWN WILDEST IMAGINATION! HAVE YOU JUST LOST YOUR MIND?! YOU'RE WILLING TO THROW AWAY YOUR LIFE FOR SOMETHING WASTEFUL, JUST LIKE THAT!?"

She didn't respond. She simply looked at him, with dazzlement and confusion.

Jeremy himself had nothing else to say, at least until Mirina replied back and provided for himself something to argue against. It came to the moment of staring and breathing, loud enough for both of them to hear each other.

“If that’s the case, there are tons of people losing their minds... *they already lost their minds.*” Said Mirina. It sounded weak, tired, and, somehow, even sad. “One of them being Darran.”

The name alone felt like a sword struck onto his chest. It flooded right in his mind, as it was just yesterday.

“You were behind me... I think.” Said Mirina. “You saw me too. I was talking to him. But it’s no use...”

She walked toward him, and put her right hand on his shoulder. He didn’t sweep it off. He noticed that she was already crying, trying to hold her sound solid.

Even her breath sounded heavy; she could barely keep her voice stable. “Jeremy, if — you think that... people like Darran... that they would just accept their losses — his grandparents’ fates... *he has no one else now...* there’s nothing else we need to talk about.”

But what he had in mind, was instead the imaginary face of the dragon, since he had never seen it. His imagination already pictured the dragon, standing tall in front of millions of people. They all bowed down, dropped their weapons, and sobbed, as the dragon breathed fire onto them.

“Look, listen... think about it...”

He was too focused to talk his senses to Mirina, she didn’t realize at all that she was still holding at his shoulder, much less that she prepared a spell on her right hand.

He was thrown off, up to twenty meters from his position. It was just a hold on his shoulder, but he could feel the pressure on every bit of his body. Fortunately, he landed on the bushes, not having his back hitting the tree. Aside from the push, his body was also in shock, so he couldn’t move for a while.

“Miri...” still in shock, he could barely shout. He slowly rose from the ground with bushes, but she was already nowhere to be seen.



“I don’t know exactly what... but... I... I did think that they would do something bad, but...” stuttered Jeremy.



“You didn’t report to the kingdom?” Asked Sir Clarton.

“I... I thought about it later...” replied Jeremy. “I thought that, maybe... I was thinking too much...”

“What a shame.” Said Sir Clarton. “You could have just stopped it right at that moment, and this wouldn’t have happened at all.”

“I... I humbly apologize...”

“No need. It’s done, anyway.” Said King Brice. “So, after you suspect that she was about to join them... what then? How’s it between you and Mirina?”

“She... well, between us, it went back to normal...” said Jeremy. “But... well, we never talk to each other, especially about that... I mean, we’re just schoolmates...”

“I see... you’re never good friends with each other...” said King Brice.

“What about her and Roven?”

“Well, they... they did get along together...” said Jeremy. His heart began pumping out of fear and panic, as if there was a sword on his neck, ready to cut cleanly if he misspoke.

“You didn’t suspect, not even once.”

At that moment, their eyes met each other. Jeremy saw something in his eyes: it was, at best he could guess, coldness and anger, but also with something else. It made him recall, back in the moment, when he encountered Roven’s friend...

A soldier suddenly spoke from behind. It was in low volume, and rather calm, but it alone shocked Jeremy, he jumped on his seat, even though just a bit. “My King, Sir Sherty is here.”

They all automatically looked at the incoming knight. At first, they looked at a floating shadow, without shape, about big as a normal person. It then materialized and shaped quickly into a young man, wearing black cloak. The young face honestly stunned Jeremy; he guessed that it was over five years between him and Jeremy.

“My King.” He kneeled and bowed down.

“Sir Sherty.” Replied King Brice, simply nodding.

“Sherty.” Called Clarton, much warmer than he was to Jeremy. “How are you now?”

“Pretty much well, Sir.” Said Sir Sherty.

“What about Sir Quest and Sir Amycus?” asked King Brice.

“Still recovering, My King.” Responded Sir Sherty.

“Of all the most powerful rebels... I’ve never thought that Lupy had magic himself...”

*Lupy... thought Jeremy. Is he...?*

“I thought he was an ordinary person, without magic...” said King Brice.

“Unfortunately, My King, it’s not true. Not anymore. Maybe he somehow stole it from someone else, too...” said Sir Sherty.

“Uh... excuse me...” said Jeremy, as Sir Sherty went to sit down, next to him. “I just want to ask... this Lupy... is he... the leader of the rebels...?”

“Yes.” Said King Brice, “And since we’re talking about that, I’d like to know about the attack...”

“My humblest apology, My King.” Sir Sherty bowed down again. “I couldn’t stop them...”

“Please.” He stopped him by lifting his hand. Sir Sherty himself choked as he stopped abruptly. “On the second thought, let’s not talk about that anymore.”

Jeremy embraced himself to look at King Brice’s face, even though it was just a short while. He looked pale and grim, and frightened in a point; he even gulped. He then looked at his left; there was the castle at the left side, but seeing his eyes, he suspected that he actually intended to see far away, beyond the kingdom’s castle.

“We need to find a better way, a more discrete way... more secretive way, to transport the material...” said King Brice. “Which is also why I call you. Is there no other alternative choice? Something smaller, perhaps?”

“F-Frankly, My King... I’m afraid... I personally have never really known anything about the material...” said Jeremy, “Until the... *The Great Dragon*, suggested... and until I researched it *manually*...”

“Okay, even if there’s no alternative, how would we distribute it...?”

“I think, My King, that the problem is, how we solve the spy problem in the first place.” Said Sir Clarton. “How could they know to such details in the first place?”

“It has to be someone with high position... someone within the castle...” said Sir Sherty. “A knight, a bishop, a higher-up...”

“Obviously.” Said Sir Clarton. “We need to narrow it down. To *five* people.”

“Let’s handle that problem later. Now, we need to think of a way to transport the material, without any means of magic...”

“I... I’m afraid, My King... this material is... it’s... *complex and complicated*... I’m afraid that... that there’s no other alternative...”

“*There must be another way!*” Shouted King Brice.

“I’m so sorry, My King...” He decided to stop looking at him, and looked down at his plate instead. He had only touched few biscuits, while the others enjoyed their food with relaxation.

“But, wait, they *literally* absorbed the material into that stone of theirs.” Said Sir Sherty suddenly. “Won’t that mean...?”

“The material is broken? Probably.” Said Sir Clarton. “But, then again, it’s probably not... it’s a different kind. What do you say, Mr. Earnton?”

Hearing him calling his name alone shuddered him. He struggled to embrace himself, responding, “W-W-Well... I agree... it’s... dark storage, isn’t it?”

“Yes.” Responded Sir Sherty, which was warmer and friendlier than Sir Clarton. “And light shield... I admit, I couldn’t stand a chance against him...”

“Considering that you’re on defending the carriage, not *actually* fighting against the enemy, I suppose you need more training.” Said King Brice.

“Yes, My King.”

“I told you.” Said Sir Clarton. “They’re not like others which you can underestimate.”

He then looked at Jeremy. “That’s your *friend, Roven*, by the way. He’s remarkable, I’ll give

him that. And annoying, too.”

Jeremy couldn't help but gulp; from his tone, it sounded as if it was all his fault. He could only stay shut and keep looking at his plate.

“How strong is he, this leader of theirs, Lupy?” Said King Brice. “Perhaps in the future we can leave him to Madam Lovelia...”

“No. Not even she wouldn't stand a chance against him.” Said Sir Sherty directly.

“He's that strong?!” Said King Brice, surprised.

“To the level where he could affect hundreds of soldiers at the same time.” Responded Sir Sherty. “Or worse, imbue emotions to things. Like what he did to Sir Quest.”

“Nggh...” grunted Sir Clarton short. But his face, on the other side, was expressing horror and shock.

“That's impossible...” even King Brice was stunned.

“I would like to say the same as well, My King. But I've seen it with my own eyes.”

“But, then... why would he show up now? I... he could already come to this palace and convince all of us to fight The Great Dragon and...” King Brice then stopped, which sounded like he was choked.

“I can't tell... I suppose there's some explanation for that issue.” Said Sir Sherty. “But, by now, I'd say, it's best for us to steer away from him. At least until we have proper countermoves against him.”

“Well?” King Brice turned to Jeremy. “What do you say? Do we have something for a *really powerful* empath?”

“Uh... well... I suppose we can put up with advance, more enhanced empathy dampener...” stuttered Jeremy.

“It has to be more powerful. One hundred times more powerful, or it'll be all for naught.” Suggested Sir Sherty.

“Y-Y-Yes, Sir...”

“But he then must have other tricks up his sleeves, like some of his people as reinforcement.” Said Sir Clarton. “He seems like a man who has lots of preparations before going to a battle.”

“Oh, yes. I’m sure.”

*How could they get along well in the first place...?*

“That would be our responsibility.” Said Sir Sherty.

“Is it possible?” asked King Brice.

“Well, it’ll be hard, but... we’ll try our best.” Responded Jeremy.

“Very well.” Said King Brice. “Now, about transporting the material...”

“What if we just open the portal between the gateway to the other world, and directly the laboratory?” Suggested Sir Sherty. “No need to bother taking a train... honestly, it’s not a good plan in the first place...”

“I’ll still suggest looking for this spy among us, before we even think of a plan, My King.” Said Sir Clarton. “Because, no matter what kind of plan, if they’re still prying on us, they’ll just come up with counter plan to make us fail. Our position is more vulnerable than theirs. They just need to stand in our way.”

“Fair enough... how would you suggest to find them out?” nodded King Brice.

“I have some of the officials I have suspected...” pondered Sir Clarton. “I say, we give them each one a plan... *a fake one for each*. If they were the spies, they would leak what they got to the rebels, and then the rebels would intervene. That’s how we could tell which one of them were the spies.”

“That’s a good idea.” Nodded Sir Sherty, awed.

“I agree.” Said King Brice.

“We’ll have to do all these at the same time. They would have no time to warn the others.” added Sir Clarton. “Our focus will be only on finding the spies.”

“Very well. When can we start?” Said King Brice.

“Tomorrow. If not the day after, I’ll began leaking fake plans. I’ll need to make up lots of plans.” Said Sir Clarton.

“What if none of them were?” Wondered Sir Sherty.

“No. I know them, and *I have observed each one of them*. At least one of them is a spy. We just have to pinpoint which one is.” Said Sir Clarton. “If it turns out that I miss one or some... well, it’ll take quite a long time.”

“Very well. I’ll leave it to you two.” Said King Brice, looking at Sir Sherty and Sir Clarton. “While you’re handling it, Mr. Earton can prepare the material to be transported, until there’s no longer spies among us.”

“Y-Yes, My King...”

“Very few have my trust on essential matters... especially on these times. You,” said King Brice, “are one of them. I hope you understand that it’s a huge privilege.”

“I do, My King.” Nodded Jeremy. He was excited of that, but his nervousness was still dominating over his pride. “I won’t let you down...”

“Thank you... I suppose that’s all.” Said King Brice. He stood up, so all three of them stood up as well, out of respect; Jeremy stood up a bit late. “Thank you for your time and attention...”

## Chapter 11.5

Sir Sherty and Sir Clarton bowed down, and then walked out of the garden fast. Jeremy followed them, but a bit late; he even walked in an awkward way. *Oh, come on, what am I doing...?*

“Mr. Earton?” called King Brice calmly, but it alone made Jeremy shocked and stuttered, “Y-Y-Y-Yes...?”

“Which ones would you like to bring back home?” King Brice gently said; he returned back to his seat. “Any flowers you’d like.”

“W-What...?”

“I saw that you often stole looks at the flower beds. I wouldn’t blame you.” said King Brice. “These flowers are... *a collection*, you could say.”

He then rose slowly from his seat, and went to a bed next to him. “From all around the world, and even beyond this world. Which one do you think is the best?”

“I-I-I... they’re all beautiful...” stuttered Jeremy.

“Yeah, but there must be one kind that stun you the most with its beauty.” Said King Brice. “There’s no way they all touch your heart just as equally stunning.”

“I... uh...” Even with his gentle and friendly — and weak — tone, his mind repeatedly told him that he might get furious if he didn’t answer the question. He looked around, looking for the flowers he saw on the path toward the palace, but he didn’t find it around the dining space. “I... I saw one, when I was going here... but... uh... it seems that it’s not here...”

“Oh, yes. Because there’s too many.” Said King Brice. “You haven’t even seen the other sides of the garden. What was it like?”

“It’s... dark blue... and... it looks like... I mean, it blooms like a crown...” started Jeremy.

“Oh, yes, I know that.” Cut King Brice; even the sudden interruption shocked Jeremy. “It’s called *cromunus*, from where it’s taken. It does look like a crown.”

“Y-Yes, it is...” said King Brice, agreeing.

King Brice then called, “Luia!” A servant showed up from the door, “Yes, My King?”

“Pick a big bouquet of *cromunus* flowers.” Ordered King Brice.

Luia the servant answered, “Yes, My King,” and then walked away. Jeremy began, “Oh, no need... I mean, no need to make it big... it seems to be rare...”

“Nonsense. There’s plenty on the garden. You can grow it on your garden, too, if you’d like it.” Said King Brice. “It’s very rapid in growing and spreading, in fact.”

“But... but this is *your* flowers, My King...” said Jeremy. “You’d allow me to plant and grow it on my garden...?”

“Consider it a gesture of kindness.” Said King Brice, smiling weakly. “You’re... you’ve been loyal to me. And... well, I realized that I haven’t been kind to my own people. This would be the first step for the change... starting from a big bouquet of *cromunus* flowers.”

“Uh... that’s a wise decision... I mean, thank you, My King...” said Jeremy.

“No need for thanking me. Just plant this on your garden or porch, in front of your house. It doesn’t need to be fertilized or watered.” Said King Brice. “It can grow by itself... you probably have to cut it daily, or it’ll grow covering all over your house.”

“Yes, sir... it’s... forgive me, if I ask, but... it’s not poisonous, is it...?”

“Of course not. I wouldn’t give it to you if it was.” Said King Brice.

He heard that Luia entered, with a big bouquet of the dark blue crown-like flowers. Seeing it directly and much closer, he noticed that the color was darker than he thought, but also more beautiful and sharper. The petals bloomed and opened into a shape of a smooth and linear crown of a queen; there was only one sharp point at the petals. The leaves were small, easy to tear off, while the stems were quite thick.

“Just pick a stem, and plant it on the ground. I’m sure you know gardening stuff...” continued King Brice.

“Yes... again, thank you, My King,” bowed Jeremy, after he accepted the bouquet.

Without saying anything, the king walked out of the garden, back to the corridor in the wall.



Jeremy let him walk off first; there was a soldier, standing next to the door, and bowing down to King Brice, as he passed by. He then said to Jeremy, "This way, Sir."



As he reached his house, the first thing he did was pulling out the flowers from the bouquet, and began planting each on the porch. He carefully forced the stem into the soft dirt in front of the house, each one set separate from another. The stem was not thick, but it felt stronger than he thought and harder to be snapped. *Here sure are plenty of flowers he gave me...*

"Honey? What is it?" said Hollen, coming out of the house.

"Oh, Hollen..." said Jeremy, smiling as he saw her face. "I'm just planting the flowers, it's called *cromunus*. King Brice gave it to me."

"Oh... you were... *invited*...?" said Hollen, surprised. "What happened?"

"Nothing, just... a conversation, that's all. He's so kind to give me these flowers." Said Jeremy. "It's from outside this world, in fact."

"Whoa..." Hollen bowed down next to Jeremy, for seeing the flowers up close. "Its shape is like a queen crown... weird."

"But beautiful." Smiled Jeremy.

"Hm. Can't argue against that." Shrugged Hollen. "What's the name you said? *Cromus*, or something?"

"*Cromunus*. From *outside*." Answered Jeremy. "King Brice said that we don't have to water and fertilize them. But we do need to cut them down if they grow all over the house."

"Okay. Seems too scary..." said Hollen. He grabbed half of the flowers from the bouquet, and planted along with him. "Well, remember to buy a garden scissor. We don't have any of those yet."

"Alright. Don't worry." Said Jeremy. "How's Ruby?"

"Sleeping. Just recently sleeping. It's so tiresome, honestly." Said Hollen. "She insisted that she wanted to see you before you go home, but I told her to sleep ahead..."

"Huh." Grinned Jeremy. His mind imagined Ruby, just as tall as his waist, running and

jumping onto his chest, as he caught her in his warp. "I'm so sorry. I can't help it..."

"It's okay, Jerry." Said Hollen, "Anyway, it's not like you'd be called by the king every day."

Jeremy couldn't help but chuckle with nervousness. He wanted to say yes, but the word turned out to be stuck on his heart, it hadn't even reached his throat. He decided to put the bouquet on the ground, and used both of his hands. "Anyway... what's for the dinner?"

"Chicken curry soup. And I bought a bottle of black wine, too." Smiled Hollen, still planting all around the porch.

"Aaahhh... that's the best..." Jeremy smiled widely, just by remembering the sweetness of black wine on his tongue. "And I'm starving..."

Hollen chuckled. "Hold on, hold on... let's finish planting these flowers first."

With Hollen helping along, the gardening was finished faster. Soon, the porch in front of his house was full of *cromunus* flowers, all evenly spread. They all stepped on the gate, to see the result of their gardening.

"Okay, I admit, it looks good." Said Hollen.

"Huh...?" responded Jeremy. For a reason, it wasn't as great as he thought it would be. With their house being cream-colored, it felt weird for him to see the porch covered by blue flowers. The sun was close to set down, which made the color mix much weirder. But he couldn't exactly tell what was wrong with it. "I don't know, now that we plant it here, it feels... *false*...?"

"Perhaps the cream color." Guessed Hollen. "Should be light blue, or white."

"No, it's... I don't know. It just feels wrong. Maybe we should just put it on a vase."

"Well, we don't have a vase. And it's almost sundown..." commented Hollen, looking at the sunset. "Don't you think it's a bad idea to put them on a vase? It can't last long, you know."

"Yeah..." sighed Jeremy. "Whatever, I'm starving already. Come on."

"Agree." They all then walked into the house. Before Jeremy entered the house, he took a glance at the flowers for one last time. It did look more beautiful back in the garden, when he saw it for the first time.

*I should have asked about the shape... why does it shape like a crown...?*

The interior was rather simply, and a bit pale compared to the color on the outside. But as he entered, he could feel the cool temperature greeting him and refreshing his body off the sweat and the sultry weather. Almost everything in the house was of wooden, from couch to dining table.

The fireplace, made of fireproof, *grux* tree, was lit ablaze, but even then, the magical cool temperature was stronger than the heat from the fireplace. He bounced himself onto the couch, with pillows on it. “Aaaaahhhhhhhhhh...” sighed Jeremy, as his exhaustion and anxiety were released. He inhaled as deeply as he could, so the flavor of the chicken curry soup got into his lungs.

“That smells delicious.” Commented Jeremy.

“Duh.” responded Hollen from the kitchen, behind Jeremy. “You won't come home if it's not delicious.”

Jeremy laughed. “That joke is old already, come on...”

“What? It's funny.” Insisted Hollen.

“No, it's not! Not anymore!” said Jeremy, turning back to her.

“Alright, alright. Let's just that we agree to disagree.” Smiled Hollen, as she prepared two bowls and two cups.

“No, we don't. We need to agree to agree!” replied Jeremy, chuckling.

“Now that sounds weird, you know...”

She went to the living room, with two bowls of chicken curry soup and two cups of black wine floating around her. They all landed on the wooden coffee table, which Jeremy shifted closer to the couches. Hollen then sat next to him.

“How is it?” asked Hollen, as he scooped the soup and put it in his mouth.

“I think I need to dine somewhere else.” Joked Jeremy, and then burst out laughing. Hollen also laughed out loudly, as she hit him on his shoulder.

“You said it yourself!” replied Hollen, laughing.

“See?! It's old!” shouted Jeremy.

Hollen shushed him quickly, and then looked up to the staircase, just next to the living room. He, realizing this, also silenced himself quickly by shutting his mouth with his hands. They both leaned their right ears toward the staircase, and sharpened their ears, trying to catch even as small as a child's grunt voice.

“Seems fine...” concluded Hollen in whisper. “We need to keep our voice down...”

“Agree.” Added Jeremy. They then continued eating the soup in whispers.

“So... what is it? Between you and the king?” asked Hollen.

It was no longer laughter or sprouting jokes. She looked at Jeremy in the eyes; there was not even a smile on her face.

Knowing that he couldn't lie to her, Jeremy said, “You know... the material to be delivered through Ryver's Cross...”

“Oh, yeah... what is it he talked about, specifically? I hope he's not blaming you...”

“No, of course not. Just about the substitute for the material. Unfortunately, we can't transport it with any other way. And with the rebels easily interfering, we have to come up with better way.”

“Those rebels...” said Hollen, spiteful. “Good for nothing.”

“Agree. Although...” added Jeremy carefully. “I honestly still can't believe it's going to happen...”

“I thought you said that it's The Great Dragon's order.”

“It is, but, still... that's *actually* scary...” said Jeremy. “Every husband and wife in this kingdom will be reproducing a child — or twins — once a year, until we're on menopause. That's... no less than twenty...”

“I understand. But... it's not really scary, at least to me.” Said Hollen. “Sounds like an adventure...”

“Yeah, tell that to other millions of wives out there.” Said Jeremy.

“As long as they can handle lots of children, it should be fine. It's all been thought of and solved. It's not like there's no ready solutions for all the coming obstacles.”

“Yeah, but... well, that's not helpful for now. We need to transport the material safely...”

“Why don't you just build a laboratory in Ryver? A better one?” said Hollen. “Sure, it'd take some time, but you can't certainly deliver it to Solirus, not with them sneaking, scouring, and interfering all the time.”

“The Great Dragon would not be pleased...” predicted Jeremy. He took the cup and sipped the black wine, savoring drop by drop, sip by sip of it.

Hollen chuckled, and took her own glass to sip and savor it as well. “I'm sure He will understand. We just need to talk in a friendly way. No misunderstanding whatsoever, that's all.” Added Hollen.

“Easy for you to say. Even I have never met Him, but I know he's beyond scary.” Commented Jeremy.

“Only King Brice has ever seen Him, no, if I'm not mistaken?” said Hollen. “Oh, speaking of that, I've heard the rumor that The Great Dragon just recently came down here, to the kingdom, in a shape of a human. Is it true?”

“I guess... we didn't talk about that...”

“Wow... I wonder how He looks like...” pondered Hollen.

Jeremy chuckled. “But then again, the rebels probably have taken Him down — his human form, I mean...”

“That sounds impossible... The Great Dragon is mighty.” Rated Hollen.

“Yeah, but the rebels are not to be underestimated, too.” Warned Jeremy.

“Huh... come to think of it, I've never actually met one of them, face-to-face.” Said Hollen.

“What? You want to fight them?”

“No, not really, I mean... I've never even met — seen one. There was that one time, when I was going back home from the market, I happened to see everyone crowding around the branch lab in Qatzer...”

“Oh, yeah...” said Jeremy. “Wait, you really met one of the rebels at that moment?!”

“No, I just spotted one... two, they were in the rooftops, near the branch. And I just happened to see them accidentally. I wanted to shout and point at them, letting everyone else know, but they're gone already... they're so fast.”

“Still think you want to meet these people?” said Jeremy, chuckling.

“Okay, maybe not a good idea... you had some friends of yours who joined those people, right? Mirina and Roven?”



Unlike few days ago, the sun shined brightly onto the village. Jeremy looked up to the sky, as he walked toward the school entrance; he barely found any cloud on the sky, much less big, dark clouds. The sky transitioned from dark black and blue, toward bright blue, with a bit of blinding yellow from the sun.

As he returned to the earth, he noticed that Darran was just next to him. He decided to break the ice, saying, “Hey, Darran. How’re you doing?”

Darran seemed to daydream, because he was stunned when Jeremy started, next to him, “Oh, hi, Jerry... yeah, I’m fine...”

Among hundreds of the students, they both entered the entrance to the school. The wooden entrance itself was so tall, even beyond adults’ heights. It took them to the entrance hall, which was shut from the outside and sunlight. The hall was enormous, there were about hundreds of students in it, from children of about ten years old, to teenagers almost as tall as adults; there were also some teachers passing through the hall. They all had chatters with each other and stood in their own groups in the hall, so Jeremy and Darran had to talk a bit louder.

He looked at Darran; his eye bags were still black and swollen.

*Jeremy, if — you think that... people like Darran... that they would just accept their losses — his grandparents' fates... he has no one else now...*

“I... I’m so sorry about...”

“Yeah, thanks for your condolence.” cut Darran abruptly, though still smiling.

“Oh...” responded Jeremy, because he didn’t expect such response from Darran. “Uh, well...”

Roven jumped between both of them, wrapping their shoulders with his hands. “Hiya, there.”

“Hi, Roven.” Responded Darran. Somehow, Jeremy felt that he was warmer toward Roven than to himself. However, Jeremy said nothing; his face turned stiff as he looked at Roven.

He rather looked relaxed, as if nothing had happened at all. He continued, “Did you guys hear it? Mrs. Svylsan is quitting.”

“What!?” both Darran and Jeremy exclaimed in shock at the same time.

“Yeah. I heard Mr. Powell and Mrs. Netty talking about it. Eavesdropped, to be exact.” said Roven.

“No!” Darran stopped walking in a corridor which led to their classes, so they all stopped in the middle of the way. Roven slowly pushed them both aside. “Why? Why is she — did she do something wrong?”

“Well, I don’t know...” said Roven.

*He’s so good in pretending...* thought Jeremy.

“But I heard that she had a quarrel with Mr. Prow. I think that’s why... maybe. I don’t know.” continued Roven.

“No! She’s so good — she’s my favorite teacher! Why do they even quarrel?! What is it about?! They don’t usually argue with each other!” noted Darran.

“Dunno. I figured that we should visit her, sometime after school.” said Roven.

“Okay, sure... I’ll have to go home and let my aunt know first.” said Darran. “I don’t know where her house is, though...”

“Don’t worry. We’ll meet here first.” said Roven. “It’s me, you, Mirina, and... Jerry, you’re coming?”

He didn’t respond at first seconds. He was delighted to visit her, but he wished to not go along with either Roven or Mirina, much less with them both. “Just four of us?”

“Well, maybe we can call others along, but... come to think of it...” Roven then lowered his voice to whisper, “The problem is, we’re not supposed to even know about this in the first

place..."

"Oh..." nodded Darran, with down and sullen face. "Well, we can't tell anyone else, then. It has to be just four of us."

"Alright, then." Nodded Roven in agreement. "Remember, keep this a secret. We'd probably be in trouble if we're found out."

"Okay." Said Darran. He'd returned to joyful. "What do we bring, then? Grape pie? She loves them."

"Fair enough. I'll bring them myself, don't worry about that. Mirina also prepared flowers for her already."

He looked at Jeremy, and said, "So, you're coming?"

"I... probably not... but..." started Jeremy.

"Alright. Just come here after school if you can come along. Just don't tell anyone, no matter what."

Roven tapped on his shoulder. For a second, he felt a great, unreasonable urge to push him off, just like what Mirina did to her yesterday. But before he even started it, Roven already took his hand off his shoulder.

"Jerry? What's wrong?" asked Darran, looking confused.

He stared at Jeremy's face. He sighed, and tried to calm himself. "Nothing. I won't tell anyone, fine."

"Good. Hey, do me a favor, and wait in our class, talk with Mirina, or something. I have something to show you. I gotta talk with him for a while."

"Okay..." he went toward their class, which was several classes away, leaving them both. Jeremy naturally checked on his watch: there was less than five minutes left before it started.

There were still lots of students passing them by, but they all were busy with themselves; none even looked at either of them. Jeremy also almost suspected that it was a spell set up by Roven, without him even knowing.

*I should be frank before he does...* thought Jeremy to himself.



He threw away his smile and calm, and put his cold, anger, and resentment up front. "Right. Just the two of us, and nobody interfering. Just the way you like it. Go on. Be frank with me."

"Fine. I'll be frank with you." Said Roven.

But even then, he was still friendly toward Jeremy. "Nobody likes this. Not the kingdom, not all of us, and not *them*, too. But if this gets out of us, it'll be something we all will regret, I guarantee."

"So, what? *You'll kill me? Or you'll send some of those people to do it?*"

"No." chuckled Roven, with confidence. "They won't kill a kid, just because he finds out some secrets."

"Bullshit. You think they'd just let me go and tell on them to the king?!"

"I know these guys. Believe me when I say that, the only reason they would kill you is if you're the deadliest sorcerer who have committed genocide." Said Roven. "There are better ways to handle that without killing."

"Don't lie — !" started Jeremy, loud.

"I don't — okay, let's look at it this way. They could have come to you since yesterday. But they didn't. They haven't. Why do you think is that?"

"Don't you dare lie to me...!"

"I don't. We don't. None of us do." Said Roven.

He moved his hand, and tapped on his shoulder. Because of that, Jeremy quickly brushed his hand off his shoulder. "Don't touch me."

"Oh, yeah, sorry." Said Roven, apologetic, pulling his hand back. "Trust me. It's not like what you think..."

"Oh, yeah? What if I come to the castle and report it to a knight? They'd kill me?!"

"No, they won't."

"Why!? Because you *begged* them...?!"

"I don't have to beg them. They don't want to kill you either. They're not those kinds of

people, like those maniacs...”

“Exactly! I don't trust them at all!”

“How about trusting me...?”

“You?! Why should trust you?!”

Other students started to look at both of them, because Jeremy raised his voice. He gathered his energy on his fists, ready to punch him with it. He could hear some of passersby whispering, “... ready to kill...”

But Roven was still calm, even sympathetic. “None of us are looking for troubles. If we are, it would have happened already... it just makes sense...”

Jeremy could say nothing, because shock, disappointment, anger, and fear, were all storming inside his head; he couldn't think and act clearly, although he himself was aware of that. Nevertheless, he still held his fists.

“Just... calm yourself, and think about it through, alright?” said Roven, smiling.

For the first time, it wasn't a mischievous smile. It was a warm and friendly smile, as if they had been best friends for long time. He spotted his hand about to move toward his shoulder, but then cancelled.

“Come on. I have surprise for everyone in the class. Including you.” continued Roven.

“What surprise?”

“It's called a surprise. For everyone.” added Roven. “Come on.”

He then left Jeremy, and went to their class. He felt as though he still needed — and wanted — to talk with him, but he already got into the class. Reluctantly he followed him along. While his body moved forward, his mind was busy and confused.

*What should I do...? Should I report it to the kingdom...? Or should I...?*

Before he even got to conclusion, as he entered the classroom, he saw Roven at the teacher's desk. He put his right hand right on the middle of the table. Everyone else was looking at him; the class was about two thirds' full. He saw Darran sitting next to Mirina.

“What is it?” asked Lianne, a bit suspicious.

“A surprise.” responded Roven, now with a mischievous smile.

As he lifted his hand quickly, a big chocolate cake popped out from his hand, onto the desk. There were up to five levels of the cake, and the lowest one itself almost covered the table. The cake was heavily decorated with cream-colored buttercream, as well as chocolate and cheese bits in shapes of butterflies and flowers. He even spotted tiny meringues and macarons on some parts of the surface. It was immediately greeted with sounds of surprise and excitement from everyone.

“Wait, I know that cake...” started Mirina.

“Yeah! Freshly baked from Mr. Garty’s bakery! He just displayed it in front of his place!” said Roven.

“You better not put chili in it...” said Owen.

Roven laughed. “Come on! I do give gifts sometimes!”

Mirina walked to front, holding Darran’s hand. For a short second, her eyes met Jeremy’s. She smiled widely and shook her hand, and then said, “Wait, is this... for everyone?”

“You bet. Enough for everyone in the class.” replied Roven.



“Yeah... why? What is it?”

“Just recalling.” Said Hollen easily. “But... sometimes, I... can't help but wonder... I mean, why?”

“Why join the rebels? Who knows?” said Jeremy, acting indifferent. “You know what? It doesn't matter. Let's talk about something else. How's Ruby after school?”



## Chapter 12

Aravour, while flying, took another sip of the potion. It didn't really taste anything special, aside from replenishing his energy.

*Such a size...*

He kept floating way above the vastness of forest, freely and fast, to avoid the dragon and its breath, and to mock it as well. There were some times when he *pretended* to almost get hit, but then simply shifted away, as if he was toyed with telekinetic on large scale of area and skill. He even made weird faces towards the dragon.

*It hadn't even tried to suck me into his mouth... could it be...?*

As he avoided the fire breaths — it did look beautiful as pillars of fire, lighting the forest in the dark — the dragon roared louder and louder, out of anger, frustration, and even probably pain. The fire looked absurdly red and brown in one, but he could tell that *there was something else from it*.

From Aravour's point of view, it looked that the dragon was not even conscious at all, but instead, possibly, retreated back to its animal state. It simply chased him off, and either breathed fire or open its mouth to swallow him.

It felt like *ages*, but finally a green firework soared up from a mountain nearby, and exploded at the sky.

*Finally. What took it so long?* thought Aravour.

*It's not easy, you know...? We're talking about a huge portal... and we don't even know if it could actually work!*

*We'll have to try. Hopefully, the dragon would stay too stupid to realize that it's been kicked out of this world.*

*That's a huge presumption...!*

*Guys, focus. We'll know just soon enough. Said Kivi. Aravour, do it.*

He began buying some time for them, by flying around in a circle, about few kilometers' wide, while the rebels on the mountain were preparing spell for the portal. At first, he was thinking of going around for few kilometers, but with the abnormal size of the dragon, he had to circle even more.

He started near where the firework was lit; the dragon didn't seem to notice, or even be bothered with it. Thanks to his experiences, it wasn't hard for him to maintain himself from straying the path, and going just straight away instead. He could almost see the imaginary line on his mind, guiding him to fly as perfectly oval as possible.

The dragon foolishly followed him, not as fast as he did, although he was well aware that it could very well fly faster than him. It simply breathed brownish fire, and crawled with its mouth and claws, reaching to tear apart and eat him, but all of them to no luck.



*A knight is coming toward me... stated Arvour. He's from...?*

*He can be trusted. Said Kivi. He came to us...*

*How can you tell to trust him?!*

*Because Lupy sent him.*

*Lupolious... responded Arvour, with stressful sigh.*

*You haven't told me why you never like him...*

*I don't really like him, too, responded Kivi. But I know he's genuinely good...*

*Yeah... said Arvour reluctantly. So, what is this knight for? Help me?*

*Pretty much so. It's already scary, letting you be chased by it, all by yourself...*

He looked down: the knight couldn't be older than twenty years old, and he literally *ran* on air. What stunned him was the fact that he was so fast that it should've been physically impossible. He thought that it was more likely leaping, but then, he couldn't see his legs' movement. Soon enough, he could actually keep up with both he and the dragon.

As he came closer, Arvour reluctantly linked with him. He had his hand on the grip of his sword, which was hidden from the knight's point of view.

*What's your name?*

*Fannous Gree, sir!*

*And you're a knight? At that age?*

*The kingdom has recruited new knights! The candidates just happened to be mostly young!*

*To think they would take in teenagers as knights... pondered Arvour to himself.*

*So, are you sure about this?! You can't get in contact with the dragon and its fire breath, no matter what, not even once!*

*I wouldn't be here if I'm not sure, sir!* Answered Fannous confidently. He didn't seem tired at all, considering how fast he dashed on air.

*You'd instantly die... or worse. There's no way out if you get infected. Do you understand this gravity?!*

*Yes, sir!*

*Fine... stay close, be vigilant.*

Despite that his method was technically stiff, he could keep at close distance with Arvour as well. His movement weren't limited to only leaping, but also flipping, from and to every direction, using both hands and legs. The dragon became wilder at breathing fire, it moved its head and directed the flames randomly, but both of them didn't have trouble at avoiding it. They could even chat to each other with ease.

*This kid is good...* thought Arvour to himself.

*Why didn't he strike us with deadlier spells? He's a dragon, after all...* wondered Fannous.

*I suppose it's losing consciousness, or something like that.* Responded Arvour. *Just a mindless beast, you get what I mean?*

*Why? Because of that energy?*

*Makes sense...* said Arvour. *If you're going to join our ranks from now on, you're gonna have to start calling the dragon it, not he. Do you understand?*

*Yes, sir.*



*Right. How's the preparation?*

They already did half the way. The dragon had already lit the whole forest, with its corrupted fire. He personally wished to split and shut down the fire, but he was busy, even though there was Fannous to keep luring the dragon's attention. The dragon wasn't even aware of it, or attempting other ways; it simply followed them both with hunger and frustration.

*And it's too... powerful to shut down, even for me... thought Arvour to himself.*

*Not yet... just keep spinning...*

*Good... grunted Arvour. We'll keep spinning and around...*

*Be patient. This is not ordinary gate, after all...*

*What so? What do you mean?*

*I'll explain it later. Just, for now, keep buying us some time.*

Arvour sighed, frustrated. He glanced over Fannous, which looked sympathetic as well. *That sure is taking some time...*

*Well, meanwhile, why don't you tell me about yourself?* Said Arvour. He leaned forward and started flying backward, as if he lied on an invisible flying bed, while Fannous kept leaping. *Lupolious convinced you to come with him.. to us... and betray King Brice and the kingdom...?*

*Well, yes... I mean... I don't know, the way he convinced...*

*Yeah. Agree. You basically never had a choice.*

*But... I... I knew — I've known that it's wrong... giving up to the dragon and obeying his — its demands... all these are wrong...*

*Huh. Good thing you have solid moral compass, kid. It can be rare to have, believe me.*

*Thanks, I guess...*

*And? What happened?*

*We were sent to reinforce Sir Sherty — another new knight — he was tasked to deliver the material for... the... the population explosion...*

*Yes, that part I know... said Arvour with grim.*

*Anyway, we... we were actually the second reinforcement, because we caught word that the first one failed down... continued Fannous; Arvour noticed that he was a bit nervous. It was true... all the chemists and sorcerers from the first reinforcement were fighting against each other...*

*Emotional manipulation... on extreme level, they could forget what they're actually there for...*

*When we got there... we saw Sir Amycus... he was lying down and sobbing... and there was another man...*

*Lupolious. Of course. Concluded Arvour.*

*I, yeah... we thought that it was best to retreat... seeing even Sir Amycus himself was...*

He paused. It became clear to Arvour that it was rather best to be told directly through his memory, not by words. He thought of telling him to put it on hold, but before that, Fannous still continued, deciding to skip it, *Anyway, we tried to run away, but he could keep up with us... before we even began fighting, it was pretty much over...*

*Of course.*

*He... I don't know, we were all lying down, defenseless. He could have finished us... but he then came to me... and-and-and took me away, separate from the others...*

*And that's when he used his spices to convince you to realize... no, to fully betray the kingdom?*

*Y-Yeah... it probably sounded a bit forced, but... I see that it's... that he means well... unlike the kingdom... I thought that... that had nothing to do with his magic, but, that moment, I could actually make a change...*

*What did he say to you?*

*He said... that... I could make it right... that's pretty much it...*



For a reason, he didn't believe it. *He must have said something more than that...* thought Arvour to himself.

*So... he sent me to you guys... and... here we are.*

*What about the other knights?*

*I don't know... I suppose they're just left like that unharmed. Do you think Lupy would kill them?*

The answer was "Likely..." but Arvour figured that it was best not to show him Lupolious' dark side, so he decided to give Fannous benefit of the doubt. *I don't think so...*

*I see...* responded Fannous. He seemed to take the answer seriously.

*If that's the case... why join in the first place?*

*It was... uh... mandatory...? Especially if you're smart, skillful, and talented...*

*What, they're running out of knights...? Or they need more manpower to deal with us...?* Pondered Arvour to himself.

*Interesting... how many are you? You get what I mean, don't you?*

*About fifty, I guess... it's quite a lot, at first round. Nowadays, it's only one or two or even none, but it's increasing.*

*I suppose they're trained and educated to be better and tougher... and more loyal to the kingdom?*

*Yeah... I thought you people have known about this?*

*Well, yeah... my job is often outside, so, about any updates on the info, I'm not really enthusiastic with it, that's all.* Replied Arvour. *Come to think of it, it's been a while...*

*So you guys have spies in the kingdom?* Asked Fannous, half-surprised.

*Has the kingdom ever suspected?*

*They did. They're now working on something to find and pinpoint these spies...*

*Huh. Good luck for that...* said Arvour, confident, but at the same time, also anxious with

it. *I'd best warn them about this...*

*Are they really tough? I mean, the spies.. your friends...?*

*I don't really know... but if they can infiltrate the kingdom and its hierarchy, I suppose it's already rhetorical...*

*So you're not going to let them know?*

*Of course we will. Have you told them about this?*

*Uh... not yet...*

*Alright... you can tell them yourself, after we're done with this shit.*

*What if the dragon realizes suddenly?*

*Well, if that's the case, we'd have to retreat... you wear the bracelet, didn't you?*

*Yeah...*

*Good. Just focus on what we could do, while they work on the portal...*



*Good news. It's ready.*

They were almost on the third round of circling and buying time. He predicted that it had been over an hour, and yet, the dragon still followed blindly and stupidly; even they both were already used with its roars. The fire, unfortunately, was already spread all around the forest, as well as *the corruption from the dragon*. At some point, he even saw something leaking *literally* from its skin on the belly, and falling down onto the forest.

*Might as well deport this forest out of this world as well...!*

*It can. It will. Said Kivi. Lead it to here.*

There was another firework, from the first place. It was red; weirdly, he saw that it was almost the same as the color of blood. Arvour and Fannous naturally made a turn, smooth enough for the dragon to easily keep up, and went straight toward where the firework came from.

*I can't believe... this is it... we're finally free of the dragon... thought Arvour. Joy and relief were mixed in his heart, but also disbelief.*

*I wish I could say the same, but... the best way is for the dragon to actually die. By our hands... like, I mean, we hold its heart on our hands, and then crush it to nothing.*

*That's... disgusting... commented Fannous.*

*Because we must be sure that it is dead... throwing him out of our world doesn't guarantee... Responded the rebel, somehow, naturally friendly with Fannous. My point is, we should kill it, not deport it out...*

*You see it. We can't do anything else... we can't even touch the dragon. Hopefully, the corruption itself would kill the dragon.*

*We'll have to send some people for checking.*

*Of course. After this.*

Huge power surge suddenly popped out, just ahead of them. He could also tell some rebels gathering around the point. But that was all he could see. While they were approaching with the dragon, there was no forming and materializing of the portal.

*What about the kingdom's knights? Aren't they coming here? Asked Fannous. They should have come here already...*

*Oh, they did. They just couldn't pass through Lupy and others.*

*You... Fannous? You think they would intervene and kill us, or come to aid us and get rid of this dragon?*

*I guess... the former...?*

*Great...*

*But, well, I'm not sure myself...*

*Well, I don't think it'd be the latter, either...*

They came closer toward their goal, but there was still nothing, aside from the huge power surge, which was hidden from physical eyes. *Why haven't you started it...?!*

*We'll start it after you pass through. Just keep going straight, and let us handle this.*

*Wha...?!?* Stuttered Arvour of shock.

*This is what we're designing for... what she was designing for. You'll see it.*

*What the... you're telling me that this is a sort of prototype's first try!?*

*Not first try. And not exactly a prototype, either.*

The moment *she* spoke, it felt as if Lupy cast emotion of utter respect to everyone around. He naturally gulped and went silent, although he would like to argue. They were now just few meters toward their position, where the portal was supposed to be activated.

He noticed that Fannous look confused. *Who... who is she...?*



Before he answered Fannous' question, they already went past through the point. Both of them intuitively turned back, to see what they were working on.

The rebels were still at the point, while the dragon was about to fly over it. That was when something flashed upward. It appeared to be a small flash of light, in a white-like color, for a while, he thought that they were sending another firework to the dragon. But instead of exploding into flower of fire, it bent, and reached to the dragon's chest, a bit lower from the long neck.

It took only less than a second, so he was lucky to see it with his own eyes, before he blinked. The dragon shrunk, almost being absorbed by and into the flash of light, and then simply disappeared, ended by a small blink of light.

They stopped; Fannous appeared to be unable to stay still on air, so he went down and landed, while Arvour stayed, stunned and shocked, trying to comprehend what he just saw. *The dragon... it... where...? What...?*

There was another small flash of light, just similar, flying toward the burnt part of the forest. The burnt part happened to be round-ish, so it flew to the center. He could see that the burnt part of the forest, for a moment, were slowly *split and separated* from the rest. Thanks to his good sight, he noticed that the burnt part was also shrunk, but in slower pace and time than the first one.

In eventuality, the burnt part of the forest, as well as the ground, shrunk by the flash of light, and then disappeared. The flash of light also blinked, and then disappeared, leaving a gigantic valley, at least up to five kilometers in diameter. The light from the fire that covered and lit the forest, were also gone, leaving the whole place in darkness.

He heard loud shouts from below, those being cheers of joy and happiness. He went down to check in with them.

They all hugged each other, and then switched to hug the others as well. None of them were standing still in alert and vigilance, not even *her*, which he just realized, was something he hadn't seen for a long time. He simply stood there, dazzled and confused, as Kivi jumped onto and hugged him.

"WE DID IT! WE FINALLY DID IT!" said Kivi, overly excited. "YEEEEESSSSS!!!"

"H-How... what was that...?"

"It was..."



What she said next, was covered by loud boom sound. He couldn't be sure, but he could simply guessed that it sounded like mountains being dropped, out of nowhere.

Naturally, *they all* set up spell to protect their ears, and some of them flew upward to check it out, including Arvour and Fannous. Weapons, all kinds, as well as various tools were instantly summoned onto their hands, and so was their stance.

*Now, this I recognize...*

Several around *her* immediately gathered around, all holding shields, while *she herself* were preparing some spells. It was something he had never known about; nevertheless, he set his focus on what caused the loud sound.

The dragon was *almost clean*.

It simply stood with its four legs, facing against them. Its wings were stretched wide open, so wide that he could barely see both their ends. Its tail was circling around the dragon itself. He saw that a portal, big enough for the dragon, was just shut above them.

*"I'd like to thank you for the moment of clarity... if only for a second, it was enough..."*

What he noticed, was that he didn't sense almost any of *the energy* from within the dragon; there were only stains of it, around the insides of its belly, which now seemed and felt like cancer cells on organs, spreading around very, very slowly. He even guessed that it was held and restrained from spreading.

*"But... what's that thing... that tool you used to send me out?"*

# Chapter 12.1

That was when the dragon turned to them.

The face of the dragon, which he just noticed, was like one of a giant lizard. It had scales all over its face, and he was certain that it was almost impossible to pierce. The eyes were pure red; even under darkness, it glowed strongly.

But what scared Arvour, was the mouth.

It made a curve, as if *it was grinning*.

*"That's no ordinary magic tool. Not a portal..."* said the dragon. *"It's... something... transcendent?"*

*What do we do now?! The dragon's fully awoken! We can't fight it, not like this!* Shouted Arvour in their telepathy network.

*Calm down. I'm working on it.* Said the lady. *It'll be done soon.*

*"To think you have such means... I can now see why Brice and the kingdom are really concerned with you lot."*

*Calm down!?! How could we calm down?! The dragon must have restricted the whole area! We can't leave this place in front of him!* Replied Arvour, getting frustrated, but also frightened.

*"Why don't you just surrender and give me the tool? You can't escape from me."* Said the dragon. *"I'll let you all walk away for tonight, if you do. Isn't that generous?"*

But from below, he heard that the lady chuckled a bit, and then abruptly stopped. It sounded absurd, and even arrogant, considering that they all were thrilled in fear and alert. Arvour himself was picturing of what the dragon would do in his mind.

*"Stupid lizard!"* Said the lady. It was with most certainty that the dragon heard that well. *"You think this is a magic you can control?! This is something else! Why don't you see it yourself?"*

For less than a second, it was either that Arvour's sight seemed to distort, or that his sight was put under the dragon's illusion. It happened really, really slowly, so Arvour shut his eyes close,

preparing himself to die.

*I'm sorry, Dina... I couldn't come home...* his mind spontaneously recalled back to the meadow, the very place where he met his soon-to-be wife. For some reason, the memory became clear and vivid, almost as if he was *actually* there...



The distortion, or some sort of it, became faster and more distorted. Even the darkness was eventually replaced by tons of lights, mixed and combined with each other. For a while, it seemed weird to Arvour, to think that the dragon would cast mild epilepsy onto him and the others.

But then, for a blink, the sensation of near-epilepsy peaked straight to its maximum, and then dropped down, disappearing, as if nothing happened.

The darkness was replaced by almost-blinding sunlight. The forest *was replaced* by the desert. *The dragon*, previously in front of him, was replaced by a rock mountain. He looked around to grasp what just happened.

It turned out that it wasn't the dragon's spell. They were no longer in the forest; they all were now in a desert. The weather around them instantly changed; he could feel the sting of the heat from the wind and the sun. The others seemed to be confused as well.

He looked down, about to descend and ask the lady. What surprised him, and everyone else, was that there were some trees and dirt, suddenly popping out and landing in the middle of the forest. They were just similar to the ones from the forest, the point where they all gathered just a minute ago.

He looked around: all the rebels were there, safe and unharmed. Those who flew up descended back to the ground. They all looked confused, demanding for explanation. As he got down, the lady was explaining.

“... I said, it's no ordinary magic. It's not exactly magic, in fact.” Said the lady. “The dragon has a point. It's transcendent level of magic...”



## Chapter 12.5

They all stepped into the meeting room, with grim faces and weak steps, even though most of them were in good condition.

The room was up to thirty meters' long. In the room, was lots of chairs, and long table, fitting the room's length and width. It was decorated with paintings on the wall, flower vases on the long table, carpet to the corners of the floor and several small chandeliers. Lots of food and drinks were already prepared on the table.

"Always good to see the renovation." Commented Roven, walking slowly. Mirina walked next to him, helping him to walk.

"How are you, Roven?" Asked Lupy, sitting at the head of the table.

"I'm okay, don't worry..." replied Roven. He sat next to Lupy, while Mirina sat on the other side.

"Seriously," said Fortu, sitting in front of Mirina. "To think you actually set loose the control..."

"If I didn't, they'd deliver the substance successfully," replied Roven, "and even we'd all be..."

"Let's not talk about that." Cut Mirina, clearly uncomfortable. "Yes, good thing you did it, Roven."

"Are you sure you're okay? You don't have to come here if you can't..." Asked Lupy.

"I'm fine." Said Roven. "Believe it or not, the light shield negates the effects..."

"Doesn't mean you should do that again," said Fortu. "That's really dangerous..."

Soon enough, the room was half-stuffed. There were at least fifty people inside; only Lupy sat at the middle, while the others at either left side or right side. They all took from the plates bit by bit, either with their hands or by levitation.

"Right. Everyone's gathered." Said Lupy. "All alive and breathing."

Aura of positivity and comfort spread all over the room, affecting and influencing them. The grim faces were all gone.

“Lupolious, can you please not do it? This is serious.” Said Arvour, a bit demanding.

“Since when is encouragement a joke?” Replied Lupy. “Would you rather be sullen all day?”

“No, but I wouldn't pretend to myself that this is nothing.” Replied Arvour.

“*I don't pretend.*” Said Lupy. What was encouragement and comfort, took a sharp turn and changed into tension and impatient anger; even Arvour gulped. “If you think that I have been pretending, those chemists and sorcerers would be all still alive. You need to learn the difference.”

“I...” started Fannous, just next to Arvour. “I don't mean to be disrespectful, but, I think he's just saying that, we should *be realistic* for sometimes.”

“Yes. I'm not blind, Fannous.” Said Lupy. “By the way, welcome to our ranks. I'm delighted to have you here.”

Lots of people nodded and mumbled in agreement, and some even greeted him directly. Fannous looked down, his blush was obvious under the lights from the chandeliers. Arvour tapped his shoulder, as if they were father and son.

“Don't take it that I'm playing, Arvour.” Said Lupy. “I don't. *I have never, not even once.*”

“Alright, sorry, I'll rephrase that.” Said Arvour. “*This is fucking bad.* We all have thought that the dragon would finally die, by that... whatever that is.”

“Yeah, on that, I agree with you.” Replied Lupy. “You have no new explanation, Mr. And Mrs. Lips?”

“No, unfortunately.” Said Mrs. Lips. “Supposedly, we can find some info from outside our world. That much, I'm certain.”

“But outside *is* dangerous.” Said Mirina. “Even for the best of us,”

“We just need to find information. We don't need fighting...”

“You've never been outside, have you?” Said Irina, just across Mr. And Mrs. Lips.

“No.” Defended Mr. Lips, next to her. “What about it?”

“Outside, I can guarantee, you'd at least fight against whoever you meet, at least once.”  
Said Irina. “Even if all you're looking for is information”

Mrs. Lips chuckled, “Surely, we can offer them something else for substitute.”

“If they want that. Which is *very, very few.*” Said Irina. “Most of the time, you yourself are more valuable to them. Soldier for their battles, you get what I mean?”

“Really? Have you ever been outside?” Asked Mrs. Lips, politely.

“Once. And... let's just say, I almost couldn't come back here.” Answered Irina.

“Well, if we have to go outside, we don't have any other choice.” Said Lupy. “Just be more careful. Do you think you can do it, Irina?”

“I hate it, but... yeah, I can. But not alone.” Answered Irina.

“Take some people along with you. Perhaps Kivi and Relas can help.”

“Yes, Lupy.” Responded Kivi.

“Right away.” Said Relas.

“Good. Now, about the substance... *is it true?*” asked Lupy, looking straight at Mr. Lips.

“It is.” Said Mr. Lips. “It makes you... well, *horny*, should I say, almost all the time...”

Everyone grunted loudly of displeasure, as Mr. Lips said it.

“Unbelievable...” commented Roven.

“Screw Brice!” shouted Arvour.

“Eww...” wrinkled Irina.

“And — that's not all...” continued Mr. Lips loud. The grunts stopped gradually. “It also potentially speeds up the aging...”

“Ag — wait a minute!” Called Dower. “You mean, we will all grow old faster?!”

“Yup — basically, imagine everything you can do in your wildest imagination, if you have a

very hungry customer in your restaurant, while all your ingredients are about to run out.” Said Mr. Lips. The grunts and complaints grew louder. “But you have a garden of all your ingredients. What would you do?”

“Make them grow faster. Double fruits, in short span.” Said Fortu, grim, and then exploded. “I can't believe Brice's going along with what that fucking dragon says! To think he'll stoop himself this low!”

“I guess you'd do anything for immortality.” Said Qartz.

“But he grew older, no?” wondered Kivi.

“Yes, but that's just appearance. He won't die, even if you cut his head. The only way is to make the counter brew, all thanks to the dragon's knowledge.” Said Qartz.

“You haven't got it?” Asked Lupy.

“I'm still working on it.” Said Qartz, scratching his head. “I will probably need help. From Mirina, preferably...”

“What? Me? *Specifically?*” Said Mirina, surprised.

“Your White Pin. *Specifically.*” Said Qartz. “I'll explain it later. But, just to be sure,” he shifted to asking Lupy. “Are we sure we'll be killing Brice?”

“Just in case. We need the ingredients for the counter brew in our hands.” Said Lupy. “I'll leave that to you. Let us know if he was going to harvest the substance again.” He looked at Qartz, “and see if you can find where they get the substance from. If we can destroy it.” He then shifted to Irina.

“Oh, uh... speaking about, you know, King Brice and the knights already suspect that there are spies among them. They're about to do inspection within the palace.” Said Fannous.

“What kind of inspection?”

“I'm not sure, I overheard King Brice talking in private with Sir Clarton, specifically, I quote, 'find the spies among us'.” Replied Fannous. “It was just a great coincidence, that's all.”

“Okay, where were they when they talked about it? And where were you?” Said Qartz.

“A corridor to the west tower. There was no one else but us...” said Fannous. “I was almost

late for the training, so I quickly ran and just pass them by. I'm not sure that they even noticed me.”

“Sounds like a trap...” pondered Qartz. “Of all more discreet and quiet places where no one can stick their ears, they decided to whisper in that place.”

“Makes sense...” said Fannous, also thinking. “But... *me*? I was even so busy, I was lucky I overheard that part.”

“Doesn't have to be for you. Maybe it's for someone else who was about to pass by, or someone who passed by without you knowing.” Said Qartz. “Because I know Sir Clarton well enough. He's a sly knight; he likes traps. *He does traps.*”

“Or maybe King Brice suspected that he *is* the spy...?” Thought Kivi. “He didn't know which one, right?”

“Maybe. But I can't imagine him confronting the spy all by himself. He'd normally send another knight to investigate and execute.” Said Qartz. “It's more likely that they just set up the spies to move suspiciously, out of paranoia of being found out. That makes more sense, when we're talking about Sir Clarton. Thanks for the warning, we'll handle that, don't worry.” He then winked to Fannous; he simply smiled as reply.

“Very well. Now, about Briton, how is it? And the people?”

“Well, it's now a valley. A really huge valley.” Said Pia.

“What about *the energy*? That's the most important issue here...” cut Lupy.

“No trace of it anywhere and anyone, except on the dragon.” Said Lucius. Lupy couldn't help but look at *his new arm*, which looked very identical and hard to distinguish from the left hand, at least from a distance. “And, there are about one and a million and half of survivors. The kingdom already took them to refugee camp, quite far from Briton.”

“Camp? Not Eltrix? It's the closest...” said Mirina.

“I don't know, unfortunately. Perhaps they have their own personal problem, like, for example, they don't have enough space for over a million.” Said Lucius. “They're not really advanced and sophisticated to deal with this kind of problem, after all.”

“But the casualties?”

"Up to six hundred thousand." Said Pia.

"Six hundred thousand..." nodded Lupy. He didn't look really positive anymore.

"Some of the survivors were even asking for their deceased families and relatives." Said Pia.

Dower chuckled, saying, "I'm sorry, I don't mean to make fun of it, but, *where do they ask to?*"

"The kingdom. I think if they know how to contact us, they would." Relied Pia.

"They don't understand how it works... or what even happened..." explained Lucius. "Or they don't want to. That's the problem."

"I would do that too, if I were them." Said Kivi. "Out of nowhere, the dragon stormed the whole city, and, not just burn the entire city, but affect one third of the people with *that energy.*"

Everyone shuddered of disgust and fright, almost at the same time, as she brought the sub-topic.

"They're dead, aren't they?" Asked Barnet. "They can't be helped anymore...?"

"Nope." Answered Mr. Lips. "I don't know much about it, I admit, but I think we all can agree on one thing about the infectees."

"Oh, by the way, you haven't done any study on one of them...?"

"No, that's impossible." Said Mr. Lips. "You can't study them if you don't have a medium to contain and stop *that infection* in the first place... ivory flask can't even contain *it*, for a long time."

"Yeah. *The energy* destroyed the flask as well." Supported Mirina.

"And, will they ever return to this world again, Mrs. Lips?" asked Lupy.

"Unlikely. They don't have ability to open portals." Said Mrs. Lips. "Even if they, somehow, get into this world again, you can deport them all out by yourself. You have the blueprints and the tools, don't you?"

"Yeah. That was remarkable, Mrs. Lips." Praised Lupy. The other nodded and mumbled in agreement.

“Oh, it's nothing, really. If anything's remarkable, it's the person who made the design in the first place. I'm just filling the blanks, in the torn pages, that's all.” Said Mrs. Lips.

“Yeah, but the *fill-the-blank-pages* part, that's still remarkable.” Said Lupy.



“What is she talking about? About torn pages...?” Whispered Fannous.

“Quite a long time ago, we were simply scouring around the forest, for a project against the dragon, we had to do it outside. We happened to find a book, in the middle of nowhere. It was quite old, but when we look inside...” explained Arvour. “It was insane. Descriptions, methods, functions... even the fact that such idea — such concept of the magical technology...”

“I still don't understand.”

“It's an instruction book for building magical technology. Powerful beyond our technology.” Said Arvour. “For example, like, we're savages who happen to find a book about how to build a house. We know enough to comprehend it, but we've never thought of that. We've never even thought that it's possible.”

“So... it's beyond valuable...” commented Fannous. “Whose book was it? Where did it come from?”

“No idea.”

“It can't be. Who would throw that kind of book away just like that?”

“For example, a man too unintelligent to understand a word of it.” said Arvour. “Or maybe it's the wormhole.”

“That's too far-fetched.”

“No, that's *too far-fetched* that it's *actually possible* for once in a lifetime.” Corrected Arvour.



“Very well.” Said Mrs. Lips. “Agree to disagree, then.”

“Come on, Mrs. Lips, you're being too modest.” Said Roven.

"No, I'm not." Replied Mrs. Lips.

"I suppose it's time we need to find a bit of information about the book." Said Lupy. "Irina, you think you can find it out, while you're outside?"

"What? That's too far! There's not even a name in the book!" Said Irina.

"But at least, there might be another similar magical machine from the book as you go out there. A bit of insight or a clue would be enough." Said Lupy. "Consider it a side mission."

"Fine..." said Irina, drinking fully cup of wine.

"Well, now..." said Lupy, with a sigh. "So... the dragon has returned to North Mountains?"

"Yes. Like nothing happened." Said Gavour.

"But it seems like *the energy* is still within the dragon, although just a bit." Addd Mr. Lips.

"How long would *it* take to kill the dragon?" Asked Lucius.

"I can't tell..."

"My hand was destroyed instantly." Said Lucius, showing him his new hand. "How could *it* not kill the dragon?! It's inside its organs, am I right?!"

"Well, for starter, the dragon is much more powerful than all of us combined." Said Mr. Lips, "Or probably almost equal. I'm certain that the dragon wouldn't be able to resist it completely, for a long time. But we can't rely on *the energy* to kill it."

"He's right." Said Lupy. "It's too dangerous. At least until we find a way to control *the energy*..."

"Wait, you can't be considering on using *that thing...!*?" Cut Mr. Lips.

"No, not really..."

"*Not really?!!*"

"If *this energy* can kill the dragon, on a certain condition, we *will* use it, as the last resort, but only if we find a way to control it." Said Lupy. He quickly added, "I agree, and I understand your perspective and fear. I don't like it as much as you want it."



“Then why do you even consider it?!” Said Mr. Lips. Even so, he got to maintain his calm while arguing on such an issue.

“The last thing I want, is for the kingdom to realize this, and take this opportunity to use it against us.” said Lupy.

“So you'd use *this... this corruption*, to destroy the kingdom...?”

“Since when do I want to destroy the kingdom?” Said Lupy. “I want to *destroy the dragon*, and the old rules and regulations, *the ones which were made for the dragon's benefits.*”

Mr. Lips didn't say anything; he simply looked at Lupy — Mrs. Lupy, as well as the others looked back and forth between both of them, waiting anxiously — so he continued, “That's what we've been doing. That's why we've been doing this.”

“I still don't like the idea. The fact that you even consider it...”

“Nobody likes it. Except people like Amycus, and that's not much, fortunately.” Said Lupy. “But...”

He paused for a while, and looked at his glass of wine. Everyone else waited in silence for him to continue, the room became quiet as a dead person.

“I'm... *I'm tired of this.*” Said Lupy. He looked tired and blue, as if he was about to cry. “Believe it or not... I miss my home... but I can't go home until I do the job...”

The sorrow on his face disappeared in an instant, a small grin and relaxation, but he then slammed his glass onto the table. It wasn't hard enough, so the glass didn't break, but it was sudden, and it somehow sounded sharp, some of the others were stunned by surprise. “You have my words. I will not use *the energy* in the first place, irresponsibly, assuming that there is a way to do so.” He looked back to Mr. Lips. “Would you like to take my words?”

Mr. Lips himself looked stiff, even intimidating, straight toward Lupy, considering the fact that they were more or less at the same age. He was silent at first, but then continued, “Yes. Please, don't misuse my trust...”

“Since when have I ever abused your trust?” said Lupy.

“Never...” said Mr. Lips.

“Thank you for your trust. *All of you, no exception.*” Lupy then stood up, smiling. Everyone

else, including Mr. And Mrs. Lips, stoos up from their seats as well. All the food and drinks on the table were removed from the table, floating and leaving the room. “You know what to do now. Hopefully, Fortuna will bless us.”



She sat on one of the branches of the brit tree, about thirty meters from the ground. The wind was a bit strong, but she wasn't scared even for a bit.

The memory of her city was still fresh in her mind, so the scenery from the mountain, of a massive, barren valley, where the city had been, was strange and new to her, even unpleasant. From afar, she could see that not even one was there, even to see the valley by themselves. It was, weirdly, like seeing a giant bright-brown-colored dough in the middle of the forest.

*Weird... do they not care about Briton?* Wondered Silia.

She jumped down from the branch, and *fell down into the ground, way past the surface*, before floating back on the surface. She let herself floating, slowly toward the valley. With the mountain's ground slumping down, it was like floating on streaming river, and letting the river took her, as the river pleased.

Her eyes looked upward to the sky. It was sunny, almost without cloud. The sunlight shined brightly, piercing through the leaves and branches, and onto the ground, with mushrooms, flowers, and grass. She noticed that there was a squirrel, also heading toward the valley. It seemed confused at first, seeing Silia's face half in ground, but it then continued moving forward and ignored her.



It took hours for her to get to the valley, with such slow speed. The sun was no longer straight above the ground; it seemed to be afternoon already. As she reached the valley, there were no more trees to shield her from direct sunlight. She emerged from the surface and stood still, on the edge of the valley.

The edges of the valley were sharp and rough, considering that it just happened yesterday, which made it even stranger. She bowed down to look closer; she even grabbed a handful of dirt with her right hand. Bits of dirt, as she grasped some, fell down to the center of the valley.

“Silia?”

She turned back; it was Jowen, showing up from her back. "Jowen..." greeted Solia weakly.

*He's Martin's little brother...*

She sat next to her. "What are you doing here?"

But his hand moved straight to swipe her hair back, and even rubbed his finger on her neck. She moved her hair back to front, while lashing his hand off her. Her tone went defensive and mean, "*Why are you here?*"

"Come on." Said Jowen, relaxed, as if there was nothing wrong. "We're all in grievance. I'm just trying to comfort you..."

"Yeah, thank you very much." Said Silia sharp. "I'll let you know when I need one from you."

"Silia, please," sighed Jowen, but even it sounded disindigenous. "I know it's tough, I... *I lost my brother...*"

*Because I threw him away for saving my uncle...* "Yes, I know, I'm sorry for that..."

"I don't have anyone else..." said Jowen, about to sob.

"You have lots of friends, Jowen. And some of them survived. I'm sure they need you just as much as you need them." said Silia. "Might as well help them out. Setting up a camp is no small thing."

"That's not enough — why are you like this?!" Asked Jowen, louder. She could catch his anger rising from his tone.

"I need to be alone now, thank you very much." Said Silia. She then stood up, and walked away from him.

"What about — " Jowen then stopped abruptly, before continuing, "Alright... please, just..."

After sighing hard, she decided to flee away, by sinking down. Jowen, just realizing this, rose in panic and anger, and went to dig the ground with his hands. But at that moment, she was already meters away from the surface, safe from anyone's reach. She could barely hear Jowen's screaming. She didn't have trouble for breathing underground, as if she was a fish in an ocean. She let herself sinking down, with closed eyes, trying to think of nothing.

## Chapter 13

The music smoothly flew from beginning to end, filling every corner of the inn, and reaching to everyone's ears, although it came out of nowhere. Since it was raining outside, the inn felt warm, cozy, and comfortable, with hot food and drinks, and warm aura. It was in a village, so it wasn't as sophisticated as ones in cities; it still used wooden tiling and furniture, and there was no pillows or rugs for smooth surface.

However, the people inside barely talk. Only few chatted in low volume and grim tone. The place itself wasn't crowded; there were at least five out of thirty tables which were occupied. It was as if there were soldiers, standing at every point of the inn, and listening to everyone, ready to kill for taboo topic and blasphemy.

"It's one thing if the soldiers *are* here. Or knights." Said the bartender, also keeping the voice low. "But there's no one here. No one's eavesdropping. Seriously?"

"You're also talking in low voice." Said the drinker. They both were talking to each other, at the corner of the bar.

"Because they'd be offended. They just can't." Said the bartender.

"Well, that's one reason." Said the drinker. "After all, what's happened is too grim to talk about. Who likes to talk about deaths of millions in a night?"

"I'd like to. No one knows what exactly happened. Like, why...?" said the bartender.

"I've heard that *The Great Dragon* weren't pleased with the food, so *He* went on rampage and decided to burn a city." Said the drinker.

"Yeah, but *that's what people said*. What are the proofs? How do we know if that's what happened indeed? I could say that *The Great Dragon... uh, anything*, and at least a million people would believe that."

"Come, now, you think people are that dumb?" Said the drinker.

"They could. Believe me." Said the bartender. "That's why I never buy gossips and winds."

“Hhhh... well, how would you know the truth, then?” Said the drinker, a bit desperate.

“I don’t. Not really.” Said the bartender. “I...”

One of the customers lifted his hand, and said, “More beer!” The bartender simply swung his hand, and a bottle of beer floated from the racks full of bottles, toward the customer, at a table of ten people.

“I just listen, and gather all I have heard, but never really buys it. If you really want to *know the truth*,” said the bartender. “*ask the right person*.”

“*The right person...*” the drinker nodded with a sarcastic grin. “If only I have an access to contact *the right person* as I please, without getting caught by the kingdom’s knights...”

“Good luck with that.” Commented the bartender.

“Honestly, since when does the truth cost your life?” Complained the drinker with sigh. “What are news broadcasters for, then?”

“Careful. I mean...” warned the bartender, “I agree, but, let’s not asking some questions and ending up answering them by yourself. That’s never good.”

“What do you mean?” asked the drinker.

“I mean, make sure you don’t eventually presume.” Said the bartender. “We can’t take any more presumptions, thank you very much.”

“Hm.” Chuckled the drinker.

“Hey, Forder. How’re you doing?”

The bartender greeted another customer, coming toward them. Forder sat next to the drinker, also greeting both the bartender and the drinker. “Colius. Bartem.”

“You were... on the train hijack, didn’t you?” Said Bartem.

“*I was on the train hijack.*” Said Forder.

“That’s... not good, I’m so sorry for that...” said Colius, sympathetic.

“Good thing I was fine, unharmed.” Said Forder. “You got food?”

“Of course I have food.” Said Colius. He called a waiter who happened to pass by. “Hold on — what would you like? My treat.”

“Just pumpkin porridge and whiskey, thank you very much for the treat...”

“Get him that.” Said Colius to the waiter, who simply nodded. “Must be thrilling, being held as hostages by the rebels...”

“Honestly... we spent most of the time unconscious...”



At first, he felt dizzy. All his senses returned to him, and his energy *was restored*, slowly. The first thing he could tell, was that he was lying on solid, cold ground.

The second thing, seeing where he was around.

He, and the others, were in a likely-giant cage — it even took some time for him to remember that they were all passengers from the same train. It was a sort for locking gigantic animals in; even the height was about five meters.

His sight returned later, from blurred to clear. He happened to be the one at the side of the cage. The bars were tight, both vertical and horizontal, and he was almost certain that there were restrictions set inside the cage, although he couldn't check it out.

“Hello...” Hearing was the next thing returning to him. A sound came from his left. He looked at left, and found a young man, at least no younger than twenty years old, standing outside the cage. “You're the first one to wake up.”

“Where...” asked Forder. His voice also returned, but it was still weak and hoarse. “Where am I...?”

“Somewhere.” Answered the youngster short. “Just sit tight. It'll be over soon. You can go back to sleep if you want.”

“I...”

Though vague, his memories slowly came back. He was talking with laughter and snack in his chamber, along with his friends, when they slowly felt weary, out of nowhere, and then all passed out.

“I... my friends...!!” Forder started to panic, looking around.

“Are safe. I’m sure they’re somewhere among all these people.” Said the youngster.

It just came to his mind, to pay attention at the youngster, and the whole place they were in. They were in a blackness: everywhere around them was either *empty*, or simply a dark cave, set up to give sensation of mystery and blindness. The only normal thing he saw was a huge mansion, tens of meters from them. He was sure he had never seen, acknowledged, or visited a mansion in the middle of black, unknown territory.

The youngster in dark grey robe sat on the ground, which was just unknown black surface; he also had a sword holstered on his right side. Seeing his face alone, he realizes that he was no ordinary youngster.

“You... one of the rebels...!” Declared Forder.

“That’s fast.” said the youngster. “Yes, I am a rebel.”

“What the — why are you — what do you want to me?” Shouted Forder. He meant to taunt the youngster, but instead, he stuttered nervously.

“Nothing. We just need the train you’re on.” Said the youngster. “You’ll be back to your home before you know it.”

“Let go of me, you BASTARD!” he banged on the bars with his hands, although he was aware that it would only hurt his hands. As he looked around for something he could use, he got an idea to wake the others. He quickly bowed down and shook the nearest one. “Hey! Wake up! We’re caught by the rebels...!”

“Wha...” It was a lady, just about as old as him. She slowly woke up, likely having slight headache and confusion as well. He saw that the others a bit far from him also started to wake up by themselves. “Where...”

“We’ve been kidnapped by the rebels!” Shouted Forder, pointing at the youngster. Weirdly, he simply sat by and watched them, doing nothing at all.

Gasps were heard, but then quickly were followed by roars and curses of anger. One of them even threw a destruction spell, in black flash of light. It simply hit the cage, and then disappeared.

“You can’t destroy the cage. The only way to get out of the cage is if I let you.” Said the youngster calmly.

“We should try rolling the cage over!” Roared one of the captives. Some of them shouted in agreement, although Forder personally wasn’t sure if they could even push it in the first place.

“My son! Where is he?!” Shouted one of them. He ran toward the youngster, but managed to avoid stepping other people, who were still unconscious. “I know he’s not here!”

“Oh, yeah, Rigrin, isn’t it? He was in the mansion.” said the youngster. “Under process...”

“What process!? You better not touch him...” said the father.

“He has illness, doesn’t he? *Heartiliax*. We noticed that he was close to death, even before getting on the train.” said the youngster. “We’re curing him as we speak.”

“You can’t cure *heartiliax*...!” Started Forder.

“No, indeed. Not for the doctors out there, or the kingdom’s best medical surgeons.” Said the youngster. “That’s why we separate you and took him to the mansion...”

“Liar! He must be lying!”

“How do we know if you don’t kill him already?!”

“Get us out of here!”

“Please, just... let me see him...” said the father steadily, his tears already rolled down.

“You can’t see him, he’s under curing process.” Said the youngster. “Trust me, I’m not going to kid you about your son like that. He’ll be fine when you see him. Completely healthy.”

“He’s lying!” Said another man next to the father. “They must have already killed him, and eaten his flesh!”

The youngster laughed. “Ewww... we’re not cannibals, thank you!”

“SHUT UP, YOU FUCKING SON OF WHORES!”

But it didn’t trigger the youngster’s anger at all. He simply sat on *the surface*, and looked at them, as if they were performers in a stage.



More people were awakened, and shouted curses to the youngster. They began throwing more destruction spells, including Forder, to the cage. They all were focused on one side only, where the youngster faced against. Soone place was deafened and blinded by hundreds of flashing bolts, clashing the cage with loud sound.

But after minutes of full blasting, they all stopped to see the result. That was when the youngster said, "You can't destroy the cage."

He saw not even a scratch or a bend on the cage. It remained solid and black, even after facing multiple destruction spells.

*So this is the strength of the rebels...?*

The youngster started, "If I want you to die..."

He just touched the tip of the handle of his sword. In an instant, the height of the cage *changed*, from about five meters, to just less than two meters. It made such sensation, as if the cage would fall down and flatten them both. Almost everyone was awakened, and as they saw the cave nearly crushing them, they all screamed of fear.

"Don't bother the cage. You all would be already dead in the train." Concluded the youngster.

But they didn't bother listen to him. They kept throwing more of destruction spells to the cage; now they threw it to any point of the cage, but most of them went to the ceiling of the cage. Forder also continued throwing, but the youngster simply did nothing...



"Thank you..." said Forder, as his porridge and whiskey were delivered. "It doesn't budge at all."

"As expected of the rebels." Said Colius.

"I heard that you have to be really, really talented to join their ranks." Said Bartem.

"Again, *you heard*." Complained Colius.

"You really hate this gossip and wind stuff, don't you?" said Bartem. "It's one thing if you don't trust gossip and wind. No one force you but yourself."

“I think I’d say, I’m fucking annoyed.” said Colius. “I don’t think it’s true, though...”

“But it’s logical. Think about it. They’ve been fighting against the kingdom for, what, over fifty years, and they’re no close to defeating them. Meanwhile, the rebels have been pain in the ass to the kingdom and... you know...” said Bartem. “Sounds talented to me.”

“But that would sound really arrogant, if they only accepted the best of the best into their ranks.” Said Colius.

“Heh, sounds about right to me.” Said Bartem. “So, what happened, then?”

“We kept trying to destroy the cage... but it doesn’t work. We eventually ran out of energy.” Continued Forder. “It took quite a long time... until we’re let go...”

“Just like that? Unharmed? Unrobbed?” wondered Colius.

“Yes. But we were cast to faint, again.” Said Forder. “By the time we’re awaken, we’re already in a train...”

“I thought the train’s wrecked beyond function.” Said Bartem.

“It’s not the same train we were on, that’s for sure. I was in a room, with other people I don’t even recognize, separate from my friends.” Said Forder.

“But they’re fine, aren’t they, your friends?” Said Colius.

“Yeah, they’re fine. Everyone’s fine...” said Forder.

“You know, I thought that they would kill you lot. Or at least, torture.” Said Bartem.

“I have never recalled them torturing anyone. Killing, yeah, but never the people.” Said Colius.

“Knights are not people?” Teased Bartem with sarcasm.

“By people, I mean those who just happen to cross the road as the rebels and the kingdom’s knights were fighting.” Explained Colius. “Can’t say much about the murdered knights. I guess if someone wants to kill you, you’re naturally to choose whether to kill or to be killed.”

“Or to spare...” said Forder.

“Ehhh... with that kind of enmity, I’d be surprised if they ever spared even one of their

enemies.” commented Bartem.

“So... that’s it?” Asked Colius.

“Yeah... that’s it. But, honestly, at that moment, most of us were frightened and panicked. I mean...” Said Forder. “We didn’t know what was going to happen. For all we knew, we could be... I don’t know, whatever’s leading to our deaths...”

“Yeah, I understand that.” Said Bartem. “But even if they put no harm to the people, they’re still a *serious* nuisance. A problem, in fact.”

“How so?” Asked Colius.

“I mean, is it really not obvious? We have laws and regulations. They decide to gather around all the people who think alike, and break those laws and regulations.” Said Bartem. “Kidnapping people and holding them hostages, even if they do no harm... that’s still against the laws.”

“Yeah, but...”

“But what?! There’s no but here!” said Bartem. “Not to mention those dead sorcerers and chemists! Very few survived, and they’re already horribly wounded! Can you imagine that?!”

“Okay, okay, I’m just saying...” started Colius. “Not everyone can obey the laws, you know? Like, for example, if you can’t pay all the taxes and the debts...”

“Well, it’s not like they’re cursed to be poor, right?” Said Bartem. “*They curse themselves to be poor*, you know what I mean?”

“I beg your pardon?”

A couple, just behind him, spoke out. They both looked at Bartem with wrinkled foreheads, their eyes unpleasant and sharp looking at Bartem. He simply repeated, “They curse themselves to be poor. It’s metaphorical, obviously...”

“I know it’s a metaphor.” Said the man. “What I’m asking is, *you really think that they’re poor because of their own faults?!*”

“Yeah, what?!”

“Are you even living here?” Said the man. He didn’t sound angry, he instead sounded

mocking.

“He’s wearing the robe with the Clauves’ symbol.” Said the woman. “Seven circles with branches behind. I don’t expect much from a man born into a rich family.”

“You got a problem, lady?” Said Bartem. “I’m not saying that *all people* are lazy and complaining for. I don’t deny that some people can work hard and be free of the debts. Maybe you should watch over your wife, whatever your name is.”

“Have you ever wondered, how some cities could *massively* prosper, while *some other cities* are already falling? Especially when your tax is just less than five percent?” Said the man, somehow smirking in annoying way.

“How should I know? I’m not an economist or something!” Replied Bartem.

“Hear that?” Said the woman to the man. “That’s the sign of an ignorant person. Just say, *how should I know? It’s not my problem!* Or something like that.”

“You know what? Fuck off. I don’t need someone who think they’re the smartest people.” Replied Bartem, turning back to his glass.

“Fair enough.” Said the man. They both stood up. “I wouldn’t like it if your stupidity spread all over us, like a virus.”

They both left the money on the table, and walked out of the inn, even though it was raining. The food and drinks on their table was almost finished.

“A pimp and a whore.” mocked Bartem, but after they both already walked out. “Well, they would not survive paying their debts and taxes, with that kind of profession, I’m sure of it.”

“They don’t look like that...” said Colius.

“I wouldn’t be surprised if they’re in disguise.” Said Bartem. “Or... nah, they’re just assholes, whatever they’re doing in life.”

“I don’t mean to quarrel with you, but, when you think about it, don’t they make some senses?” started Forder. “The money can’t come from nowhere. It’s the logic.”

“Not you too...” grunted Bartem with a smirk.

“I’m just saying,” defended Forder quickly. “At least, if you want, let’s theorize, like that

new hospital, just nearby. Where does the fund come from? It can't be low budget..."

"I don't know, *I'm not an economist*, like I said. But all I know is, it's not impossible if you work hard and diligently." Said Bartem. "What do you think? You're not saying anything."

"Well, I agree pretty much." Said Colius. "But perhaps it's these rebels — not that it's true, but, maybe — just, maybe, this is one of the rebels' plans to make some people suffer..."

"Come on, I thought you hate gossips and winds..." complained Bartem.

"No, that's a guess, there's a difference. Your fault would be to believe it and tell everyone else as truth." Said Colius. "Now that's a wind."

"Fuck you..." both Colius and Bartem laughed to each other, but Forder simply looked down to his half-empty bowl, recalling what he heard...

## Chapter 13.5 (Forder)

The father stood at the edge of the cage, while the youngster sat closer. It was clear that they were having conversation. Being close to them, he could hear them talking, although it was quite loud inside the cage.

“How-how much longer...? The process...?” asked the father with a loud voice.

“Shouldn’t be much longer.” Said the youngster. “I see the *heartilix* is acute. Stadium three or four...?”

“Four. We’ve been going around the world, seeking for anyone who can help, but to no luck.” Said the father. He repeatedly looked at the mansion behind the youngster. “Can you lot really cure him...?”

“We’ve actually done this before. *Heartilix*, stadium three. One of the rebels’ relative suffered it as well. It was indeed a great breakout.”

“Wha... you’ve done this!? Then... then why didn't you...? Why didn't you share it to everyone...?”

“We just found a great breakout. It’s not like we’ve found it years ago. And, after all, would you really buy it, if I, a rebel, told you that we found a way to cure *heartilix*, before we cure him?”

The father was shut, and looked down. So the youngster continued, “Considering that we’re pretty much wanted, we can’t just announce that we found a cure to *heartilix*...”

“I would.” Cut the father. “Doctors and healers and more... they can’t... if you can... I’d... I’d try to find you and ask for help... even if it’s from the rebels...”

“That’s a bit harsh. And desperate. Maybe you will, but you can’t say for everyone else, right? With the kingdom and some people — quite a lot, actually — completely against us, if you go ahead and ask from us, I don’t think that’d do good for you either, right?”

“I don’t — what can I say? You make people feel terrorized! Look at what you’re doing right now!”

“Terrorize? We’re migrating you all safely from the train. We don’t harm you at all.”

“And for what? What are you even doing, anyway?”

“Ah, yes. This is where it starts to get a little complicated.”

“What do you mean...?”

“Think it like this. Imagine you have a farm of pigs. You supply pork to the market weekly with... let’s say, three thousand kilograms every week. But, suddenly, the market demands more pork per week. How would you solve that problem?”

“I... I... raise the number of pigs in my farm, I guess...”

“That’s correct. *And that’s the problem.* Because we are the pigs, and the market is the dragon. *How do you think the kingdom is going to supply three thousand people every day?*”

He said nothing in response. The youngster added, “They can keep giving him us humans, but not for a long time, that’s for sure. From what I know, according to the statistics, there’ll be no more humans left in this world in the next year. Maybe even less than a year. How do you think the kingdom would tackle this problem?”

“I... no idea...”

“Easy. Simply make all of us *reproduce rapidly*. Make a population explosion.”

“What...?” The father stared at the young rebel, shocked.

“Just like you would raise the number of the pigs for the market, the kingdom will raise the population, intentionally. More food for *the lizard*, you get what I mean? That’s where the train you were in comes from. They were transporting vital materials to make potions for rapid reproduction, and they will be spread all around the kingdom, freely, into vegetables, fruits, meats, anywhere — from what I know, it’s tasteless, so you won’t be able to know it. At least according to our intel; who knows if they decide to use other methods later on? It’s a secret project. Not even those soldiers know what they’re protecting, much less ordinary civilians.”

“How... how would that even work...!?”

“Our intel said that, most likely, it makes you feel... *passionate*, to your couple. It may even make the sterile fertile as well.”

“No... that’s...”

“Impossible? The materials are from *outside this world*, so, unfortunately, it’s not really impossible.”

“But... they... they wouldn’t dare do that to us...”

“Oh, this is the juicy part. The lizard is the one that ordered it.”

The father gasped, the moment the youngster said it to him, “Wha... *it’s The Great Dragon’s own request...?!*”

“*The lizard*. Please don’t call the dragon that — I’m going to be sick... yes, it’s *its own request*. Greedy, don’t you think?”

“That... that can’t be true...”

“I wish it’s not, but that’s the truth. If you can’t, or don’t want to believe it, I can kind of understand that. The only proof for you is my words — *our words*. The kingdom won’t admit this to you. They might kill you for that, in fact...”

“Where... where do you get that from?!”

“We have spies inside, obviously. I’m sure even you can have that presumption. We have them confirming it, but if you expect more than that, I’m afraid that’s all I can tell you.”

The father looked shaken to his core. He stared at the youngster with open and gasped mouth. He instinctively stepped forward to join them. “Bullshit. I don’t trust them.”

“No one’s forcing you to trust me.” Said the youngster. “Forder, isn’t it? I remember your name when I was checking and listing all the passengers. Quite a cool name, I’d say.”

He was surprised that youngster knew his name, but then decided to completely ignore him, and looked at the father. “You don’t believe him, do you?!”

But he was silent; he didn’t even notice his presence.

“Let’s think about it, anyway. What do you think do they carry in that black train?” interrupted the youngster.

“Who knows?! What about it?! It never matters!” shouted Forder.



“That kind of argument is not going to fly.” Said the youngster. “Such security for an ordinary passenger train... what do you think is it?”

“I thought they're transporting prisoners... very dangerous prisoners...” said the father.

“Good suggestion. Until you remember that they'd instead transport the prisoners straight to the lizard.” Said the young rebel.

“This is ridiculous!” was all Forder could say. He then shook father roughly. “You don't believe that, do you?! He's making up these stories!”

The father didn't respond. He simply looked at the youngster and the mansion back-and-forth. It was a big and luxurious one, a bit far from the cage; the style was common of all mansions in Mount Poppert, but he was sure that it wasn't one of the mansions *directly* from the mountain. It was on the same ground height with the cage, but it almost seems that there was *actually no surface at all*.

Just realizing it, Forder shouted, “Where are we?! What is this place?!”

“Well...” the youngster shrugged. “What do you think is this place?”

“I...” Forder looked around with attention, looking for something familiar. There were not even trees or sky around them, as far as they could see. There was no sun, yet they could see each other just fine, without the light from destruction spells.

“This must be illusion... yeah, this must be illusion!” He turned around to tell the others. “You must have covered all the trees and stuff with blackness, so you can trick us into thinking that we're in somewhere unknown! We're actually in the mountains, aren't we?!”

“That's quite an imaginative deduction.” Said the youngster. “Unfortunately, you're wrong.”

“LIAR! JUST BE HONEST! WE'RE IN THE MOUNTAINS!” Exploded Forder.

“Not even close.” Said the youngster. “You're not in the mountain. You can say this is *a sort of pocket room*.”

One of them began shouting. “THEY SHOULD BE ABLE TO HEAR US! HEEEEEEELP!”

The others came to follow and shouted as well, while most of them did nothing, simply sitting down and surrendering. Those who shouted for help, including Forder, reached to the

bars, and stretched their hands through, as if they could grab something from outside. Some of them, nearby the youngster, were trying to claw him with their fingers, but he sat beyond their reach. Forder noticed that they couldn't drag him closer by telekinetic, most likely because their magic were disabled beyond the cage.

He saw that the father now clenched on the bars, so that he wouldn't be pushed away from it. "That you just said... about my son... and the kingdom... is it true?"

"YOU CAN'T TRUST HIM!" Shouted Forder spontaneously, but none of them were bothered by him, as if he didn't exist.

"It is." said the youngster, ignoring Forder. "Whether you want to believe it or not, it's up to you."

"THERE'S ZERO PROOF OF HIS WORDS! YOU CAN'T EVEN TAKE HIM SERIOUSLY."

"Perhaps calm down a bit?" said the youngster. "You have no loss even if you believe it. And no one's coming to you. We're not in the mountains. We're in somewhere remote and distant. They can't even hear you."

Forder suddenly had an idea, so he continued, hoping to trick him, "Then why don't you even tell us where we are?!"

"As I said, we're in *a sort of pocket room*." Said the youngster. "*Enormous one*, I'll add."

He tried not to frown, since he didn't get what *pocket room* meant at all, so he pushed again, "What the fuck does that even mean?!"

"Well, I'd like to explain, but I'm afraid you wouldn't understand a bit." Said the youngster. "Especially since we don't have any more time left."

Something popped up from his left ring finger. It was a ring, with a big black glittering diamond on it. He moved it, as if showing off his ring to all of them.

For a moment, he thought that he was hallucinating, and seeing the stone shining the black light, because his head suddenly felt heavy, and accelerating fast, he himself became extremely exhausted. He didn't have time nor the energy to lie down slowly; he simply fell down onto the solid, cold floor of the cage. Though weak, he heard other thump sounds of people falling down, no more shouts of curses and flashing lights. The last thing he saw, was the father, standing tall and still conscious.

And the last thing he heard, at that moment, was the youngster saying, "Come on. The operation is a success."

## Chapter 13.5 (Mr. Paris)

“What did you do to him?”

“Putting him back into unconsciousness.” Responded the young rebel.

Just to be sure, he knelt and checked on the man. He found that the man still had pulse and breath. *Extreme vatigue...* He then looked at the stone on his ring. *Must be that stone... something to absorb their energies, until very few were left...*

“You know this thing, Mr...?” Asked the young rebel, showing him the ring.

“Mr. Paris... what's your name?”

“Orion.” Said the young rebel. He then turned and walked to the mansion, signaling him to follow, “Come on. It’s time to meet your son.”

The cage had no door, but as he pulled out his all-black sword, in front of him, the bars moved aside, opening a square hole for him to walk out. Orion said, “The curing process’ done. Your son is now fully healthy. He has to stay here for few days, for advance recovery.”

There was a bit of doubt in his mind, he was thinking of not going out of the cage. However, regardless, he quickly stepped out of the cage. “T-Thank you...” Mr. Paris quickly abandoned Forder, and everyone else in the cage. He has only one thing in his mind.

At first, he thought that it was actually bottomless, empty space, and Orion was floating in the middle of it. But as his right leg stepped out of the cage, what met his leg was a stable and solid surface. He could tell that it was flat, without any pebble or heap to make him stumble down and fall; it didn’t make a sound at all when he stomped on the surface.

The mansion was an overkill, to Mr. Paris’ view. The width alone could be more than a hundred meters, and there were seven stories. He imagined that it was their main headquarter, but for a reason, it appeared to his mind that it could be a branch of their bases as well. The exterior design was also elegant and luxurious. Because of that, he had a thought that they were *stealing* a mansion from some nobles.

There was another rebel, waiting for them in front of the two-door big entrance. He was a

male adult, just about as old as he was. He said, "Come. It's finished."

"How — how is he?!" Said Mr. Paris, a bit panicked.

"Resting. Actually, it was a close call, but we managed to cure him." said the rebel. He touched the doors, and it opened wide gently.

They both walked through the entrance corridor. There were already lots of decorative flowers and statues at the sides of the corridor, considering that they were the most wanted criminals in the kingdom; there were also some doors on both the left and the right. Far ahead of them, however, was a thick, closed curtain.

"H-How could you... how could you cure him...?!" Stuttered Mr. Paris, following the rebel. He alone walked fast, but Mr. Paris could come up with him without problem. "It's *heartilix*, stadium four...!"

"I'm not an expert in physiology and biology, so don't ask me. What I can say is, we dealt with the same disease in stadium three. It appeared to be challenging to them — but regardless, it was a success."

It led them to the entrance hall, which was already six stories' tall, and the size was enormous. Mr. Paris instantly acknowledged the entrance hall most fitting for a dance party. It was so large, it could have hundreds of people in a party. The sounds of their walking were quite loud, the only way to sneak through would be floating. Even though they were in a somewhat dark place, the glass dome ceiling displayed sunlight and bright sky, strong enough to lighten the whole aula. However, as stunned as he was with the aula, he was rather concerned.

"I take it that you took him on the train as his last wish? To see the mountains?" guessed Orion. "He was this close to dying, when we carried him from the train."

Having him talking about the train, it reminded Mr. Paris of his moment with his son, before they hijacked the train. His son was leaning on his shoulder, trying to grunt in pain due to the discomfort. He opened his eyes as narrow as he could, trying to see and record into his mind the green mountains on the side of the train. Even though he was trying, with his skin *literally* as white as snow, it somehow felt as if his son became as fragile as a thin vase, ready to break by even a rub of a finger.

He could feel the tears about to roll down his cheeks, so he held it, and said, "Y-Yes, it was... t-the doctors recommended for him to stay in the hospital, but I said no... I don't want the last

thing he saw being lights and nurses in the hospital.”

“I see. That’s quite lucky of you, to get in the hijacked train. If you stayed in the hospital, your son will die in the hospital.” said Orion. “That, or being sent to the dragon...”

“Wha... no, I don’t... I don’t think The Great Dragon would... would...”

He couldn’t bring himself to state it out into words. It was too dreadful for him to even think about it. Fortunately, he didn’t have to, as Orion replied, “Well, fair point. I... I can’t imagine they would do that.”

They went through the entrance hall, and turned left into other corridors. That was when Orion asked, “Where’s the mother, if I may ask?” Said the rebel.

“She... dead... the... the... the...” For some reason, he couldn’t bring himself into saying it out loud as well.

“The dragon, huh?” guessed the rebel instantly. “This is why we have fought against the dragon, and the kingdom. They think they’re gods, just because they have power, figuratively and literally.”

“I...” There was an urge, even though it was just a small one, to say something, but on the other hand, there was nothing he could say. What he had in mind, aside from hesitation and doubt, was, surprisingly, agreement, either of them were stuck in his mind and heart. So he decided to say nothing.

“Say no more. I understand.” Said the rebel, seemingly misunderstanding his pause. “Anyway, time to meet your son.”

He opened the door, into a grand bedroom. The size alone was about twice his house, which was just simple and moderate-sized. The bed and the wardrobe was super-sized, even compared to the biggest bed he had ever seen in his life. Aside from those, the space in the bedroom was spacious.

Rigrin lied right in the middle of the bed, under light balls in bright yellow. He seemed to be sleeping at first, but as the door was opened, he opened his eyes, and shouted, “Dad!”

Being used to hearing the weak, hoarse sound of his son's, the clear, strong and loud sound of a young boy shocked him. Nevertheless, he ran toward the bedroom, to reach for and hug him. Even his skin was vivid, and his smile was wide.

“Rigrin...!” He no longer hugged him as carefully as he could. He wrapped his arms around Rigrin tightly. The solidity and warmth from his body was real, and pleasant, yet so strange, but he decided to ignore that and hugged him, as if it was the first time. The only thing he wanted, just at that moment, was his son.

“Dad! I... I'm cured!” shouted Rigrin, excited. “I'm finally cured!”

“Now, now, let's not rush it.” Said another rebel, most likely one of the sorcerers who were working on the disease. He didn't notice her presence at all, when she approached them. “It was really nerve-wrecking, the process.”

“T-Thank you, I...” Mr. Paris wiped his tears, and even his snot with his upper arms, and shook her hands. “I don't know how to repay...”

“Oh, please, it was nothing,” said the healer. “Good thing we can help him just in time.”

“Thank you, Ma'am!” Said Rigrin to the healer.

“You're most welcome, kiddo...” the healer kneeled down, and rubbed his head, which somehow tickled him. The way he rubbed it felt as if she was his mother, or at least, a gesture of a mother's love to a son.

“I... oohh...” he hugged him, again, feeling the warmth and solidity of his body. It went by quite a long time, he started to complain, “Dad, you can let go...”

“No, no, no... I'm never letting go of you...” chuckled Mr. Paris, in the middle of his son. *I need to remember these feelings...*

Rigrin laughed off, as Mr. Paris let go; even his laughter sounded strong, healthy, and strange to Mr. Paris, but he swept it off his mind. They then butted their heads with each other.

“Well, we'll give you two a moment alone.” said the healer, as she signaled Orion to get out of the room. He followed her out of the room, when Mr. Paris heard her saying, “How are the passengers?”

Orion didn't answer, as he already closed the door shut, leaving him with Rigrin alone.

“Mom *would* be so happy if she knew...” started Rigrin.

“Oh, Riggy...” said Mr. Paris. “If only she was still alive...”

“She knows, Dad. Mom knows. From up there.” Said Rigrin. It was not only a happy face. It was the kind of face to encourage someone out of sorrow.

Seeing his face, it was hard for him to believe. He still remembered how Rigrin looked like, when he suffered *heartliax*, how he was weak and pale as snow, even a single touch would hurt him, how he would scream out of pain, but he had no power even to do so.

But one thing from Rigrin, as Mr. Paris just realized, was his heart of steel, his will of life, his passion to encourage and comfort people, especially his own father.

His sob, tears, and snob now poured down like a leaked kettle, mixed with laughter. “Goodness, how could I live without you...?!”



## Chapter 13.9

He walked alone, as steadily fast as he could, on a dirty and grim alley, glancing around the environment, through the corner of his eyes, all while keeping his head afront, and pretending to ignore everyone else.

There weren't a lot of people on the street in the first place, considering that it was close to night time, but they all either sat on the ground, stood still, or walked around, either having a dish, carrying clothes and medicine, or talking with each other. As he entered the environment, he could already hear a sort of commotion from afar; it didn't seem to be a quarrel, but rather a gathering.

Only one child looked at him, while the others were ignoring him. Their eyes met each other. The child didn't look straight at his eyes, but rather around his head. However, he knew what the child actually looked at.

Soon enough, the child walked away, and entered into what was most likely the child's house. He automatically touched his own neck — particularly, the skin on his neck — before he walked away.

It took just a few minutes for him to see the commotion. It was a simple and open buffet service, right in the middle of a flat, barren meadow. The dishes on the buffets were not luxurious, but they were all big, enough for more or less two hundred people. At this moment, there were still a lot of people lining up for the food. There was also a line of people for getting some clothes, although it wasn't as much as the one for dishes. They enjoyed the dishes by sitting on the floor, because there were no tables or chairs at all. There were only a few children who ran and played around with each other. From a glance alone, it was clear that there were massive differences between the people who served and the people who were served.

They were wearing shabby dresses, and they had iron collars on each of their necks.

"Excuse me, sir?" said someone behind him. He turned to see who it was.

It was a little girl, without a collar on her neck. She looked at him with a curious look, as she said, "Is... is there anything I can do to help you?"

“Uh... yeah, I... I just wanted to look around...”

“Thank you for coming, sir.” smiled the girl. She then stood next to him and looked at the queue lining for food. “It’s so rare for us to have a visitor here, even if only for sightseeing. Although, to be fair, it’s not a nice place for sightseeing in the first place...”

“I see...” he looked around. Unlike the city, none of the places were remotely nice looking or clean, much less in good condition. It really looked as if it were one of the abandoned cities, inhabited by wild plants and animals. There were even some buildings without walls, doors, windows, or roofs, as if a war broke out in that place.

“Please understand that I don’t intend to be pushy, but... if you’d like, we’d appreciate donations,” said the girl. “Of course, only if you’d like to.”

“Oh! Uh... well, I do intend to donate, actually...” he took a small sack of gold coins from his pocket. He then held it from handing it to the girl, fearing that she would take it and run away instead, fooling him. “Where would I donate to...?”

The girl then smiled widely, saying, “Oh! Thank you, sir! That’s very kind of you! You can hand it to me right away, or you can donate through our counter, over there!”

She pointed at a counter table, quite far from the buffet dining. He didn’t realize that it had been there all along. “Oh. Thank you. I’ll... I’ll hand it to the counter instead.”

“Sure thing!” the girl still smiled. “Thank you for your donation, sir!”

He then said nothing further and walked straight toward the counter. From the corner of his eyes, the girl walked away as well, in the opposite direction. In conclusion, she didn’t seem suspicious to him; he started to wonder for a while, if he should just hand the money to her, in order to leave right away. But because he already made the decision, he had no other choice.

He had to approach the counter to see who was handling the donations. It was a young boy, all by himself. He saw that the boy was counting the donations on the table. Soon enough, as he was less than two meters from the table, the boy lifted his head, noticed him, and greeted, “Welcome, sir! Would you like to donate?”

“Uh, yes...” he put the sack on the table. The boy took it and put it into a box below the table.

“Thank you for the donation, sir. Would you like to be listed in, or would you like to donate

privately?

“Privately, please.” he immediately answered.

“Very well, then. Thank you for the donation, sir!”

“Alright, I’m done. You can take your break, Rigrin.”

Someone else spoke from the right side. The boy looked at the source of the voice, as it appeared that he was mentioned. However, he also turned, because the voice was actually familiar. So he looked at the one who called the boy with a name he had heard before.

He looked the man in the eyes, and then the man noticed him as well. At first, he was smiling, a normal and friendly one for a stranger. But it gradually and immediately turned into shock. While he, on the other hand, was still processing the familiar face of the man, he was already greeted with “Wait... are you... are you Forder?!”

Only after that did his mind finally click. He realized just then, that it was the man he met in the cage. He then shifted his look onto the boy on the counter, who was looking at them both back-and-forth with confusion.

Panicked, he turned and walked away, “Uh, no, I guess not — anyway, I gotta go...”

“Wait!” The man quickly moved to catch and put his hand on Forder’s shoulder, stopping him. “Please! Just for a moment...!”

He wanted to push his hand aside, but the grip was quite firm, although not too hard. On top of that, the man’s voice sounded somewhat pitiful, to a point that Forder himself felt like he couldn’t deny his request.

He turned, before the man released his grip on his shoulder, but Forder still avoided looking at him in the eyes. He said, “Well, I *do* gotta go, but I suppose I have a bit of time.”

“Alright, alright...” smiled the man weakly. “I haven’t introduced myself. My name is Abbon Paris. This is my son, Rigrin,” as he pointed at the boy.

“You know each other, Dad?” asked the boy.

“We met each other in the cage. You know... that train...” said his father, without clarifying any further.

“Oh...! Oh, that...!” Rigrin nodded, and then looked at Forder, “Uh... nice to meet you, sir.”

“Same.” Forder insisted on smiling, but what came out was only a thin, nearly invisible smile. “They really cured you?”

“Yeah, they did!” said Rigrin, excited. “I feel so much better now!”

“I didn’t truly believe it as well, to be honest.” added Mr. Paris. “*Heartilix* is no joke, as we all know. Doctors all around the kingdom couldn’t cure it, and here they are, completely curing him.”

“That’s... nice...” this time, he could smile a bit wider. Looking at the boy’s colorful and spirited face, he couldn’t doubt if they actually cured his *heartilix*. Although he couldn’t read people’s faces, he couldn’t imagine them lying either.

On the other hand, however, there was suddenly a small thought in his mind, that they were very crafty in lying and deceiving.

He decided to get rid of the thought, by changing the topic. “So, what are you doing here? Is this what you do daily?”

“Well, I wouldn’t call it daily, personally, but, yeah. We help them as often as we can. We just arrived here recently, so there hasn’t been much progress here.” said Mr. Paris. “It’s... quite challenging, to be honest, price and all. I’m sure you can imagine how much all these cost.”

“Agree.” nodded Forder. “So all the villages you have helped prosper?”

“Pretty much. But they still need guidance and help...” he then turned to Rigrin. “Go on. I’ll take charge. You must be hungry.”

“Finally... okay, Dad!” Rigrin immediately ran toward the buffet tables. The queue was still there, but not too much compared to previously. Mr. Paris then sat at where Rigrin sat, and continued counting the money right away.

As he noticed it, he asked warily, “Where’s the mother... if I may ask...?”

Mr. Paris looked quite focused on counting the donations, but he answered nevertheless, “Well, she’s long gone, that’s for sure...”

He looked as if it was nothing, as he stated that. But somehow, it sounded reluctant. He decided to leave it be, saying, “I see...”

“I have to admit, I didn’t expect we’d meet again. And in this place, of all.” said Mr. Paris. He lifted his head to look at him, while his hands still counted the donations. “How are you doing? You weren’t hurt, were you?”

“No. Fortunately, I’m fine.” said Forder. “What about you? And your son?”

“We’re let go, safe and sound. Not too long after they cured my son.” said Mr. Paris.

“Not too long...? Not even a rest or something? Anything?” Frowned Forder.

“Well, no... it’s not like we were chased by a lion all day long or something...” said Mr. Paris. “I suppose because it’s a very terrible illness, and there hasn’t been any successful attempt like that, you thought that he would have to stay on the bed for days, at least — I used to think the same as well. But it turns out that’s not the case at all. He could literally walk and run afterwards... it’s almost like he had never suffered at all.”

“Did they explain to you how they cured him?”

“No. I didn’t ask them either. I wouldn’t understand it anyway.”

“I-I see...” responded Forder. “And then...?”

“And then what?”

“Then what happened?”

“What happened...? I’m sorry, I don’t follow...”

“What happened after they cured him? That’s it!? No payment? No consequences? No favor-for-favor? No nothing? They just let you go?” said Forder.

“Yeah, they just let us go.” said Mr. Paris. “We wouldn’t be able to pay them greatly, I suppose...”

“That...!” *is impossible!* But he decided to keep it in his mind, to not offend the father. He composed himself back and re-worded his sentences. “I... I heard... I heard that those rebels demanded money, food, or support for their help and service...”

“Really? I wasn’t requested to give them anything as payment.” said Mr. Paris. “I mean, I took my son on the train for a bit of scenery. I didn’t know at all if that would happen — no one did at all.”

“All the more reason... I’m supposed to believe that they would just cure your son for no ulterior motive?!”

“Uh... yes, I suppose? I mean, yeah, it’s not like they’re extremely charitable, I get that, but... is it so hard to believe that people would just... help each other...?”

“Then where would those rumors come from?!”

“I don’t think rumors are something reliable enough to be as trusted as factual and accurate news...”

“You’re not actually saying that I’m lying, aren’t you?”

“No, of course not! That’s not what we’re talking about at all!”

Mr. Paris, shocked, rose from his seat, and approached Forder. “Is there something wrong? You’ve been... you’ve been asking about them... is it about what happened in that cage...?”

“No, it’s...”

What came to his mind instead was blank thought, with a slight confusion. Now that Mr. Paris asked him, he couldn’t express it in words. All he could tell was that he was feeling angry.

Mr. Paris continued, as he was about to put his hand on Forder’s shoulder. “I don’t mean to pry or something, but, if you can tell me what’s going on, perhaps I can help it, as much as I can.”

Forder spontaneously stepped away from him, saying, “Tell you?! You?! How can I trust that you’re not their sympathizer or something like that?!”

“Their — what?” frowned Mr. Paris, out of confusion. “Sympathizer?! I’m definitely not their sympathizer, alright!?”

“Oh, don’t be ridiculous. They cured your son. From *heartilix*, of all kinds of illnesses. The least they expect from you is your sympathy — that’s what I’d do, if I were them.”

“O-Okay, but they didn’t say anything about that at all. They definitely didn’t ask me to side with them or anything like that. Well... like, furthermore, I mean, I’m just a single father of a child. What would they expect from me, anyway?” chuckled Mr. Paris.

“Oh, this isn’t fucking funny!” said Forder, getting louder. “You do know that rebels’

sympathizers are to be suspected and shunned, don't you?! And that's the least of the worst repercussions. Part of the reason it's hard for you people to help these people is that you all were suspected to be the rebels' sympathizers, and you're smart enough to realize that."

"Okay, that's taking it too far." Mr. Paris remained calm. "This charity has nothing to do with supporting them whatsoever. These people are in a horribly poor situation..."

"Oh, come on! You do know *what they're ultimately for!*"

"Don't push it, Forder!" snapped Mr. Paris. He then pushed his voice to whispers, only audible to Forder, "Not here, not that, of all things and places!"

"Why should we keep it down, anyway?" shouted Forder. "It's so fucking obvious! If anything, keeping it down will only make people forget that they're meant to be — "

There was a sudden sound of a clashing iron, despite that it wasn't clear what exactly it was and where it came from. But right away after that, he couldn't speak; it was as if, if not quite literally, his mouth froze. He was trying to check what was wrong, but he then realized that he couldn't move his hands as well. It took him a second to realize that he couldn't move his entire body at all, except his eyes' movement.

*What the...!? I can't move my body at all!*

*How could it be...!? Who the fuck...?!*

"Enough." said Mr. Paris, lifting his hand. At the same time, he could feel that he was floating upward, a few centimeters above the ground. The levitation felt stable, as if there was an invisible device with a flat surface that actually lifted him.

Mr. Paris walked fast, almost running, to the back of the place, through the ruined buildings. Despite looking quite old, Forder didn't think that Mr. Paris would walk that fast. He wanted to scream and curse, but not even his voice came out through his mouth. It was really as if the time itself stopped for him only.

That was when he noticed that, at least, almost everyone was staring at them both. Most of them were confused, including those with iron collars on their neck, but a few of the charity committee looked at Forder with sharp, cold, and angry looks.

Mr. Paris took him quite far away from the buffet dinner. There were no more buildings around them; instead, what was around them was dead forest. Most of the trees were dead,

naked without their leaves and flowers, and only a few of them still hold a few yellow or grey leaves on their branches. The ground itself was infertile, looking from its greyish brown color; there were no grass or flowers on the ground at all. From the corner of his eyes, it was entering into night time, as the sun was already set, making the whole place look more ominous.

He couldn't hear the loudness from the buffet dinner at all, as Mr. Paris let go of Forder. It was quite rough, but he managed to find his own balance, so he didn't fall down. "What the fuck...!?"

"It's already disheartening enough without you calling them as *The Great Dragon's fodder*." said Mr. Paris coldly.

"What?! It's — "

"I don't know what your issue is with the rebels, but don't involve your issue with these people, or with us, just because you feel it's somehow relevant." cut Mr. Paris.

Forder took a step back, but decided to keep going forward, "You think I'm not going to realize the possibility that those rebels will support you lot for aiding these people?! They're literally against *The Great Dragon* and the kingdom! They'd be clearly opposing this whole thing — this concentration camp!"

"You have a good point at that. But then they would have literally broken through the borders and rescued all of them from this place, and from the collars as well, instead of aiding them." said Mr. Paris. "That's what I would do if I were them. You're mixing what we're doing with what they're doing, because of your own frustration, whatever it is."

"You don't just break through Ursika's walls and rescue them all." laughed Forder, mocking. "I don't deny that they're skilled, but this place is well-guarded, even for them and their standard, within and without. You were checked and examined when you came here, didn't you? Even when I came here, just to see this place myself, I was fully inspected. The least they would do is send food and clothes for these people, just like what you're doing."

"Maybe, but that still doesn't change the fact that it's stupid to correlate what they're doing with what we're doing." said Mr. Paris. "Look, we're permitted by the kingdom, under strict regulations — you said it yourself, we were thoroughly examined before we got to this place. What do you think could be those rebels doing as much as sabotaging this place, all to rescue them, anyway? Giving them food and clothes, so that they could somehow turn them into weapons and rebel against the kingdom from inside Ursika?"



“Oh, don’t be ridiculous! The fact that these people get support, that’s pretty much what the rebels would do, if they couldn’t rescue them — they even probably convinced the lords and ladies to legalize giving support to these people!” said Forder. “These people don’t have their own time at all! They literally belong to the kingdom and *The Great Dragon!* And — and you people are helping them prosper! Can’t you see, to say the least, how suspicious it already is!?”

Mr. Paris stared at Forder, at first, with an empty look, as if he didn’t understand what he was saying. But in the next few seconds, a frown on his forehead was formed. His look somehow felt sharper and colder; Forder initially thought that he was somehow feeling disgusted by what he just said.

It took him some time to finally answer.

“So you’re saying that we shouldn’t have helped them? Because otherwise, you’d be at least associated with the rebels, and that would... *prolong their suffering...?*”

“YES!” shouted Forder immediately. “They’re problematic, the rebels! They, and everyone else who supported them! And these people? They’re dead! When the kingdom has already regulated — !”

“I get what you’re saying.” Mr. Paris cut and lifted his hand.

“Oh, really?! Because you don't seem to understand at all what the problem is!”

“Regardless of how problematic the rebels are, the government *has also regulated* that these people are to be given support and help. I hope you're not going to forget that.” Said Mr. Paris, fast, continuous, firm, and cold. “If you object to that decision, you can complain to King Brice straight ahead, because complaining to us is not going to help your cause at all. But if you want to obstruct us, then get ready to get slaughtered by the kingdom’s soldiers and knights.”

Forder was about to open his mouth, but nothing came out. So Mr. Paris continued, “I, for one, value life more than quitting early to escape a horrid end. If they want to live a meaningful life they have out of their borrowed time, I’m going to respect that. And let me tell you. Those people who wanted to end their lives, *who wanted to escape from The Great Dragon’s mouth*, they had already ended their lives, far before they're being collared — far before you even decided to care to come here and see it for yourself, I'd say.”

“I don’t — ”

“I’m not one to assume too much, but from what I understand, it seems that you want to

believe that the rebels are evil, atrocious criminals, and that these people in the slum village should be dead right away.” cut Mr. Paris. “So I'll say right away: I don't care what you think about the rebels. But I don't want to hear anything about these collared people from your thoughts out loud.”

He immediately added, “It’s getting late. You should go back home, and maybe go to propose your complaint straight to the kingdom,” as he turned and walked away.

“I...! Where do you think you are going!? I... I’m not done yet...!” shouted Forder, frustrated.

“Drop it. There’s no need to keep repeating your words.” said Mr. Paris, without looking at him at all. He kept walking away and leaving Forder behind the desolate forest.

Furious, he was actually thinking of attacking Mr. Paris from behind. He looked around, seeing and finding nobody around the place at all. A part of his mind had second thoughts, but only because he didn’t know at all what his ability actually was. A wind spell, sharp enough to pierce through an unarmored person, was about to be prepared on his right hand, ready to be launched off from his hand. He already flattened his hand, as if to cut with his hand.

But he then shook his head, get rid of the murderous intent, and said with a stutter, “Th-that’s not it...”

He tried to catch up to him, but he was shaking, somehow feeling panicked and frightened; he nearly stumbled on the uneven ground and fell down. Mr. Paris, on the other hand, didn’t stop and turn to look at him.

“P-Please, I-I need you to listen...” said Forder, now as steady as he could, still catching up to Mr. Paris. “I don’t mean to insult you or them, it’s — it’s — it’s...”

Mr. Paris finally stopped and turned, although his look was still cold and furious. Forder stopped, and continued speaking, “I... I just... I can’t believe it... I guess... I mean... I... I thought that those people are... those rebellious people are irredeemable...”

“And what does it matter to you, if they’re redeemable or not?” asked Mr. Paris back, still cold. “It’s not like you have a close relationship with any of them.”

“It’s — no, it’s...” continued Forder, still stuttering. “Like, their goal is to liberate the kingdom from The Great Dragon, as they said, but... it has been so many years, and they’re still nowhere close to that — if anything, they’ve caused destruction and chaos and...”

He then automatically looked left and right wildly, his eyes scanning for anyone other than the two of them in the middle of the dead forest. He didn't see anyone — he didn't use presence sensory either, considering that he couldn't use it well enough — but regardless, he lowered his voice, almost to whispers, "It's just so damn disappointing..."

Mr. Paris' eyes, still looking at Forder, widened. "Let's see if I get this right. You're actually supporting them, but you're disappointed in them, because they haven't actually made significant progress?"

Forder kept his mouth shut tightly, unable to reply. It took a few seconds, so Mr. Paris continued, "You're angry that they have, in your view, failed. So you come to despise them... and expect others to rally against these rebels. Am I missing something?"

"You..." started Forder. "You made it sound like I'm a sympathizer of their cause..."

He then sighed, and continued, "I don't care whether you're actually one or not. I assure you, because you don't look stable at all: I'm not one either."

"But... but I thought you supported them... they cured your son..."

"Doesn't mean I'd join their cause as well. You think it's a transactional thing!? They just let me go after curing my son, *as I've said already*. Being helped by them and helping them along are two different things." said Mr. Paris. "I don't really care about them, but I know enough that they're not that transactional. Of course, I'm thankful to them for curing my son. But this opposition against *The Great Dragon*?"

Forder looked at him in the face; Mr. Paris showed a certain expression, but he couldn't tell what it exactly was, nor what he was thinking and feeling as he said it. Forder himself was somewhat surprised, with a bit of not believing his words. Seeing him, however, he couldn't imagine that Mr. Paris would still pretend.

"It's so dangerous, and it's just impossible. Not that I'm saying it's a massive folly or something, but I can understand if some people think like that." said Mr. Paris. "And — this is my personal, controversial opinion — to merely oppose the kingdom and *The Great Dragon* by thoughts and principles alone, is not something that significant, not to a point where they cause actual destruction and chaos. I think that people take thoughts, principles, beliefs, and sorts too seriously. So, no, I'm not associated with them, and what you personally think about them doesn't have anything to do with any of us, so please stop assuming and just go home."

Mr. Paris then turned and walked back to the camp, leaving Forder alone. He quickly shouted, stuttering, “You-you think that I’d let you go just like that, after-after-after what you said about me...!?”

“I’m not that patriotic to the kingdom, I won’t do something like reporting you. I’ll just pretend that this conversation never happened, as you should.” said Mr. Paris, still not turning back. “I’d advise that you keep hating on them, lest you cause suspicion from your family and friends, just in case.”

“Don’t be shitting me! What are the chances that you wouldn’t... you wouldn’t report on me!?” shouted Forder, preparing the wind spell to shoot from his hand.

“I’m not that kind of person, Forder. It’s not like you’ve actually gone to the knights to mention me either, right?” said Mr. Paris.

Forder said nothing further; he even took a step back, his mind still processing what he had heard, unable to utter a word. Mr. Paris, on the other hand, was getting further and further, away from him. The sun was about a few minutes from setting, but the entire forest was already dark, although it wasn’t a problem for them. Mr. Paris already cast a light ball to brighten his surroundings, floating next to him and following him along.

“And... regardless of what you do, think, and believe,” he added, “please don’t involve others like that again.”

## Chapter 14

“This is... amazing, but...”

They all stood on the edge of the giant crater, the place where Briton was, before everything happened. She could see that they all looked stunned, unable to believe what was in front of them. They kept moving their heads left and right, as if they wished that it was just an illusion.

“What part of this is amazing!?” said another one.

“Well, for starters, you can’t deny that they really solved it. From what the people in the city said, it’s insanely dire. *They really did it...* you saw what they had seen, after all...”

*It took them more than a day, even if it’s to come here and examine...*

“Yeah. And they decided to make them all homeless.”

“Fair enough...”

One of them bowed down, examining the edge of the valley up close; he dug a handful of dirt from it. “This is... it can’t be...”

“What?”

“There’s only one kind of magic that can do this... the kind that’s impossible to do...”

“Then why is it even a thing?”

“I mean, *impossible for us to do*. This is absolute level... only a transcendent can do this...”

She could see that they turned pale, both their faces and the colors, although just slightly.

“A transcendent...? You mean...?”

“You mean The Great Dragon?”

“No, no... The Great Dragon is formidable, but nowhere close to a transcendent...”

“You could be executed if He heard you saying that...”

“I’m honestly sure that even He would agree with me. A transcendent can tear worlds in a second, without breaking sweat. That’s how scary they are. Not even The Great Dragon can do that.”

“That sounds... *ridiculous*... not that I don’t trust you, by the way.”

“Agree. Sounds like a fairy tale for children. But it *is* real.”

The others didn’t refute. They just looked at him with grim looks. He then showed them the handful of dirt to them. “This is one of their capabilities. *Teleportation*.”

“You sure?”

“Not really, but I can’t think of better ways. It does make sense. The damages all over the city is beyond recovery. Best way is to get rid of it, one hundred percent.”

“Okay, let’s just say that it is *a transcendent*. Any idea on why *he, or she...?*”

“Or *it*.”

“Why is a transcendent even here in the first place? What brings one here? Could it be that The Great Dragon was fighting a transcendent?”

“Maybe, but they said that it was only The Great Dragon. And some rebels rescuing them.”

“Curse those assholes. We could rescue them instead, if that asshole Lupolious and his minions didn’t stand in our way...”

“I still can’t believe it. *He has magic...*”

“Obviously he’s been keeping his ace cards in his sleeves. All for tricking us.”

“But why now? There must be a reason...”

“It doesn’t matter. What matters is how to defeat him. He’s no joke; not even Madam Lovelia can stop him...”

“Won’t it be cool... *nice*, if they fight against The Great Dragon, directly?”

“They’re not stupid. They won’t fight head-on with Him.”

“Yeah, but still...”

“We’re getting sidetracked. You’re saying that The Great Dragon went on... rampage...?”

“Most likely...”

“So the rebels responded by rescuing the people, but then... a transcendent happened to show up and... what, teleported the whole city out of the world?”

“Maybe the rebels asked a favor from the transcendent?”

“So the rebels have ultimate ally? Because that’s not good at all.”

“Let’s not jump into a conclusion. First of all, we don’t know if it is indeed a transcendent. It could be an advanced complicated spell. Secondly, we don’t know if they do have a transcendent as an ally. I personally think that’s unlikely, because, well, otherwise, The Great Dragon would have been defeated in the first place. Am I right?”

“Exactly. The former is more likely. Well, there isn’t much to find here at all. Come on, we need to report to the King.”

“Hold on. We’re not in rush, after all.”

“What? What else do you want to see?”

“I have to admit... it’s teleported cleanly, the ground...”

“Yeah, sure, whatever. We’re going back to the castle.”

“Wait...”

Silia repressed her presence once again, after accidentally being reckless for even a second. *Even for a second...?! These guys are professional!*

The knight looked down to the ground, frowning with suspicion, alert, and enmity, as she summoned her spear onto her right hand. The other knights then followed, also summoning weapons of their own, without any need to say a word.

“Underground?”

“Not sure... it’s... just a glimpse, but...”

“Well, let’s not hesitate, then. Better safe than sorry.”

The knight was about to stab with his sword onto the ground, but Silia knew better. *FUCK!*

She pushed herself down further as fast as she could, because he blasted the ground with a single stab of his sword. The strike split, shook, and cracked the earth, and everything else inside apart, reaching up to hundreds of meters down from the surface. Her legs kept swinging and her hands kept pushing, but because of panic, they were almost out of sync with each other. All parts of her body and mind screamed by instinct, that if she got into the splitting blast, even by just a touch, it would cause great harm to her.

Noticing that the strike stopped, she decided to stop, and looked up. “Whoa...!”

From below, it looked like the air being turned into split and cracked space of clean, pure and transparent glass. The cracks also reminded her to roots of trees, seeing how it branched to thousands, stemming from one big crack on the surface. However, it didn’t give the sense of reflected and biased light, which would make rainbow effect on each crack; it simply looked blue as the sky, the background for her point of view.

She couldn’t hear what they said, but seeing the knight pulling out his sword, it seemed that they decided to regard it as false alarm.

*They didn’t suspect... phew...* sighed Silia with relief. She decided to call it a day, and swam away, staying underground, far away safely from the surface.



With all the survivors refuging to Eltrix, the closest city to Briton was twice more crowded than she remembered.

She walked through the market. Therefore, she accidentally bumped with one person per second, as long as she was walking through the market. So many were walking around in the market, buying and selling food, drinks, and lots of kinds of stuffs. He could even catch someone nearby saying, “... annoying. It’s too crowded...”

But often times, she had to look over her shoulders repeatedly. Her eyes were wildly — and cautiously — looking for people wearing armor and holding weapons, in the middle of the crowd with robes and baskets. She kept repressing her own presence, and walked forward. She had to look at the buildings, mainly the second stories, to see and know where she was going, and which path she should take.



*So far so good... please, Rugan, no more surprise for today...* thought Silia.

Even then, she found it hard to remember the directions, because she had been here for just few days, and the houses and buildings seemed to be all the same. It took quite a while for her to find directions to her new house, with only her uncle and her distantly-related grandmother. The buildings were similar to the ones back in Briton, and to each other as well.

“Silia!”

It was a familiar sound, coming from behind. *Oh, fuck, no...! Of all people and places...!* So she put up her pace to walk as fast as she could, and to stay away from him.

“Wait! Silia!” shouted Jowen from behind. She began actually pushing other people to make way. Some of them even tripped and fell down, throwing curses along as well.

“What the fuck...?!”

“Fucking bitch...!”

“*Illegal immigrant...*”

“*Silia!!*” Shouted Jowen louder.

Being in the magic-restricted areas, she couldn’t *swim down in ground*, even if she wanted to. She didn’t even once look back at him. It was a bit hard to tell how close or far he was to her, with all the sounds of chattering, shouting, and walking; the only thing she had in mind was steering away from where the sound came from as fast as she could.

*I need to hide...! Where should I...?* Her eyes scanned wildly around, except at behind, looking for a good place to disappear. However, most of the buildings were houses and stores, which she had never even visited. She didn’t even press down her presence anymore.

“Come on, wait — I’m sorry — Silia!”

She heard a loud voice of clashing and breaking from behind. It sounded like a big fragile pot just fell down and broke. She could only guess that Jowen clashed with someone carrying something, and caused a big havoc with it.

*Good. That should hold him down...* There was no more shouting and calling her name after that. She didn’t bother looking back, and instead kept going forward, now looking for her house.

“What the fuck are you doing?! Look at my project...!”



“I’m back.”

It took her some time, likely about half an hour for her to find her way back home from the market. But, eventually, she managed to get back home and lost Jowen. She closed the door, and then locked it.

Her uncle was reading a book in the living room when she got in. Half of the living room was bathed by morning sunlight; it took a moment for her to realize that it was just a spell to entrap and shine out morning sunlight in the whole house.

“Silia.” greeted her uncle. “By the way, Jowen just came here...”

“When?! When exactly?! Few minutes ago?!” shouted Silia, panicked. She then looked around, in case he was already inside here.

“Well, uh... not ‘just...’ it’s been... an hour, I guess... my bad.” Answered her uncle.

Silia fell down sitting on the floor, sighing in relief. “Ohh... thank goodness...”

“Yeah, I don’t like him either. I told him to go away, but I’ll admit, he’s persistent.” Agreed her uncle. “I’m afraid that, one way or another, *you two will talk with each other*. Eventually.”

“I... don’t want to...” started Silia.

Her uncle rose from her seat, and picked up Silia off the floor. “I understand. I don’t like it too. Come on...”

He carried her along to the living room; she sat next to her. She had never liked the house because it gave the sense of flamboyance and luxury, but it was all in the theme of emerald green, which was her favorite color. With the morning sunlight coming out of nowhere, it gave the effect as if they were *actually* in a forest.

“Add sounds of chirping birds and crickets grasshoppers, and it would be a real forest.” Joked Silia.

They both giggled. “She did plan to do so. She said she just bought the tools for that.”

“Oh, great. She would really make this house a forest. Fancy that.” Said Silia, sarcastically.

“It’s not really bad, I think. It’s really something, in fact.” Said her uncle.

“Yeah, no one’s hating it, but, you know...” Argued Silia.

Her uncle just chuckled. He took his cup of tea from the coffee table.

“By the way, where’s Franma?”

“Going to the market. You were from the market, didn’t you?”

“Yeah, well...”

“You didn’t meet her?”

“It’s huge. There’s no way I would meet her.” Said Silia. “Actually, I was from, well, *the valley...*”

“Oh, no, Silia... why did you go back there? *Again?*” scolded her uncle.

“I can’t help it, what happened there... *what I did...!*”

“... is not your fault.” Cut her uncle firmly. He held her hands tightly. “Not at all.”

“But...”

“No, no, no. No. You did nothing wrong.” Cut her uncle again. “People will die anyway, in that kind of situation. Even if you picked him over me... well, I would understand...”

“Really?” asked Silia. Her tears already rolled down her cheeks. But aside from regret and sorrow, it was also skepticism and bitterness.

Without hesitation, he swept her tears off her cheeks. “Maybe, but, who knows?”

“Who knows...?”

“You did what you thought was right. That’s what matters.” Said her uncle.

“How could you tell that it’s a right thing to do in the first place?”

“I don’t. Truth be told, there’s no right and wrong in what we do here.” Said her uncle. “The fact that it’s happening is already wrong in the first place. It’s all just *what we thought* was right

and wrong.”

“But, still... I should be able to carry both of you, not just one by one, I should be able to save more...”

“Hey, hey, hey, you have saved so many people. *You are* a hero.” Denied her uncle. “You didn’t back down. You kept going and forward.”

“But I...”

“Not even the greatest hero in the world — in any world, can rescue everyone perfectly.” Encouraged her uncle. “But you have courage. You have bravery, and you rescued people. That’s what matters.”

On one side, she agreed with him. But on the other side, it felt like a mere encouraging and comforting words, just to make her feel better about herself.

He seemed to realize it, because he then said, with encouraging smile on his face, “I know it doesn’t feel like that. You feel guilty for now, and that’s normal. I’m just saying that... just think about what I said. Try not to succumb in guilt for too long, okay?”

Silia sighed. She wept her tears by herself, “Alright... I’ll try...”

“That’s my girl.”

He moved closer to her, and hugged her. It felt strange, but at the same time, she adored it. It felt warm and solid, having his hands wrapping her body, even though it wasn’t cold in the house. But the strangest, and most important part of it, was how long it had been since she was hugged, and how she needed it so much. She wrapped her uncle with her arms too, as tight as she could.

“Anyway, you haven’t had lunch, haven’t you?” said her uncle.

“No... biscuits and tea will be fine for now.” Said Silia, taking a piece of biscuit from a full plate of it, on the coffee table. Her uncle took a new cup and poured tea into it.

“Are you sure?”

“Yeah, I’m still stuffed by Franma’s pasta, that’s why.”

He gave her the tea. It was weird, tasteless, and without sugar. “I’ll never understand why

you guys love this tea.”

“Well, why do you even drink it?”

“Because I’m thirsty...!”

They both were stunned and shocked, because the door was knocked loudly, in mean manner. “What the...!?” exclaimed Silia.

“I think it’s *him, again*. Hide, get upstairs — take your cup too!”

Without hesitation, she took her cup, and went upstairs, just next to the living room. She didn’t go to her room, but simply hid in the second floor, near the staircase, and eavesdropped the conversation between her uncle and *the guest*.

“Mr. Howell, is she here?! I saw her at the market, but she avoided me!” she heard Jowen’s sound, a bit low, but obviously furious.

“No, sadly” lied her uncle. “She was through a lot just few days ago, as you were. Why don’t you give her and yourself some time to be alone? You just lost your brother.”

“That’s why I need...”

“And she just lost her home, friends, families... can you please give her some time alone, just for now. And for yourself as well, thank you very much.”

She then heard the sound of the door being closed, calmly, quietly, and politely. She heard Jowen shouting, “But I need to see him... AGH!”

“It’s safe now.” Said her uncle, so Silia went downstairs, slowly in relief.

“Thank Rugan... thank you for the cover-up, Uncle Ryan...” She returned to where she sat before, and put her cup back.

“Never mind that, but... eventually, you two need to talk...”

“*He doesn’t want to just talk! You know that...!*”

“I don’t tell you to go on a date with him, or get laid with him. *I’d kill him if he did...*” said Uncle Ryan. “I just want you two to talk it out, that’s all. He lost his brother, no matter how much a dick he is.”

“Yeah, because I killed him...” started Silia with bitterness and sarcasm.

“You don’t have to tell him that.” Said Uncle Ryan. “But you can’t avoid him for the rest of your life, can you?” said Uncle Ryan. “At some point, eventually, you two have to settle this out.”

She couldn’t help but gulp in nervousness, even though she was aware that her uncle was right; she could barely imagine herself having a friendly and polite conversation with Jowen. She sighed, before continuing, “Alright... I’ll try...”

“That’s good.” Said her uncle, smiling. “I’ll come along if you need me. You won’t be alone.”

Silia sighed. “Maybe not... you’re right, but... I need to be — I mean, it has to be just between the two of us...”

“I understand. Whenever you’re ready...” smiled her uncle.

## Chapter 15

The branch lab he was working in was huge. With few additions in his imagination, it could be like a mansion of a noble. The front of the branch was grass field and parking lots for carriages, as well as stables for the horses.

In his surprise, the branch was already renovated, though nothing was really damaged in the first place. It was almost as if nothing had happened at all for few days.

Differences he saw, were higher, more intimidating fences, and three guard posts at the entrance. Because of it, all the scientists and staffs of the branch lab had to line up in three queues. For each post, there were at least two guards; one for examining the person, while the other one examined the stuff they carried. With these new changes, some people from outside were standing outside, watching the fences and the posts with curiosity and concern.

As he joined into the line, Stain greeted him from his front, "Morning, Professor Litten."

"Morning, Mr. Lax." Replied John. "Where would the trucks go through...?"

"From behind the branch now. I haven't gone there, but I imagine it's much stricter there..." answered. Mr. Lax. "All thanks to those rebels... you weren't there, were you?"

"No, fortunately..." lied Mr. Litten. "How bad is it?"

"By loss, they just stole some mediator stone from the disposal room. But the problem is, they filled the entire lab with the rotting gas. It's a bit difficult to take care of."

"Why?"

"I suppose so that no one would intervene... man, it was bad... there has never been breach on any lab in the entire kingdom."

It was his turn to be examined. He just carried a suitcase, so he put it on a plain black table next to him. The guards, which were soldiers of the kingdom, were holding a long black stick, and scanned both him and the suitcase with it.

*Wonder how Lupy and his people would pass through this security...* wondered John. *They*

*would, that's for sure...*

It was his turn to be examined. He noticed that it took just about a minute for the examination, and it went just well. He passed through the posts, and went along with Mr. Lax, who waited for him.

"That was... fine...?" commented John.

"You're telling me that you're not disturbed by the... *that* — *those?!*" Asked Mr. Lax, shocked.

"No..." answered John honestly.

"You're unbelievable."

There turned out to be more changes than he thought were there. Aside from scientists and other staffs of the branch lab, was a knight. He wore complete armor, inside a dark brown robe, completely blanketing to his legs and arms. He simply stood on the grass field, next to the path toward the building, but he kept watching around with vigilance and even sense of intimidation. His hands were beside him; he didn't seem to be holding a sword. However, he didn't seem to give nervousness to everyone passing by. Only few looked at the knight with concern, as if he was about to slash them for no reason.

John, on the other side, tried to hide his nervousness.

"Do you know who the knight is?"

"I... no, I think he's new one. He looks young, after all." Said Mr. Lax. "You know, they have been recruiting youngsters into knighthood."

"Yeah..." said John. He felt perplexed to look at the knight out of curiosity, but at the same time, he tried to steer away as far as he could from the knight. So he decided to focus on talking with Mr. Lax, "Anyway, what else the damages are?"

"The lab guards were knocked out, but, overall, no actual casualties. That's the rebels for you, I guess..." said Mr. Lax.

"Mr. Litten?"

Someone called him from behind; it was a sound of someone he hadn't recognized at all. When he turned back to see who called him, it turned out to be the very knight he tried to ignore.



He was about a meter behind John, and his hand reached out to as if touch his shoulder.

He quickly set up his cold tone, and hid his panic, "Yes?"

"I'm to inform that you're called for interrogation regarding the incident in this branch. Please go to the main office at the top floor." Said the knight.

*Oh, fuck...!* He sighed out of frustration, but in truth, it was rather an act of despair, which he hoped didn't sound desperate to either Mr. Lax or the knight. "Fine. You're sure it's the main office?"

"Yes, sir. Just you alone." Said the knight, looking at Mr. Lax.

"Yeah, sure." He added eyes rolling, for the sake of conviction. Without any further saying, he turned front, and walked toward the branch, leaving the knight alone.

"Man, that sucks... also because you were out before it happened. No wonder they have suspicion." Commented Mr. Lax.

*Because I was one of the two...!* "What am I supposed to do?! Leave my wife alone, with only herself to take care about?!"

"I know, I know. It's just unfortunate, that's all." Added Mr. Lax quickly. "I'm sure they would understand if you explained it to them calmly."

Past the entrance, were corridors; there was no generous greeting design whatsoever like receptionist desk or entrance hall. The corridors were split into three as they entered, so Mr. Lax went left, "Good luck for the interrogation!" and then abandoned him alone.

John said nothing as reply. He went straight ahead, to the end of the corridor. There were three lifts at the end, with two toilets at the left and right.



*This is...*

The main office was all covered in wooden tiles, and with the furniture, giving sense of antiquity on the room, which was highly contrast compared to the white, clean, and plain corridors of the branch lab. To John, it always felt as if he entered an entirely different world. The floor, walls, and ceiling, were covered by bright-brown-colored *hylga* wood, while the furniture, such as the table, wardrobe, book shelves, chairs, and even painting frames, were of dark

brown *brix* wood.

However, what shocked him the most, was the very situation in front of him, where the head of the branch lab, Professor Yard, stood still behind the seat, while a knight sat in his own seat instead.

“Welcome, Mr. Litten.” Called the knight. “Have a sit.”

*Is this a tactic of pressure...?! Nevertheless, he obliged as the knight said, and sat on the chair in front of him. “Right... what is this about?”*

“I thought you’re already told what this is about.” Replied the knight.

“Not that. I mean, what is it do you want to ask me?” he looked at Professor Yard, who just stared at him with neutral, almost empty look. He had to control himself from asking him directly.

*What the fuck...?!*

“Where were you during that incident?”

*Exactly... and directly... John maintained his calm, “My house. My wife was sick at that moment, so I have to go back home earlier than my shift.”*

“And there’s nothing suspicious at all, during your trip back home?”

“No, sadly. In all kinds of honesty,” said John. “I’m not sharp and keen in sight as much as you do, Sir...?”

“I see...” answered the knight instead, staying neutral.

*Sir I-See? “Anyway, I imagine that the rebels would operate in such method, that ordinary civilians would never notice.”*

“You’re being modest, *Professor Litten.*” Mentioned the knight. He mentioned his surname, for the first time, with his title, and because of that, he couldn’t be helped but gulp. He could even hear his own breath, as his calm began to sip out.

“You’re one of the most renown scientists in the kingdom. And you took your grandfather’s name, and your father’s name.” Said the knight.

“Yeah, as a scientist, still. When it comes to combat, though... whew...” chuckled John.

“Don’t even start.”

“Do you happen to know what they stole, or at least, why? What for?”

“A mediator stone from disposal room... to a waste dimension...” repeated John. “I suppose they need something from the junks...”

He shuddered by even mentioning it. “Sorry, waste dimensions are... ugh, *fucking disgusting...*”

“You’ve been in a waste dimension?” asked the knight.

That was when he saw the knight, *actually* dropping his attitude of coldness, and instead showing curiosity and intrigue. For once, he looked like a young teen eager to learn more of chemistry from him, despite the armor and his position in the room. Meanwhile, John saw that Professor Yard was still silent as a statue.

*What happened...?!* “I have been curious sometimes, I admit, but... it turned out to be an accident...”

“How is it like? You said it’s disgusting?”

*I suppose it’s fine explaining about this...* “Oh, yes. ‘Disgusting’ doesn’t even do enough to describe it. I mean, all the junks from the lab have been mixed and combined, and piled for thousands of years — not to mention when stale titrix got into contact with used hydroyoprer.”

“I can barely imagine...” responded the knight.

“Anyway, back to the issue, I can’t tell what they would do with the mediator stone.” Said John.

*The fact that I have to steer the topic back to course... this guy is easy to distract...?*

As he suspected, the knight returned to displaying his cold face for interrogation; his curiosity when asking about the waste dimension was now gone off his face. “Have you ever, for example, found a letter from nowhere or something, or received an unknown package?”

*He started to ask about truth-or-lie questions...* thought John fast. *Is that why Professor Yard stood still behind him...?* “No. Most certainly not... why the suspicion?”

“I thought you’re aware of that.”

Being instantly hit by the sentence, John became sensitive, alerted, and also surprised. He didn't expect that the knight's expressions would change drastically in an instant, he naturally gulped of nervousness.

*No, no, no, calm down...* he told himself. He sighed, put up his fake face of frustration, and then continued, "Please, that's, like, decades ago..."

"Your grandfather secretly collaborated with the rebels and attempted to assassinate The Great Dragon..."

*I'd like to puke...*

"... with the Death's Breath. It's a serious atrocity, He made sure that no one would ever forget that." Replied the knight, "I'm personally astonished... the way they stored Death's Breath, inside his body, without killing him... that's nothing like I've ever known... anyway, naturally, one would point out the Lips..."

"I have spitted and pissed on his grave. I renounced the surname Lips. I have... what?! What's the point if you lot still suspect me?!" shouted John, furious.

"It's simply logic, that's all." Said the knight short.

"The f... fine, *fine*, *FINE!* Whatever! What else do you want to ask?!"

"I suppose that's all, for now. Thank you for your cooperation. You may go now."

The knight pointed at the door behind him, as a cue for him to leave. Professor Yard still said nothing, but he decided to ignore it. Without hesitation, he rose from his seat, and stormed quickly out of the room. He added, with a whisper, but enough for them to hear. "Good for nothing...!"



But few steps after the door, he leaned on the door, sled down, and sighed out of relief. In seconds, his head excrete cold sweats already. He looked at left and right; there was no one else there.

*Fuck, that was close... I hope the tool works.*

He slowly rose back, and walked slowly. As he swept his sweat off his forehead, he took off the glasses he was wearing, kept it in his pocket, and took out his real one.

## Chapter 16

“Come in.”

Said Sir Clarton to the one who knocked his door. It turned out to be Lord Lopin.

“Lord Lopin. Please, come in.” greeted Sir Clarton, with a wide, pretentious smile. “And, please, lock the door.”

“What is it?” said Lord Lopin, cold and direct, unaffected by his warmth at all, as he locked the door.

“Come on, Lord Lopin. Why the fuss?” said Sir Clarton, maintaining his politeness. “We’re just having a talk.”

“We’re not just having a talk. We’re talking about the material’s transfer.” scolded Lord Lopin. “That, or the issue of a spy among the kingdom’s structure. So go ahead, spit it out.”

He knew...

“Well, yes, but we don’t have to be that tense talking about it.” said Sir Clarton, as he sat down. “What use is that? Worry doesn’t solve anything.”

“Neither does calm.” replied Lord Lopin. “Just go to the points, please.”

Sir Clarton sighed. This is not going to be easy... Nevertheless, he did as he suggested, “Before we handle the transfer, we need to handle the possibility that there’s a spy among us.”

“Figures.” said Lord Lopin. “How do you plan to handle that?”

“I do have suspicions.” lied Sir Clarton. “Lady Simmin, Madam Aliana, and Sir Locke. They’re the most suspicious.”

“I do hope this is not merely out of your spite with Madam Aliana. Your relationship with her is terrible in the first place.” commented Lord Lopin.

“Of course not!” shouted Sir Clarton, starting to run out of patience. “I actually noticed that she has been going out, no one knows where, because she disappeared. Even after I hired some

people to follow her.”

“Oh, so you’re the one who sent people following her...” said Lord Lopin. “We had a conversation just yesterday, about how she’s annoyed by it.”

“Anyone would be suspicious of her. Especially when we’re looking for spies...” replied Sir Clarton. “Which is why I call you here. I need your help.”

“What help? Investigate her?” said Lord Lopin.

“I... first of all, I am asking for your judgment... do you think that she might be a spy?” tested Sir Clarton.

Lord Lopin didn’t answer, for the first few seconds. He simply looked at Sir Clarton, straight in the eyes, as if trying to look into his mind. Sir Clarton kept his smile, nearly to a point where he had to force it.

"I find her suspicious." Said Lord Lopin, frankly and fast. "But there may be good explanation for it. Something that has nothing to do with espionage."

"Agree, yes, that's possible." Nodded Sir Clarton. "But until we exactly know it, we need to know about it, no?"

"Agree. Why not just ask her directly?" Said Lord Lopin.

As if already being confirmed, he stood up, about to leave the room. So he automatically stood up, and said, "Lord Lopin, sit down."

He stared at him for a second, and then continued, "You really want to spy her...?"

"Direct order from King Brice." Said Sir Clarton, now turning cold and throwing away his smile.

"That's Sir Clarton I know." Commented Lord Lopin.

"Quit that." Replied Sir Clarton. "There's a spy in the structure. Regardless, we need to find and catch this spy."

"Yes, but, who is this spy? Who could the spy be?" Asked Lord Lopin. It was hard for Sir Clarton to describe, but he could only feel that his tone became, somehow, annoying and out of place, even disturbing. "Right now, as far as we know, it could be anyone. You, me, her, or... who

knows, someone can disguise as King Brice...?"

"Hmph." Smirked Sir Clarton, mocking. "You're going to philosophize and act deducing who the spy might be, but not actually act?"

"I'd like to plan first before actually acting. You know... not be reckless... what to do and what to avoid...?" replied Lord Lopin.

"So you are suspecting me?" Said Sir Clarton.

"I apologize, Sir Clarton." Said Lord Lopin, "Perhaps you weren't aware that everyone, knights, lords, ladies... each have their own suspicions."

He intended to reply, in a more bitter and spicier manner, but then something suddenly sparked in his mind.

Lord Lopin continued; it rather seemed that he was unaware of Sir Clarton's expression change. "Of course, this is merely what it is. A suspicion. I'm sure you understand how it is when one, or some of your colleagues, turns out to be a traitor, but you don't know who."

He sighed heavily, and then said, with a grim and furious tone, "Really? Because it looks more than mere suspicions."

"You know better not to take suspicions... guesses, seriously..."

"I'm well aware." Said Sir Clarton. "I asked you here because I need your help. Because we all want the same thing — we all need to prioritize this, above all else yet... but instead, you've been doing nothing just slandering and suspecting me — you already want to leave, before hearing me out... King Brice would not be pleased at all, you know..."

For the first time in forever, Lord Lopin was shut. Nervousness began showing up in his face, and he started to sweat on his forehead.

*Got you...*

But Sir Clarton decided not to tease him for it. He hid his smile, and continued, now taking the upper hand, "We might not have a good relationship, which is fine. But, for now, we need to put that aside. We need to find and catch whoever this spy is, among the kingdom's structure. Can you please sit down, now?"

But he didn't sit down. He stared at Sir Clarton, straight in the eyes; almost as if he still

regarded him not trustworthy. He pressed again, "Sit down, now!"

Eventually, though reluctantly, he returned to his seat. Sir Clarton also returned to his seat, now calmer. "Good. Now, let's have a level-headed conversation. So you're judging that Madam Aliana is indeed suspicious. Very well. What about Lady Simmin and Sir Locke?"

"They... not really, at least to me..." said Lord Lopin, compliant. Hearing him turning drastically compliant felt satisfying, but also ridiculous to Sir Clarton.

"I see... very well." Said Sir Clarton. "The help I need — the plan — is for you to give them a secret, fake mission."

Lord Lopin said nothing at first. "Because no one would take it from you."

"The mission is to transfer the material, as they think is real, through your region, and Lady Simmin's." Replied Sir Clarton instead. "Aided by Madam Aliana and Sir Locke."

"And then...?"

"Leave the rest to me. You just need to tell them about this made-up plan." Said Sir Clarton.

"How do you find...?! Oh!" Exclaimed Lord Lopin. "You set up multiple plans and see which one is the spy...?"

"Nice." Grinned Sir Clarton.

*I need to be careful...*

"Yes. That's not all." Said Sir Clarton. "Have Madam Aliana guarding the material, at the second last car. She had to believe that the material's there. But for Sir Locke, the material's at the middle car. They can't know each other's truth."

"If the rebels struck directly at the last two cars, the spy must be Madam Aliana..." nodded Lord Lopin. "Otherwise, it'd be Sir Locke... but anyway, if the rebels would attack the train, then Lady Simmin is most certainly..."

"Hopefully, this plan can work." Continued Sir Clarton. "That we can find the spy, or spies, this way."

"What if it fails? Because this seems like one of those 'easy-to-fail' plans." Said Lord Lopin; it was hard for Sir Clarton to tell, whether he meant it or mocked him.



"We'll think of that later. Let's settle this issue step by step, you get what I mean?"

"And not just that." Cut Lord Lopin. "Are you saying that with this method alone, it'd be guaranteed that they were the spies?"

"Obviously." lied Sir Clarton.

"You're dumber than I thought you were. And I thought that you were smart." Cut Lord Lopin, speaking fast.

Before Sir Clarton acted to respond, Lord Lopin pushed his seat backward, lifted his legs, and put them on his very table. "Because — I'll try to make this as clear as I can — the rebels have some people siding with them. To be born, live, and die as food..."

Lord Lopin then paused for a moment, his eyes looking at nowhere. Sir Clarton simply waited, opening his small wine bottle; he thought that he paused for the sake of dramatization, until about twenty seconds. "Lord Lopin?"

He was stunned by his call, and then returned back to earth. He looked at Sir Clarton in the eyes, and then said, "Yes... yes. I'm saying, people have been born, living and ended up as The Great Dragon's food. Not everyone can live that way, even after... how long has it been?"

"Over two hundred years."

"Yes, that long. Naturally, they would join the rebels, or, at least, be their eyes and ears for the rebels. That might be how the rebels knew about the delivery. A villager saw a knight and a train, so they decided to let them know that something's up." Said Lord Lopin. "Your plan, good as it may be, doesn't mean you'll definitely find the spies. What if the spy is someone else you didn't think?! What if there's never been a spy in the structure?!"

"If."

"Because, obviously," replied Lord Lopin with his hand making a talking mouth, "I wouldn't call you moronic, if you didn't put your faith, one hundred percent, on this plan alone."

Reluctantly, he acted to swallow his pride, by looking away and avoiding his eyes in embarrassment. He gulped, and then said, with a heavy tone, "Fine... fine! What do you propose, then?!"

"I'm not saying that this is a bad plan. I'm saying that we need to evaluate, to investigate

— and to interrogate further after the plan. You can't just point out, 'Oh, he's a spy' like that." Replied Lord Lopin.

"So?!" Growled Sir Clarton.

"So? We stick to your plan. What are you talking about?!" chuckled Lord Lopin. He then stood up, and as walking out of the office, continued mocking, "You're starting to be like a whiny boy, just because your parents don't get you a new toy..."

He opened the door, and left him alone; his face looked satisfied, while Sir Clarton appeared furious over being mocked.



As soon as the door was closed, black streak popped out from under his desk, went toward the door, and locked it again.

"You're right. He can't do magic."

The black streak expanded and grew into a shape of a person, sitting on the seat right away. The shadow then turned swiftly into a young man.

"What did I say?" Grinned Sir Clarton.

"Do you think he'll be reckless?"

"I know him enough to say that," said Sir Clarton, putting his legs on his table. "if he's already way above the ground, he'll tend to fall down hard. Wine?" He offered him the bottle, which Sir Sherty accepted.

"Yeah, thanks." Said Sir Sherty. "So... uh, you said that there were five you suspect, right..?"

"Yeah. What about it?"

"There's Sir Locke, Madam Aliana, Lord Lopin, and Lady Simmin... who's the fifth?"

## Chapter 17

"THEY HAVE CAUSED NOTHING BUT DEATH AND DESTRUCTION TO ALL OF US! LOOK WHAT HAPPENED TO BRITON!"

She tried her best not to storm the speaker and break his arm, thus technically proving his words. So she decided to just look away and pass the crowd by, on the sidestreet. A little bit further...

"THEY STRUCK THE GREAT DRAGON, AND WHEN THEY KNEW THEY FAILED, THEY USED BRITON AS BAIT — THEY LURED THE GREAT DRAGON INTO BURNING THE ENTIRE CITY!"

That's not what happened...

It was windy, although sunny with bits of clouds, so the streets were pretty crowded. She noticed that most of them were just from markets, carrying meats and vegetables — and occasionally bottles of liquor — with bags on their hands. They were also children playing and running around through the crowd. While some of them ignored the gathering group, there were also plenty of passersby who were interested in what the man had said loudly, and joined in the circle.

"MILLIONS DIED IN A NIGHT! ONE THIRD OF THE CITY...!" The scream turned down slowly, as she walked away further. At last, the inn she was heading toward was just ahead of her.

Inside, it wasn't as lively and crowded as the streets. She could even almost smell damp and fuggy as she entered. The inn was also dark, using sunlight through windows as the only source of light. She stood at the entrance for a while, scanning through the inn for her colleague, because it was quite dark inside.

Funnily, almost everyone looked at her, as she walked in, and then turned back to their own plates and glasses.

Her colleague turned out to be sitting in corner. There was an empty bowl and glass in front of him. Seeing her, he lifted his hand and waved at her. So she walked straight toward the table. There was no greetings or introductions whatsoever.

"Are you followed? Again?" Asked Sammen.

"At the start. Again, I could shake them off my tail." Said Aliana, confidently.

"They're really starting to suspect... you might need to leave..." commented Sammen.

"They already suspect, alright. Fannous is right..."

A waiter approached them both, with a flat face, "What's to order?"

"A chicken porridge and a glass of beer, please." Said Aliana.

Sammen took some coins from his pocket, and gave it to the waiter. "Keep the changes."

"Thank you." Said the waiter, neutral, and then left.

Soon as they were alone, she continued, "They're going to rule out spies from the kingdom's structure. Seems to be first priority."

"Finally, I guess... how?"

"I don't know, but they're saying that they're going to deliver the substance soon, through Arnisa and Greenbit. Same way, with the train. This time, I'm tasked to guard the train." Said Aliana. "I feel that this time is a trap..."

"I think the same as well." Said Sammen, nodding. "But... we need to be one hundred percent sure that they're actually not delivering the substance."

"I'm pretty confident that this is just a ruse... but, okay, I'll try to find out more." Said Aliana.

"Wait a minute... when did you say they will supposedly deliver the substance...?"

"Soon." Said Aliana grimly. "Yes. They didn't say when. They just said that it's going to happen soon."

"Smart..." smirked Sammen sarcastically.

"I honestly think that they're honest on that part. They don't know when exactly to deliver... maybe they need preparations or stuff..." uttered Aliana.

"Okay, but what if it's real? What if they knew we would think that it's fake, when actually, it's real?" Said Sammen.

"Yes, I know. I'll try my best to find out about it. Don't be too dreadful, Sam." Said Aliana.

"Just tell Lupy to prepare to ambush the train, just in case. Either Arnisa and Greenbit."

"Alright..." sighed Sammen.

Just in time, the waiter returned with a tray, carrying a bowl of porridge and a glass of beer. He put it in front of Aliana, and then took Sammen's dish out. Aliana paid for the dish earlier, and the waiter replied with a simple "Enjoy."

"Thank you." responded Aliana. After he left them both, she whispered, "What's with the waiter? He looks preoccupied..."

"He's always been like that, never mind it." Said Sammen. "By the way, have you heard that screaming man?"

"Oh, yeah... loud and clear." Said Aliana. "What about it?"

"You think it's what they're doing? Spreading false news, so that they hate us...?" Wondered Sammen.

"Perhaps, although I've never heard them discussing it." Said Aliana. "That'd be logical and efficient. Shifting the blame to us..." It turned out that the more she thought about it, the more furious she would get.

"I just thought that, maybe you'd feel... I don't know, I feel annoyed, to be honest..."

"I do feel annoyed by it." Answered Aliana. "But what can we do? We don't have any evidence against that, and the news were already spread. If we force to push him down and speak up, they..."

She hesitated, because, somehow, she felt doubt in her own words, as she stated it to Sammen. "They probably wouldn't believe us..."

"Are you sure about that...?" Asked Sammen, apparently spotting Aliana's doubt.

"I... okay, not really... but it's really risky... unless Lupy's with us..."

"Oh, yeah... he'd help greatly." grinned Sammen. "Although I'd say, it's not a good idea. Emotion manipulation is..."

"I know. It's not honest. It's sly." said Aliana. "One more reason to not put that man down and speak out about what actually happened... you know what, let's not talk about it anymore."

My blood boils just by thinking about it."

"Heh... alright..." chuckled Sammen, but then simply sighed heavily, and looked at people, enjoying their dishes on silence, as Aliana enjoyed her porridge. "Not bad..." commented Aliana.

"One of the best..." grinned Sammen, but still looking out of the inn. It was obvious that his mind was busy thinking of something.

As much as she enjoyed her dish, Aliana couldn't help but be curious, "What is it...?"

He didn't answer directly. "You think... after we, you know... finally kill the dragon, and stop the regime... you think everything will go back to the way it was...?"

Aliana frowned. "What do you mean, back to the way it was?"

"I mean, do you think that the kingdom, our lives, everyone and everything... will it be back to normal..?" Said Sammen, now feeling anxious, "Like, you know... before the dragon came here...?"

"Oh..."

"With those people now actually siding with the dragon, and accepting their... if — when we kill the dragon... do you think they will... I don't know, rejoice or something? Or will they instead be hostile toward us, because we kill the dragon...?"

Aliana could say nothing. It was a feeling she couldn't describe, or at least describe and classify. She did feel furious just by thinking about it, but it also seemed to be utter despair, as she couldn't think of a chance for it to happen. However, deep down in her subconsciousness, she also understood the people's thoughts and fears, having their lives permanently accustomed, and then being drastically changed. All the emotions were mixed inside her mind, as well as her heart, all becoming an emotion she didn't even know what it was.

*This is not good...*

"You know, let's talk about something else." Said Aliana, trying to contain her fury. "Just to waste some minutes, while I'm having this porridge."

Sammen chuckled weakly, and even nervously. "Not in a good mood, huh? Alright... you seemed to have never been here, have you...?"

## Chapter 17.1

"That's pretty much it, for now..." said Sammen.

Lupy said nothing. He simply looked at Sammen straight in the eyes, which made him nervous. He could tell that he didn't use his magic to manipulate his emotions and feelings, but honestly, it didn't make any difference whatsoever.

"They started to suspect..." concluded Roven, next to him.

"Obviously." Responded Lupy.

He still looked at Sammen; he started to think in paranoia. Don't tell me he thought I'm the spy for the kingdom...!

"So... if there's nothing else..."

It was as if Lupy was daydreaming, because he immediately cut him, with a stun, "Oh, sorry... how many will be participating?"

"N-N-Not much... Lord Lopin, Lady Simmin, Sir Locke, and Aliana herself." Answered Sammen, stunned as well.

"Two knights and two nobles." Said Lupy. "Last time, it was lots of knights. One senior and seven juniors, but as backup..."

"Personally, do you think that this is a ruse?" Asked Roven to Sammen.

"I... yeah..." stuttered Sammen. "But... what if it's not...? We'd be fucked up... literally..."

"Agree." Said Lupy short. "So, in order to find out, Aliana and Qartz need to get more information..."

"Wait, what about Qartz?" Asked Fortu. "He didn't say anything about Qartz?"

"No, not at all." Said Sammen. "Just the four of them."

"That's good news, no?" Said Fortu, excited. "He stays hidden from their suspicion."

"Yeah, but we don't know much about what they're thinking from the first place. There might be other plans we weren't aware of at all." Replied Lupy.

"Oh, yeah... it could be..." said Fortu, his excitement gone.

"So, now, we can only wait for more information, and make preparations for stopping the train." Said Lupy.

"Would be better if we can strike the substance's source directly." Said Fortu.

"Yeah, but that's..."

"Impossible. I know." cut Fortu. "I'm just wondering..."

"And also..." said Lupy, but then stopped. He paused for quite few seconds, the others started to be look at him with confusion.

"What is it?" Asked Roven, concerned.

"I was thinking... how many will be participating, again?"

"Four. Lord Lopin, Lady Simmin, Sir Locke, and Madam Aliana." Answered Sammen.

"Just four... think we can get everyone for guarding the train?"

"What're you thinking?" Asking Fortu.

"I'm thinking, if possible... I just think that, maybe, now's a good time..."



And there you have it. “The Fable of the Dragon-Tyrant,” but with real characters, real stories, and real places. Real names (compared to the fable).

It’s quite hard sometimes, because it’s bloody long, longer than I thought it would be. When I thought that it’d be just brief chapter-to-chapter stories, it turned into a continuous one, almost as if it’s actually a novelized story, as if it’s a real main project of mine. It can be scary indeed that you’re writing a story and thinking that it’s going to be a fixed plan, only to find out that it goes further beyond what even I imagine. It keeps me to adding more and more stuff in, some I already have the concept, others are brand new concepts.

And even this is still far away from the ending. You can say this is a sort of prologue of the saga of the kingdom’s endless struggles against the alien invading dragon. What comes next is something that’s still far away from conclusion (not of the story, but of the transition of the kingdom’s new age).

“When the fuck will this end?!” You may ask, and I’ll answer, “Not even I know...” I have some pictures of it, but that’ll probably be as long as the next arc (I suppose?), if not longer.

Yes, it’s terrifying.

But I fucking love it.

I wouldn’t change it any other way.