

## PROLOGUE

*Greetings,*

*I take this pen in hand today as you have taken your life in your own hands. It is my greatest honor to congratulate you in your acceptance of the application sent two years past. Tens of thousands applied, but only you and select others will have the chance to participate in the event of a lifetime. My trusted conseleigh have been examining you and have recommended individuals of the highest tier, excelling in strength of self, mind, and body.*

*If you accept this offer, the Trials you face will be extremely difficult, designed to push you past your maximum potential. The winner will be titled as my apprentice and will have the honor of training under my staff and I until my two-hundredth year as Guardian of the Core arrives. Further details will be explained upon your arrival. Good luck.*

*Sincerely,*

*Guardian Edwyrð Eska*

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The pen flitted across each letter in rhythmic repetition as Guardian Eska signed the last of eight invitations. Cards of thicker stock had previously been laid on his desk by two of his conseleigh. Eska waved his gloved hand over all eight sets. The cards hovered, defying wind and gravity both. The letters slid into the crimson envelopes and then fell to an onyx desk thick with emerald vines.

Eska removed his ring, given to him during a Coronation long past. Golden wax coated the obsidian band, hiding Eska's sigil—a dragon, with wings outstretched, spewing fire. He pushed the ring down and sealed the first envelope. Footsteps echoed in the hallways across the midsize cavity of moss-green aventurine floors and jade pillars, stopping before the stairs that led to where Eska sat. Though they echoed, Eska wouldn't have needed the sound to sense the man's presence. He continued sealing the rest of the envelopes. "Is the ship ready, Luvan?"

"Lady Tundra is readying it now. The air here is short. How long will it be?"

For Eska, the air in the room was fine. But the others were sure to be having difficulties. "We will have leave soon enough."

"Thank you, my guardian."

While his conseleigh's footsteps retreated, Eska waved his hand over the finished envelopes. He stood from his chiseled and polished seat of shakti—a rock of celadon color corded in black. As his hand passed over each envelope, it rose and floated above him, following him through another hallway that led deeper into a cavernous floating isle—to a place he had not been for one hundred and fifty years. Only he and his conseleigh knew of this place, but only he knew of the woman waiting for him at path's end.

Lighted moss clung to the pale-blue walls, serving as torches. A dominance carried with Eska, the sort no other man or woman in the universe wielded. His eyes were narrowed like the pathway. His glove was stitched of the same darknether material as his jerkin, black like the shadow that lingered behind his silken cape of gold and crimson.

At the corridor's end, the narrow path opened to a large cove with blue walls that spun like the wind in five separate places—one portal for each planet. A woman waited in the center of the room, and Guardian Eska took his spot next to her. Her lips, lush and blue like the hair that bounded past her shoulders, gave false testimony to her age. Through her transparent gown, her skin shone like a moon during the grave of night.

This wasn't his first time in the cove, but it was his first time using the portals on the wall. The halo of letters that had been floating above him separated to three spots on the wall, ignoring two. Here, the air was even thinner. From a strand of gossamer around Eska's neck, a gray orb moved toward the woman; her power attracted it, a desire to return to its creator.

Eska nodded at her. "All of the letters will be delivered, yes?"

"As sure as the wind blows," she said.

"Then let the Trials commence."

# CHAPTER 1

## PRINCE HYDRO

Even past midday, Freyr didn't have much bearing on the stone court. Lord's Keep was too tall, and the sun was not even at its zenith yet. In its current position, the two sparring figures managed to produce two slender shadows dancing in rhythmic beats of one another.

Hydro Paen's younger brother, Aiton, looked on closely from the shaded portion of the castle walls. Aiton sat in a longchair, held tight by his mother. His mother's friends were there too—marchionesses from different provinces of Acquava. Elias Ward, his father's adored, had also taken a spot amongst the crowd, waiting to tend to any injury. Hydro tried not to focus on them, but every so often he caught himself stealing a gaze, watching for his mother's eye, which never seemed to look. Mostly Hydro focused on the man in front of him: Korth.

Korth swung his sword upward, forcing Hydro into a backflip. Upon landing, he ducked to avoid another stroke. Using his momentum, Hydro propelled his body forward, lance in front, attempting to pierce Korth's seachrome armor—the front and back pieces attached by strong fishing lines, and instead of chainmail covering any openings on his side, rows upon rows of tightened clam shells protected him. Upon the breast was a droplet of water pierced and shattered by a sword. It was the Paen insignia, the pride of Hydro's house.

Hydro missed. Now his back was exposed. He tugged on the golden chain attached to his sapphire lance and spun around, ready to block an incoming attack.

"Good reflexes, Prince," said Korth. His thick moustache bobbed up and down beneath the gap of his seachrome helm.

"I do not need your praise, Korth."

Hydro jabbed his lance forward, but it was batted away. A heavy boot struck his stomach, causing his chest to heave inward. Defeat rang thrice as the lance clattered on the court.

"You may not need my praise, but you certainly need my help. Your lance skills are still only mediocre." Korth grinned, extending his sea-leather glove, dotted in brine, down to Hydro.

Hydro looked toward the crowd and saw his mother smirking at him.

*I will show you I am not a failure.* Hydro ignored the hand and returned to his feet by himself. "I do not need my lance when I can best you with a sword. Shall we practice that?"

Hydro crouched down and pushed aside the golden chain on his lance, exposing a small slit. Slightly above the slit was a silver band, colored different from the rest of the sapphire lance. A black button rose outwards from the lance a quarter-inch above the silver. Hydro gripped the band and pushed the black button with his thumb. He concentrated on forming a sword, and within seconds, the malleable liquid steel—zircha—started to transfer. In no longer than five seconds, he held it ready.

"No. You will practice power now. A prince must be trained in both."

"Humph. Very well." Hydro stowed away his sword and waited for the court to be set.

From the shadows of East Wall, a water basin was brought forth by guards Hydro didn't bother taking note of. Lamps—one of gas and fire, the other of electricity—were placed alongside the basin. Elemental power could only be cast if it already existed in its natural form and only if visible—thus it was labeled the lowest of the three tiers of power. Now, with the addition of the lamps, all four elements could be drawn from. (Earth was the easiest of them all due to its overwhelming majority and proximity. In fact, it would always be the easiest element to conquer, unless one was falling through the air or at sea.)

Hydro allayed his mind by breathing and closing his eyes, letting some of his untapped senses investigate the surrounding. Seagulls chirped, and the sound of water splashing against the rocks soon became obvious, as did the smell of salt and brine. Power flowed, tingling on the tips of his fingers. The cool warmth calmed him as nothing else could. Hydro opened his eyes and saw Korth pace around the individual elements, then flick his hand and move his lips.

“*Maa*,” Hydro said. Parts of the stone court shot up to deflect the incoming lightning bolt. Hydro soon saw flames dance over the top of the earthen shield, so he jumped back and let the spell die—the stone court returning to normal. “*Vesi*,” Hydro said. Water from the basin overflowed and slid to the fire, quickly drowning it.

The session continued like this for another five rounds. Korth constantly tested Hydro’s speed and knowledge of power’s hierarchy: earth for thunder, thunder for water, water for fire, fire for earth. The ferocity of the spell and its speed was linked to emotion and confidence. Because of this, Hydro constantly readjusted and prioritized which spell needed attention. As fatigue replaced his strength, sweat slid down his body beneath his tunic. Then, the spells stopped.

“Practice endurance now. Start with earth,” Korth commanded.

“*Maa*.” A spire cracked from the middle of the stone court and shot upwards, increasing in girth all the while.

“Raise it higher.”

Hydro let the power seize him, and he pushed the spire up, soon nearing the height of the parapets.

“Hold.”

Hydro closed his eyes and focused, thinking of nothing else but the spire of earth in front of him. His brow started to sweat, but he continued holding the spell. His heart throbbed and his fingers twitched as he dug deeper into himself. He wanted to open his eyes, but that would cause him to lose focus.

“Release.”

Hydro opened his eyes and gasped. The spire fell back to the stone court, returning it to normal.

“Impressive, Prince Hydro. You are quite the sorcerer,” said Korth.

Korth’s praise was empty flattery. The earth could have risen like Mount Klaff—to the very heavens of Axiomé itself—instead of only reaching the height of East Tower.

Still panting, Hydro looked up and noticed a man—completely bald—hobbling his way from the shade of East Tower with the help of a golden cane inlaid with sapphire vines. Gray spots on his head resembled the islands of Acquava. Hydro recognized the Paen insignia on his overflowing white robe before the man started speaking.

A hand extended a sealed bag of cerise leaves. “Would my prince care for some ard leaves to replenish his strength?” The man’s voice shook just as much as the large bracelets on his wrist. The bracelets represented his knowledge in unique elements and compounds created and given by Ancient Lyoen, the alchemist—ard leaves being one of them.

“No, Elias. I will call you over if I need your assistance.”

“But you must.”

“I must not do anything—unless my father commands it of me. Do well to remember that.”

“Elias,” Korth said, “it’s fine. Prince Hydro will regain his strength as he watches Aiton’s training.”

“Very well.”

To Hydro's dismay, this would be one of his shorter sessions; usually he went through all the spells at least once, but holding a spire of that height for so long was more taxing than Hydro had anticipated. He ran a hand through his jet-black hair and watched as Aiton was released from his mother's clutch. His brother of eight years had the same hair as Hydro, which was attributed to them by their father. Like his mother, though, Aiton had green eyes, whereas Hydro had hazel—a mixture of his parents.

From the longchair near his mother's location, Hydro glanced at her. She exchanged quick words with Marchioness Luuise Tityle of Katarh and flicked her brown hair, exposing the pearls pierced to her ear and her fingers fit with rings—all things made available to her through marriage. Then she returned her gaze to Aiton and took a sip of red wine.

Hydro watched the light session of sword play with dilapidated interest, remembering the times when he was forced to spar and train with power so that upon going to the privileged school, Finesse, he would be completely competent. Since graduating there, Hydro was required to sit in at his father's council sessions and study languages and customs with the family's receiver, Darien Dornell, and the family's advisor, Len Posair. Hydro found all of it rather dull.

At certain points during the light sparring session, Hydro glanced at his mother, who never seemed to take her eyes off of Aiton. *Mother has never watched me the whole time.* Before he looked away, he noticed his father walking toward them from the entrance to the castle's open interior. He held something in his hand, but from a distance Hydro couldn't tell what it was.

He returned his gaze to Aiton, who focused on moving his hips in sync with his strokes. The real lesson Korth was trying to teach, though, was to not be stationary. "Warriors still standing do not stand still" is what he preached in an accent that befit a true native of West Hart, an island in the Broken Sea. It was that accent and Korth's superb skill in melee fighting that charmed the crowd during the tourney celebrating Hydro's birth. With age, he grew in rank and now was commander of Lord Paen's acqua guards.

For fourteen years younger than Hydro, Aiton showed true promise with the blade—he already stabbed and sliced with combinations he had most likely gleaned from Hydro's sessions with Korth.

Heavy footsteps pulled Hydro's attention away from his brother. A hand squeezed his shoulder, and Hydro looked up to see his father staring down at him.

His father let a crimson envelope fall to Hydro's lap. "Open this."

He picked it up and turned it around, instantly recognizing the golden wax seal. *Guardian Eska!* He looked up and noticed that the sparring had stopped, and now Hydro's mother looked at him with curiosity. Behind her, the marchionesses stood, wanting to get a glimpse of what was occurring.

Prying apart the seal, Hydro took out the letter and read its contents aloud. Upon the word *accepted* he stood up and looked at his father and then at all the others. "I have been accepted to partake in Guardian Eska's Trials."

Hydro heard clapping and for a faint moment saw a smile form on his mother's lips, but quickly it faded into conversations with her guests: Lyane Powl, Marchioness of the northeastern province, Rhemu; Luuise Tityle, Marchioness of the northern province, Katarh; and finally, Enya Periwinkle, Marchioness of East Hart isle. Here, where the sea breeze kept the warm air in check, each female noble wore a loose-flowing gown of a different color of silk patched with her province's sigil—the seahorse of Rhemu trotting over a sea, the frozen flower of Katarh, and the coral reef of East Hart isle.

"Hydro, follow me. We have much to discuss."

Without hesitation, Hydro obeyed. As he was led away from the stone court, he noticed his mother's glare. *Do you despise that you will have to answer to me when I win the Trials?* After blaming him for his sister's death six years prior, his mother had never taken note of any of his accomplishments. He didn't exist to her, unless he failed.

Inside the mansion, which stood inside the castle walls guarding their home, a butler stood ready with refreshments on a tray. Hydro took one and continued following his father through the first floor hallways. Pictures of his family's lineage embellished the light-colored walls. Guest rooms were located here for the families of power who decided to visit the keep or engage in business with his father.

The second floor is where Hydro's room was, adjacent to his younger brother's room. His sister's room was also located on the second floor, but it had never been opened since her death. All three rooms were stationed on one side of the floor. The study and the communication and information processing chamber were on the other side.

The third floor was patrolled by suited guards armed with poleaxes. Seachrome half-helms exposed only jaws and noses, and a visor was placed over their eyes. There would be one acqua guard between the pair, and typically the second would be someone of import, in service to the Paens for a minimum of five years. From each veranda to the right and left of the royal chambers one had the perfect spot to see the Amughd Forest and, rising from the very heart of it, Mount Tyld—a starseer's dream to watch the night sky. Also from the veranda, one could get a marvelous look at the labyrinth of hedges located beyond the stone court. In the center of the labyrinth was a water fountain shaped like a dolphin, in recognition of the bonded animal of Acquava's first Paen ruler, Lyonell Paen.

Once inside, Hydro took note of the renowned chamber. It hosted a king-size bed with delft-blue sheets tucked beneath golden-silk pillows resting against a polished and petrified black walnut board. A walk-in closet—extended ten paces to the left—stood next to the bathroom, which included faucet handles made of gold against ivory.

Brushing a wrinkle out of the sheets, Hydro asked, "Why did you want to talk with me?"

"Not anyone can just go to the Core. There must be some sort of transportation. From where does the letter say you need to be picked up?"

Hydro reread the letter. "It does not say." He looked inside the envelope and noticed a little card he had not seen before. "Wait." There was a black button on the center of it; underneath it was a timer counting downward. The ink that created the numbers changed continuously—but by power or technology, Hydro couldn't tell.

"That is a telecard. Play it."

Hydro pushed the button, and a green light cascaded from the card, stopping directly in front of his face. A hologram played before him.

*"Hydro Paen II, the Second, my name is Tundra Iycl, one of Guardian Eska's four conseleigh. Listen closely, for this letter will only play once. A ship will pick you up from Encenro Falls once the timer on this card reaches zero. If you are not there within the allotted time, you will not be allowed to attend the Trials. Good luck, Guardian Eska looks forward to meeting all of the contestants in person. Good luck."*

Hydro glanced at the timer. Slightly more than forty hours remained. "Do you know where Encenro Falls is?"

"It is on Dotted Isle, near Roil, across from Crake." Hydro's father leaned forward with his hands on top of a dresser as he looked into the large mirror directly across from their bed. He straightened his posture and walked over to Hydro. "Although there is easily enough time to get you there, an event like this needs to be treated in proper fashion. I will begin making proper arrangements."

Hydro felt the squeeze of his father's hand on his left shoulder. "What will you do?"

"Do not worry about that. Go prepare for departure. We leave by midday tomorrow."

Hydro left the room and descended the staircase. *What does Father have planned for me?* Possibilities spun in his mind as he packed. It wasn't long after he started that he heard a pattering of feet on the marble flooring. "Aiton," he called. The patters stopped. His door creaked open.

"How did you know it was me?"

"Power," Hydro teased. In truth, it was their blood that connected them. *Blood Brothers*, as some called it. But Aiton would learn about that soon enough. "How were the rest of lessons today?"

"Short. When you left, everyone wanted to know what you and Father were doing."

"Planning, Aiton."

"You are going to become the next Guardian of the Core?"

"When I win the Trials, I will be apprentice. And then guardian."

"What does apprentice do?"

Hydro folded another piece of clothing and put it in his bag. "I assume learn everything the guardian does ..."

"As guardian are you going to fight monsters like Guardian Eska does? Are you going to climb Mount Klaff like Guardian Eska?"

"If monsters need to be fought and if climbing Mount Klaff is a requirement, I will. But the guardian also protects something very valuable."

"What is it? From whom?" Aiton's eyes widened.

"No one knows what it is. Father does not even know."

"Will you tell me what it is when you become guardian?"

"Yes."

"I know you will win. You are so powerful with your magic ... I cannot even cast yet."

Hydro lifted his brother's head by taking his chin. "I promise, Aiton, that I will do everything in my power to help you cast."

"You promise?"

"Yes."

"Thank you, Hydro."

Hydro got the hug he had been waiting for.

"Aiton, here!" His mother's voice cut short Hydro's moment of relaxation. "If you hug your brother while he still wears those filthy clothes, you will ruin yours. We have company tonight."

Aiton bobbed his head. "Yes, Mother."

"Go along to your room now."

"Yes, Mother."

"What is it your father wanted to talk with you about?"

Hydro looked at his mom, who stood at the threshold of his door. "Ask him." Hydro stood.

"He is gone."

*Already? What does he have planned?* “He and I leave tomorrow midday. I am sure you are glad about that.” He walked over to her and looked down into her green eyes, the same eyes Aiton had acquired.

“I only hope you do not make a fool of this family and lose.”

*You would hate that even more than I would. Before Father, you were nothing. And now your blood is our family’s greatest secret.* “What makes you think I will lose?”

“You cannot even best Korth.”

“You missaw, then.”

“I saw the first part of your training perfectly.”

“Well, then you missed the second.”

“In war, you do not get a second chance. If you are bested the first time, you die. Please, tell me if it is different.”

Hydro roiled inside. *Father never should have married you. I could have been born by another. How dare you. Ever since—*

She spoke again, “Be down to supper at the proper time. And bring your letter. I, along with the other families here, want to read it.” She turned and left, her heels clacking all the way.

*Why does she continue to hate me?* Hydro hung his head and stopped the slight wetness in his eyes. If either of them could just forget the mutual wrongdoings they had incurred—not conversing unless necessary, forgetting the past pain of Anya’s death—maybe then they could stomach each other. That would never happen though. Their Paen pride wouldn’t allow it.

## CHAPTER 2

### EIREK

“Ena, you need to resurface that dirt. It needs to be level and not clumpy.” Mara Surg hadn’t looked at the saddle in her hands for ten minutes. “Osker, retrim the hedges. Daphne, bring water here for the flowers.”

Eirek tapped his fingers on the side of his hip. *How much longer is she going to order them around before she finally approves of the last saddle?* He looked around to the open expanse of yard with multiple flower gardens and pine trees, tall and strong.

“Kywin, bring the tarp to the back; there will need to be shade once the guests arrive.”

“Lady Surg, the saddle, if you will,” Eirek said, hoping to draw her attention away from her servants so he could leave her battalion.

Mara Surg twisted her lips and clicked her tongue. After glaring at Eirek for a moment, she twisted her hands and examined every inch of the saddle. They ran over the leather three times. “It will have to do.”

*Thank you.*

“Payment?”

“Both saddles come to a silver spell and six copper cures.”

“Wait here. Do not come inside; I do not want the dirt on your shoes to affect our floors. They are being done.” Mara Surg turned around, opened the door, and walked into a lobby with a checkerboard floor of white and black. “Ella, you missed a spot before the stairs. And do not forget to polish the stairs either.” She walked up the staircase, constantly looking at the unlit chandelier. “And the chandelier needs to be lit—still. I suppose I will have to do that.”

*How does Angal treat with these people?*

Ever since abandoning Eirek twelve years previous, Angal had spent his time traveling to various families of power and telling tales. He was good with words, but never good with family. But Eirek wasn’t his own, so what did it matter? He was only the uncle.

When Mara Surg came back down the staircase, she held a candle in her hand. Eirek saw her lips move with her hand as she flung multiple separate fires to the candles on the chandelier. *Power!* Eirek stole a quick glance at his hands. It was not quick enough.

“Do not worry about being able to cast. You probably cannot. Here is payment. Also, here is a golden bond. It is the birthday of my twin daughters, so I am feeling generous.” Mara Surg extended a golden coin.

*How does she know I can’t cast?* Eirek avoided looking at her, not wanting to chance ruining the opportunity to get additional money. He held out his hand and let her drop the coppers and silvers and gold coin into it. “Thank you, Lady Surg.”

“Yes, well, safe travels.” She reentered the lobby and closed the door behind her.

Eirek turned around and walked back to his caravan located on the gravel path that led to the estate. He climbed up and sat down on the bench, setting the golden bond next to him—it was the only pleasant thing about the appointment.

As he drove the caravan away, he saw all the workers under the watch of the open suns: Freyr, the great red sun, and Lugh, the small blue wanderer. *How can they stand this?* At the end of the path, he steered the horses left, to a road that would eventually lead through the Amon Forest and back to Creim. *Is she always this demanding or is it because it’s her daughters’ birthdays?* Still, Eirek was impressed with how she was able to cast power.

A slight bump due to a strewn tree branch signaled that they had reached the skirts of the forest. Eirek let go of the rein with one hand and held his other to eye level. “*Palo.*”

Nothing.

Looking toward the suns, Eirek held his hand up high. “*Palo.*”

Still nothing.

He then looked toward the ground and lowered his arm in that direction. “*Maa.*”

And still nothing.

Eirek slouched a little more, picked up the golden bond, and returned to gripping the reins with both hands. *Why can't I cast?*

To avoid answering the question he posed himself, he looked at the surroundings. Trees, tall and thin, stood stationery to the path of fallen brush and dirt that helped guide Eirek. Squirrels scattered to and fro, and birds chirped.

Eirek listened, but eventually the sounds of nature fell and were replaced by raucous noises of drunken activity in Creim's Square, located five miles from the skirts of the forest. Instead of trees, hip-high crude metal fencing soon became his companion as he traveled another three miles to the place he called home. He hadn't started hearing it until a mile and a half out of the forest, but here at the burgundy house he called home, it was quite the distraction, and a broken screen door wouldn't alleviate the problem any time soon.

This was the Mourses' house, and he had been left here by his uncle, Angal, twelve years ago when Eirek was only seven. Although the Mourses weren't blood family, they were complete, and that's what mattered. Unlike Angal, they saw him more than once every year; unlike Angal, they had a steady profession of blacksmithing instead of a wandering minstrel; and unlike Angal, they cared about him.

Eirek walked up the steps and didn't bother opening the front door, just pulled back the screen, hoping to keep quiet. To his dismay, the wooden door creaked, betraying his presence.

“Jerald ... Jahn, is that you?”

“No.”

“Eirek?”

“Yes.”

“Help set the table.”

In the kitchen, Eirek found Sheryin preparing a meal. Upon his entering, she turned around and smiled at him through portly lips and eyes the color of the salad greens that had already found their way onto the table. They were the kind of eyes that obliged him to do anything he was asked.

As he set the plates, Sheryin laid a bowl of ham and another of skinned potatoes in the center of a table too large for the kitchen. Or perhaps it was Sheryin who was larger than expected compared to the lean and muscled men she lived with. Eirek was lean, but not as muscled as the blacksmiths who pounded iron and steel daily.

Jahn and Jerald came in fifteen minutes after the last of the plates was set. Their clothes, covered in sweat and charcoal, signified a hard day. Both had lean faces with eyes the like of the steel they forged. Jahn was near Eirek's height. Jerald was shorter, with a stockier frame and a belly hard and round from good eating. His hands were thicker than his son's and made the silverware look small. Neither bothered changing clothes but simply washed his hands in a bucket of water on the kitchen counter and sat. Jahn took a spot next to Eirek.

“Eirek, would you like to lead us in prayer?” Sheryin asked.

“Goddess Trema, thank you for your seeds of fertility to which we owe ourselves and our livestock. We offer thanks to you and the Twelve for continuing to watch over us long after the Ancients of Gladima vanished. The Twelve, to this we pray ...”

“Well said, Eirek.” Jerald’s deep voice resonated.

Eirek had learned the prayer in his thirteen years of living there, and to his knowledge, it was the one uttered by most people who believed in the Twelve. Old-Way Believers, like Angal, clung to the beliefs of Gladonity, only worshiping Ancients Lyoen and Bane. Eirek was caught in between the two: a Dual Believer, as he saw it. He believed that the Ancients created everything in the universe of Gladonus, but lost their power during the Great War, so the Twelve picked up their reins to govern all planets except the Central Core. Those who believed in only the Twelve thought that each god held a separate responsibility but only five were responsible for the creation of Gladonus—Trema created the planets; Pearl, the oceans and lakes; Anemie, the sky; Myethos, the suns; and Luenar, the moons.

Sheryin finished swallowing a forkful of potatoes. “Anything interesting happen today?”

“Drunks upon drunks came into the shop today—‘ad to run ‘em off with a ‘ot iron,” Jahn said between mouthfuls of food. “Stumbled in thinkin’ it was an inn or a pub most like.”

“Jahn, did you really have to use a hot iron?” Sheryin asked.

“Pops told me to.”

“Jerald!”

“I ‘ad orders to get in today! You know ‘ow busy this time of year is.”

Sheryin rolled her eyes and exhaled. “Anything else?”

Eirek looked outside and then back down toward his lap—the golden bond matched the waning light perfectly. *Should I show it?* Eirek let it play between his fingers for a bit before releasing it onto the checkerboard tablecloth.

“Is that a golden bond?” Sheryin asked.

“Where’d you get sometin’ like that?” Jahn said.

Jerald picked it up and bit on it. “It’s real. Eirek, ‘ow’d you get this?”

“Marchioness Surg gave it to me today for pay. She was pleased with the craftsmanship Lagon did on her saddles.” Eirek watched as the coin got passed back and forth between the family. “I want you to have it.”

Sheryin took the coin, admiring it between her index finger and thumb. “Eirek, what makes you think we would want something like this?”

“For raising me ever since Angal let me off ...”

“Now listen ‘ere, son,” Jerald chimed in. “Your uncle ain’t no fool; ‘e left you off for a good reason. You’re bein’ too ‘ard on ‘im. Sheryin, give the boy ‘is coin back.”

“I’m just admiring it ... They say all bonds come in two. Perhaps—”

“Who says ‘at?” Jahn butted in.

“It’s a saying! I don’t know who actually said it ... But, here, Eirek.” She slid the coin back over to him. “An envelope came for you today. Or, I found it today anyways. I didn’t bother looking who it was from.” She stood and moved around the edge of the table to a desk with envelopes. “Here it is.”

Eirek looked at the crimson envelope. In golden lettering on the front was *Eirek Mourse*. Living with Sheryin’s family made it as good a name as any to take. The Mourses didn’t seem to have any quarrels about it. On the back of the envelope was a golden seal about half the size of the bond he received. Embossed was a dragon, wings outstretched, breathing fire.

*It couldn’t be.*

In shock, Eirek dropped the letter. "I don't want to open it."

"Is something wrong?" Sheryin grabbed the envelope and put the wax seal close to her spectacles. "My Twelve—" She dropped it too. "That ... that ..."

Jahn snatched it before his father could grab it and examined the seal himself. "From Guardian Eska!" Without a moment's warning, Jahn was already prying apart the seal.

"No, Jahn. Don't."

"Someone 'as to." Jahn pulled out a letter and started reading. "Greetings ..." Jahn mouthed the words until he found something of note. "It is my greatest honor to congratulate you in your acceptance of the application sent two years past—" Jahn stopped.

"What did you just say?" Eirek asked.

"Eirek, you're in. I don't know what you're in, but you are. What is this?"

Eirek snatched the letter away from him and read it himself. He let it fall to the table as he slouched in his chair. *Surely this must be a mistake . . . What would his conseleigh have even observed?*

"Eirek, does this mean you'll be the next guardian?" Sheryin asked.

"It doesn't mean that. Look it 'ere." Jerald's fingers pointed out a sentence. "'e's a participant to attend."

"You're goin' to do it right, Eirek?" Jahn asked. "I 'ear the guardian gets to meet with the Twelve face-to-face."

"The guardian is more than treating with gods, Jahn. It's about protecting. My great-great-great-grandmother, Ahna, said that when Deimos came here to Agrost and started pulling the islands of Mistral out of the sky, Guardian Eska levitated them all so that they wouldn't crash. He saved a whole nation. Lucky, too, the man she later married lived on one of those islands."

"'e doesn't usually do that, Sheryin. I 'ear for the most part 'e just stays on the Core protectin' what's there."

"What's there, Pa?" Jahn asked.

"Beats me to death. I 'aven't ever been tere."

"But why did he choose me?"

Each of them avoided his gaze. The room was silent as everyone tried to find an answer to his question. Eirek tried too, but he couldn't.

"I don't know why. But 'e did. Isn't that sometin'?" Jahn said. "You could be guardian."

"This is a once in a lifetime event, Eirek. *You* were chosen ... the boy I've raised since seven ..." Sheryin was trying to hold back tears. "If ... if ... I've seen anything in you from these past twelve years, it's been your thirst for knowledge and joy."

"But I can't save people; I can't even cast power. I tried again today—"

"Eirek!" Sheryin took two of her fingers and lifted up Eirek's chin. "That doesn't mean you can't. You just may not know how. There is always time."

When a hand gripped his shoulder, he arched his neck to see Jerald looking down at him. "You need to do this, Eirek. If Angal were 'ere, 'e'd tell you no different."

"Well, he isn't. He never is ... I ... I ... need to leave." Eirek got up, keeping the golden bond clenched in his hand.

As he walked over the broken screen threshold, he thought about what would make him feel reality. Surely he wasn't living it now. There was only one place that would allow him to collect his thoughts. It was in the forest, by the mouth of the river that flowed from Spera Mountains. He had found it one day when he was eight. He was playing with Jahn and some other village kids until he got lost and found a spot next to a stream. He remembered staring at the

flowing water from that mouth for hours—wondering where it came from and where it went—until the Mourses found him.

The once-bright world was slowly turning shades of gray and blue. Ahead of him, Eirek saw Syf soldiers donned in leather padding and with greatwood shields strapped to their backs. The group was lighting torches that were spaced every few feet along paths called fireways.

Gazing at the fire, Eirek walked at their pace for a bit. He held out his hand. “*Palo.*”

Nothing.

If Guardian Eska wanted him to compete, surely it was for a good reason, but he had yet to find it. He hoped that such an invitation meant he was capable to use power, but so far that hope had gone unfulfilled.

The walk to the outskirts of the forest took no longer than an hour. The guards stopped lighting torches twenty paces before the forest for fear of starting a wildfire. When they boarded their hovercraft and drove off to start the other side of the forest, Eirek took the opportunity to steal one of the torches from the pricket. Even though he had traveled the forest a myriad of times, he didn’t know it in absolute dark. Songs of chirps and squeaks and twigs cracking underneath his weight played for him as he walked silent and reserved. Foxes and wolves lived in this area, but none would attack. Not so long as he had fire.

Within another hour, Eirek found himself with limited light sitting on a patch of grass that could easily observe Spera’s mouth during daylight. He spent minutes there in contemplation, gazing at the stars. When he was tired of looking at the gold and bronze he could never hope to touch, Eirek reexamined his coin. An embossed serpent swallowing its tail ran along the outside of it. The coin’s middle resembled a barren field with words in raised gold lettering: *Ajid Volintasey Fuan.*

“Ajeed ... Volan ... Volintas ... hey ... Fuy ... an.”

“May we find each other again is what it means.”

*Angal?* Eirek spun around. He hadn’t heard anyone approach.

His uncle stood there, a torch in one of his scarred hands. A spun shirt of gold and white with ornate patterns stitched down the sleeves covered him. Black breeches covered his lower half.

“What are you doing here?”

“I am here to make sure that you are not, come this time tomorrow.”

Eirek looked away from him and stared off into the river. “How did you find me?”

“I was passing by Creim on my way to Syf for their New Day parade. I figured I would stop here for a spell and see you. The Mourses said you were not there though ...”

“But, here, how did you find me?”

“The Mourses told me you would be in the forest. And the fire you have makes you quite noticeable.”

“What do you want?” Eirek continued to look at the flowing river.

“You have an opportunity in front of you, Eirek. One that people would kill for. Why can you not see that?”

*The Mourses would tell you about my acceptance.* Eirek stood up and walked toward Angal. “Because I was picked. *Me!* I have no special talents. I can’t cast power. I’ve never been trained with a weapon—”

“Eirek, strength does not solely come from that. It comes from understanding ... It comes from courage and vindication ... It is not something that can be taught ... It has to be realized ...”

Angal reached out for Eirek's shoulders, but Eirek pulled away. "You show up in my life again and expect me to forgive you? How long will it be this time until I see you next? A whole eight seasons have passed since I last saw you."

"Eirek, I've neglected you. Any fool or beggar could see that. Even the trees can see it. You have the potential to be more than some Creim villager. You have potential not even the stars in the sky could measure or all the bonds that spells and cures could buy. I'd be a fool to neglect you even more by not helping you realize it."

Eirek let those words sink in. Despite his best efforts at denying Angal anything, his uncle had a way with words, a way with motivation. That is what caused Eirek to fill out the application two years ago when last they met. Eirek had spent seven days in Syf with him completing it. How was it that Angal reentered his life now, when Eirek thought his past was behind him?

"Where were you for the past two years?" Eirek choked back tears.

"Traveling. I go wherever the wind takes me, Eirek; you know that. It's led me all over the universe during my life. I've seen every nation. I've lived on every planet. But I have never maintained a solid relationship ... with anyone ... I was separated from the love of my life in traveling." Angal showed the copper and silver band on his ring finger. "I missed the most important adventure of my life, and because of it, the woman I love I will never get to see again in this lifetime."

Eirek had never felt this close with his uncle before; he had always remained distant—literally and emotionally. Now Eirek wanted to learn more about this woman, but he knew Angal wouldn't tell. When Eirek was old enough to know what marriage was, he had asked Angal once who the copper and silver band on his finger was for. But Angal never told. And never would. Looking at the stars, Eirek searched for a reason to hate him. They were few and dim.

"I don't even know where I'm supposed to go ..." Eirek sighed and looked down, listening to the flowing of the stream and the blowing of the wind.

"It does not matter where you need to go; I will get you there. But before that, there is an important item you need in Syf."

"What is that?"

"You will find it tomorrow. We leave from The Spell at nine in the morning. Do you understand me?"

Eirek nodded, acknowledging that he heard, not that he would go.

"We will need to walk through the forest, but from there I can transfer you back in my caracraft. Are you ready to leave?"

The wind blew again. It was cold here, even with the fire. Eirek wouldn't want to stay much longer anyways. He nodded and picked up the torch from its holder and followed Angal through the forest. As he walked, his mind wandered like the profession of his uncle.

## CHAPTER 3

### ZAIN

“Two years ago I sent in this application, and I finally got something back. Guardian Eska must have seen my skills at the tournaments.”

Zain Berrese sat on the leather couch of the apartment listening (half with a piqued interest and half with mild annoyance) to his friend Zakk Shiren. Their apartment had a huge main room with a kitchen located on the left side and carpeted rugs and even a fireplace. More importantly though, there was wall space. When they first moved in with each other five years prior, the walls had been white and bare. Now the walls were still white, but the space was anything but bare, and Zain couldn't help but notice all of Zakk's trophies as his best friend continued on.

“Guardian of the Core can do anything. Eska has his own power. Through Gazo's, I already know we're denied, but there I could gain a different power.”

*Could do anything? Could have Power?* Zain flexed his fingers, thinking of the possibilities. How Zain dreamed of having power, but he knew he couldn't cast. At the age of eighteen, he and Zakk were tested for power, as was every other Gazo's student. Neither had been found to be blessed, but both remained eligible to continue their standard training.

“I would constantly train. I would be able to protect people ... people who need protecting. So that no one would need to go through what I went through,” Zakk said.

“We have all lost someone ...” Zain looked down at his right hand and flexed it.

“You didn't lose your family at the age of six though.”

*Doesn't mean that my loss was any less important.* But Zain didn't say that; he figured that growing up without parents meant Zakk was never taught to be as respectful to people as he should. Or as modest. Zain looked to his collection that surmounted to nearly three-quarters of Zakk's accomplishments, accomplishments that would never have been possible without Zain and his family. He kept his gaze there, reminiscing about how their training at Gazo's started.

When he met Zakk eighteen years ago, it was at a park in Konmer, Zain's hometown. From what Zain could remember, Zakk had seemed normal. But for six years, they only continued to stay in touch by picking a place to meet or Zakk saying he had been dropped off by his parents, who always seemed really busy. Little did Zain know at that point that it was all a lie.

In fact, Zain never found out until he mentioned his enrollment in Gazo's Premier Fighting Academy on his thirteenth birthday. Zakk had come over, along with Jarson and Lyle (both of whom joined a few years later, but Jarson was the only one to still continue in the program). Zain received one sword made of steel and had a leather grip. It was the ruby pommel that was most important to Zain though, because it was a symbol of his father's craftsmanship.

Zain's father had brought wooden swords for all the boys to play with, and during their friendly melee, Zakk pushed Zain down a hill and pounced on top of him, hitting him three times with the wooden sword. “Why do you have everything?” One stroke. “Why can't I have what you have?” Second hit. Harder this time. There was a shift from horseplay to outright hostility. “Why do you have family?” Zakk hit him the third time, then he collapsed and started crying.

Zain wasn't hurt; he had learned roughhousing with his older brother, Jamaal, but he was confused. “What are you talking about?”

And that is when the truth spilled—how Zakk's parents had been murdered in the Konmer Killings, where a group of five men killed over twenty people with swords and axes and fists, how Zakk had been living at his home until people came and kicked him off the vacant property, taking him into child custody. His foster parents cared nothing for him; they simply took him for a tax

advantage. They hardly gave him food, but they gave him a roof and water in exchange for an occasional hit or chore. Zakk confessed to even stealing food from Zain's family when he could so that he wouldn't starve.

All of it made Zain cry. "Why didn't you ask to stay here?"

"I didn't want your family to know what happened. I didn't want their pity."

"Well, what do you want, then?"

"I want to train at this school with you. Gazo's, is it? I want to be able to protect people before it's too late ..."

"I ... I—"

"Zain! Zakk! Where are you?" Jarson called.

"We have to go. I'll talk to my parents about it."

"Don't tell them about my family."

"But, why? You told me."

"You're the only one I've ever told. Don't tell them. Lie if you have to. Please."

"Okay ..."

Zain didn't keep it a secret though. He couldn't. He knew Zakk didn't want to continue living like that. They agreed to enroll Zakk into the program under their sponsorship only if he allowed himself to stay with them. Zakk agreed and, in time, came to forgive Zain for telling, but ever since then, they had been advancing together through the program. Originally Zain wanted to do it just as a way to stay in shape and to learn to defend himself, but after Zakk's confession, he championed his friend's vision to protect people, no matter the cost.

The five large trophies, as tall as Zain's forearm, stood as testament to his triumph over Zakk during the years. Fifteen other trophies of similar height stood on Zakk's side of the wall. Zain would have never known Zakk was a natural fighter from the way he hit with the wooden sword, but there was a passion that ignited when Zain told him that his parents were enrolling him. He wondered if it was because he had betrayed Zakk's secret. Now Zakk was going to compete at the Trials hosted by Guardian Edwyrd Eska, if the letter was correct. *Great . . . . .*

"Zain, what's wrong?"

"It's nothing."

"There must be something. Are you not happy for me?"

"I am ... It's just that ... Kendel couldn't complete his training session today. I can't advance yet."

"We don't always need to advance together."

*Yes, we do,* is what Zain would have liked to say, but instead he said, "I guess not."

"It doesn't matter anyways though."

"What do you mean by that?" Zain looked at his friend, who stood the same height, with the same dark-skinned complexion, and the same dirt-brown eyes. Where Zain had cropped hair like his brother though, Zakk had long braids that extended past the shoulders. Zakk also had a tattoo of Viper, the sword he used to win his first tournament—a sword he'd had made using the money from Zain's family.

"Guardian Eska is arranging my transport to be at Lake Kilmer tomorrow."

"It didn't say that in the letter."

"A separate telecard told me that."

An awkward silence crept into the apartment. Zakk stepped from the kitchen to the main living space and picked up the letter that Zain had left on the small glass coffee table in front of him. Zain looked at Zakk and sighed. "Are you coming to eat with me and my mom tonight?"

“I can’t. I have packing to do. You’ll be okay here, by yourself?”

“I’ll figure something out. Take care.” Zain threw on a wind jacket specially stitched with Gazo’s logo and headed to the door. At the threshold, he paused and turned back. “Hey, Zakk?”

“Yeah?”

“Congrats.” Zain waited for a little bit, but he heard nothing. *Is it that hard to say thanks?*

Zakk had never been the one to give praise, or if he did, it came off as condescending; at least, that is how Zain interpreted it. He accredited it to Zakk’s loss of family, but how many times would that become an excuse?

Their apartment was located only a few blocks from the academy and was where most of the people who attended stayed if they came from other nations or planets. It was located in Stel, in remembrance of Gazo Sabore’s (the academy’s founder) hometown. He founded the academy in the times before the Great War. Zain’s hometown of Konmer was located an hour’s drive east near the Anga Mountains, a small range that overlooked the Krine Sea.

In the parking structure, Zain found his hovercraft’s stall and got inside. The hovercraft was a sleek red with a black stripe down the side and sat on its rectangular belly with rounded edges. Each hovercraft required a stall because of how it was fueled. Anitron rock made it possible to defy gravity; it was smoky gray in color and harvested only in the last half-century from the floating lands of Mistral. But it was only in the last thirty years that hovercrafts were actually engineered. Once activated, the anitron emitted a shockwave around the perimeter of the hovercraft to jolt it and keep it afloat. If an individual was near a hovercraft while it was activated, one would be catapulted into the air and likely die on the fall down. The larger the vehicle, the larger the rock—and the larger the stall as well. Guardian Eska mandated that every planet have large cargo-transport ships; those, Zain heard, contained rocks as large as hovercrafts themselves. His father bought him a hovercraft when Zain decided to move out of the house, and since then, he had only needed to replace the anitron once, two years back.

Outside of the small city of Stel, the drive was traffic-free. Ahead of him Zain noticed Freyr start to descend behind the bands that circled the planet. Lugh was already in front of its larger counterpart, nearing the horizon. It would still be hours before both disappeared completely, losing authority to the two moons: Tovia and Hoffnung. Myoli was the only planet that had suns set in the east and rise in the west. It gave him something to focus on when he drove to his mom’s house after Gazo’s finished. It let him see the nation of Empora all the way across the Krine Sea from his special spot halfway up the mountain. Zain’s gaze drifted to the Anga Mountains and then lower to his hands once again as he thought, *I need to go there*. There would be plenty of time for that though; first he needed to eat with his mom, Brisine.

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The door opened.

It wasn’t his mom who answered; it was his brother.

“Jamaal? What are you doing here?”

“It’s nice to see you too, Zain.” Jamaal chuckled. He readjusted the black-rimmed glasses and stepped aside so Zain could enter.

“I ... I ... was just ...” Zain’s face flushed red. “How did you get here? Why are you here?”

“There’s a lull in senate activity, so I decided to visit for a few days. And you should know that Dad gave me my own ship as a wedding gift. Didn’t you see it in the backyard? Now, what’s with all the questions? Come here and give me a hug.”

Zain hadn't noticed his ship. He was too preoccupied. The hug felt good and strong, just as Zain remembered it from more than half a year ago. Even though time had passed, Jamaal still managed to keep thin and trim his beard.

"I didn't know you were coming," Zain said once their hug ended.

"That's the idea of a surprise visit, dummy."

Zain smiled awkwardly.

"You okay, Zain? You seem ... preoccupied."

*Am I really that obvious?* "I'm fine."

"Supper is ready!" Zain's mom called from the kitchen.

Zain followed his older brother of five years to the kitchen and sat down on the opposite side of the cherry table from his brother and his mom. His mom had dark-brown hair streaked with blonde that flowed past her neck. She wore a long-sleeved shirt that was the color of snow. Zain wanted to eat quickly and leave; he wanted to visit the Anga Mountains, to clear his head.

As soon as he reached for the food though, his mom swatted away his hand. "We have to pray first," she said.

"Oh yeah." Zain forgot. He didn't bother closing his eyes like the others. While everyone else moved their lips, Zain stared at his hands. His side began to ache—like it always did whenever he stared. It was the only reminder he had of her, and it was a constant one at that. *Why did she have to die?*

"Ava," Zain said. He usually didn't let her name escape. Did anyone else hear?

He looked up to see his family eating. His mom gave him a suspicious look, but she dug deep into her plate of field greens. Did she hear?

"So, Zain, where are you at in Gazo's now?" Jamaal asked.

"Still just a trainer," Zain said dismally. "Kendel didn't pass today."

"Who's Kendel?"

"The trainee assigned to me about a year ago. Kendel Gensen. Scrawny kid with no muscle. I'm not sure how I'm ever going to get him through an hour session."

"You'll get there," his mom said.

"Is that why you're so out of it today?"

*No, Jamaal, if only you knew.* "Yeah," Zain lied.

"Jamaal, how are things going on Mistral?" His mom changed topics.

"Good. Talks of how to neutralize the wormhole traffic have stalled. And with the rate of increase in interuniversal commerce, I don't think a solution will be constructed anytime soon. New taxes on interuniversal shipping rates are being sent back to the lords and ladies of the planets for acceptance or veto. Even if it does get accepted though, Guardian Eska will still need to approve it, and I'm sure he will have no time for that due to the fact that his Trials are about to take place soon."

"How did you hear about that?" Zain asked.

"News has spread like the wind on Mistral that Senator Nyom Numos will be attending the event as an honored guest."

"Why him?"

"Well, every senator from every nation had the opportunity—from what I hear. All you needed to do was fill out a simple card of information. If you were lucky enough to get picked, well ..."

"Did you fill one out?" His mom asked.

“You should know that a family keeps one busy enough.” Jamaal chuckled. “I don’t have time for a month’s reprieve, even if it is the opportunity of a lifetime.”

“Now you know what I dealt with for eighteen years. I might as well have had three boys to take care of with Zakk over here all the time.”

“Where is he anyways, Zain? Mom told me he was supposed to come.”

“Something came up . . .” Zain looked down at his chicken. It was almost done. Quickly he put the rest of it in his mouth. “I need to go. I have a long day tomorrow too.”

“Don’t be a stranger. I’ll be here tomorrow if you want to catch up more after Gazo’s.”

Zain nodded and left. *Perhaps I will. If I even go to Gazo’s tomorrow. . .*

An hour and a half later, after an easy hike, Zain sat on a ledge that jutted out on the eastern side of the Anga Mountains. The cliff looked out toward the murky-gray Krine Sea. Seven years ago, from this position, he had been with Ava, Zain’s only serious relationship, and they saw Rhayna, the golden bird of legend, flying across it. In this spot of phantom remembrance, he felt Ava burying her head on his shoulder, crying the struggles of her grandmother’s death onto him. *Why couldn’t I hold onto you?*

Zain flexed his hand and watched Freyr touch the horizon. It would disappear soon. He reached into the pocket of his windjacket and pulled out an envelope. It was crimson with a golden-wax seal. He twirled the envelope between his index finger and his thumb. *Zakk would get accepted.*

Zain broke the golden seal and took out the telecard. Underneath the indent, numbers counted down continuously from twenty-four hours. He pushed the center button, and a hologram of a small figure appeared just in front of his face.

*“Zain Berrese, my name is Ethen Rorum, one of Guardian Eska’s four respected aides. I am conseleigh to Myoli and liason for te nations of Ka’Che, Empora, and Chaon. Listen closely, for tis letter will only play once. A ship will pick you up from Lake Kilmer, at te edge of Trent’s Forest once te timer on tis card reaches zero. If you are not tere witin te allotted time, you will miss tis great opportunity. Good luck. Guardian Eska looks forward to meeting all of te contestants in person.”*

Zain didn’t know how long he continued looking out past the Krine Sea to the nation of Empora. His father was there on business with Victor Zigarda. He had been there for two months, already longer than usual. His father and his mother had been there for him when Ava fell to her death while out on a date with Zain on this very same mountain range. But not here. Zain only went back to that spot once a year. Even Zakk had been there for him through his loss, and who better to comfort him than someone who had lost his own family?

*As Guardian, I could do anything.* Zakk’s words stuck in his head. The possibilities were supposedly endless. But only one person could become guardian . . . Only one person could do anything. Zain flexed his right hand once again, feeling phantom fingers slip through. His side ached, then a tear came to his eye and slowly slid down his cheek.

## CHAPTER 4

### FORGOTTEN CAUSE

Eirek awoke as trumpets blared a song of festivity into the heated air. Freyr still shone greatly in the sky, making its way west toward the horizon. He had fallen asleep in order to deal with Angal's stubbornness. The telecard he had found in his envelope told them to go to Domnux Plains, not Syf, but Angal insisted that he needed to go to Cresica's capital to find something he forgot. What that was, Eirek still wasn't sure.

"You're awake. We just entered Syf."

"I heard," Eirek said. He looked around. Syf was separated in four sections, each connected to one another hill upon hill. They passed the first, a squalid section of town. Brothels and ruthless taverns lay there. The main square was located in the second section with the majority of the population. Three maidens carved of copper, silver, and gold stood center in the three separate fountains of water—a symbol to Cresica's matriarchy. People stood in storefronts along the cobblestone road that lined the city streets. Roofs were packed with straw or wood, both as copious on Cresica as the farms and food.

To Eirek's left, the procession had started. It would open with a storyteller accompanied by harps, lyres, and other strings. Drums would soon follow as the story grew more intense. He had only seen the parade once, when his uncle was chosen to lead it five years prior.

Eirek watched as Angal mouthed every word of the story by heart:

*"The men bred from fire emerged one day.  
With a sense of entitlement, claims were made  
For throne and blood. They laid only assault  
On our lands, 'cause their land proved false.*

*The horses came with rein in their mouths and fire in their manes.  
The riders from the land of Kane,  
The riders from the land of Kane  
Came on horses with rein in their mouths and fire in their manes."*

The song would go on to tell of the hero who rose up against the riders from Kane with help from the god of war, Tomahawke, and the god of fire, Fueoco. But they left the road, maneuvering past hoards of people through the main square. Eirek could see the storyteller and strummers garbed in brown with white sashes underneath their cloaks. They passed the alleys intersecting with small houses to the third tier. Private gateways of steel protected the houses made of block and brick and stone. Above the rich part of Syf was another hill and, there, Lady Clayse's mansion.

Following cobblestone to the left, they passed a variety of large estates. Angal's house was stationed half a mile in, between two white mansions. After punching in a few numbers on a keypad on the gate, Angal guided his caracraft past the electronic gate and down a paved driveway until stopping at a turnabout.

"What did I leave here?" Eirek asked, exiting from the passenger side.

"I left something here. You left something there." Angal pointed to the castle on the fourth tier.

Eirek couldn't help but notice the gray clouds rolling in. "How do you suppose I left something there?" He had only ever been to the mansion once, when he was fourteen. He and Angal were invited after his uncle finished leading the parade. Even Jahn had come along for such an event.

Before Eirek could receive an answer, Angal disappeared into his estate. Eirek gently kicked the ground, annoyed. He never received answers from Angal.

Two granite statues of hawks, wings expanded, eyed him as he made his way up the steps to the roan-colored wooden doors, large enough for an army of soldiers to enter. Once inside, rows upon rows of books filled the shelves against the walls. These texts were Angal's pride—to remain untouched by even a butler or maid. Eirek figured this because most were riddled with dust and cobwebs.

He wandered aimlessly, his hands stroking the hard wood of tables littered with maps and books. Many of their pages described the nation of Nova on the planet Pyre. Eirek hunched over and started flipping through one of the books until a map of Nova caught his eye. The nation was certainly small, about half the size of Cresica. Eirek's gaze lingered on the map until Angal called his name as he reentered the room with a large knapsack hanging over his back.

Angal descended a short set of stairs that led to a different hallway. "Are you ready?"

"Yeah," Eirek exhaled.

Outside, rain drizzled. Freyr struggled for attention. Eirek sprinted to the caracraft and entered. Like the drums in the parade, rain beat on the caracraft's steel siding and window.

"How are we going to get into the castle?"

"I have a performance. With this rain, I'm sure Lady Clayse will be even more pleased."

"But we need to get to Domnux Plains. We don't have time for a performance."

Silence.

Eirek exhaled and slouched in his seat. Angal activated the caracraft and started out toward the fourth section of Syf, enclosed by a stone wall and a barred gate. Its grandeur was guarded by men in hard-boiled leather and helmets and shields made of greatwood. Their lances were taller than them. Angal was granted passage by a man of soft jaw who filled his leather armor as full as food filled bellies.

Driving another half mile up the hill, they arrived at an enclosed dome made of metal. A portion of the egg-shaped dome folded open, spraying an orange glow on the damp ground outside. Angal was directed by guards into the enclosure, parking alongside similar hover-type vehicles near the front of the area past ships and warwagons.

A man waited for them, his neck thick with a metal brooch that fastened the silk cape trailing behind him. A metal pin, shaped to the likeness of a clock, on his doublet fashioned in celadon and brown threads, symbolized his position—receiver. Only his prominent mustache seemed unkempt, curved upwards with even thicker sideburns.

"Embry Knossol, dreadful day for a parade and a story, don't you think?"

"Angal the Bard, hopefully it is not too dreadful; I would hate to hear an awful story."

"I have never told one of those yet."

Embry let out a light laugh and then said, "Does the title still please you, or do you finally have a last name for me to say?"

"The stars are the only ones that know my last name. And I haven't managed to track mine down yet."

"That is an old folklore from before the Great War."

"Aye, and I am old." Angal laughed.

The man joined in Angal's chortle, squinting and covering the shades of brown. "It is nice of you to come again."

"It is good to see you as well." Angal stepped forward and hugged the man, patting him on his back.

"Do you remember Eirek?" Angal gestured toward his nephew.

"Vaguely ... it has been years since I have seen you." Embry extended his hand.

Eirek accepted it. "Yes, it has been awhile." What else could he say?

The receiver led them through the palace's courtyards. The recent rain necessitated the ejection of a dome, forming a gray ceiling over the outdoor gathering place. Servants in suits of celadon and maids in dresses of brown bustled in and out of the stone walls. When the dome wasn't in place, only libraries, repositories, and individual living quarters were domed; otherwise all other places were open to sky and sun alike. Rows of green lined the cobblestone paths, dividing the traffic of those entering and leaving the palace grounds. Trees stood in grassy plots reserved for their growth. Birds, now trapped beneath the metal sky, squawked from the trees.

Eirek and Angal followed Embry through corridors upon corridors of grandiose columns tapered toward the top. Most rooms were orthogonal, consisting of many right angles. The throne room, however, was oval shaped, domed, and covered with a large portrait of a man in earthy armor staring down horses with manes of fire and riders with fiery hair.

Atop a dais sat three greatwood thrones with golden leaves that extended down their frames. The royal family sat on them atop plush celadon-green cushions. Below the dais were two guards at either side donning golden armor. A celadon flag hung from one wall, depicting a lonely white mansion that sat atop a steep mountain. When the Clayses assumed power, they utilized this new design. The previous flag showed only a forest of greatwood trees; this one symbolized their palace, a new beginning for Cresica.

Eirek noticed the receiver halt before the throne and bow. "Lady Clays, it is my pleasure to introduce to you Angal the Bard and his accompanist, Eirek."

"Angal, I am pleased you contacted me earlier today, considering how dreadful of a day it turned out to be. I need a riveting tale; do you have one?"

*When did he call? It must have been while I slept.*

"I have many tales the family in power has not heard yet." Angal bowed.

Eirek followed suit. He couldn't help but notice the woman to the lord's left, the lady's daughter, Linn Clays. Since last he had seen her, she had filled into her mother's beauty. A scarf—spun from brown thread—covered part of her silk dress that was colored in celadon. Her ears held tourmalines, and her eyes were blue as sapphires.

"So, what tale will we hear today?"

"A tale of origin."

"Deriving from the Twelve? I have heard it already."

"No, from the Ancients, if it pleases you."

The lady turned her upper lip and looked at her husband and then to her daughter. "I suppose it will have to do. Commence."

"Eirek, here you go." Angal pulled a flute from his bag and handed it over.

Eirek took it with reluctance. He hadn't played flute since leaving school six seasons ago. He used to teach flute to other interested kids, but whenever he did play it, it reminded him of his connection with Angal, a connection he had grown to hate after Angal exploited his trust during the week Eirek spent in Syf filling out the application. That whole week, Angal had made Eirek feel important. If only he was.

The lights seemed to dim, most likely at Lady Clayse's doing. A soft spotlight shined on Angal, Eirek barely in its breadth. Aligning his posture upon a wooden stool, he tried to find a comfortable position from which to play. He didn't really know what melody to play, but he tried keeping cadence with Angal's voice.

*"This is a tale, telling of three Powers:  
The mysterious Other, Lyoen, and Bane,  
Blood ran pure, their ambitions ran sour,  
Fueling the war that lost their homeland and reign.*

*Lyoen, the creator of all humans born,  
Known as The Alchemist, followers Adored.  
Lyoen gives strength when our bodies lose form.*

*Bane, source of authority, Power's true test,  
Known as the Warrior, followers Blessed.  
His brother gave us life, so he gave us death.*

*The Other, his real name has never been known,  
Never been seen, so never has he been shown,  
But murmurs tell that he still freely roams.*

*Their jealousy brought war; their war was called Great.  
The survivors took Power, claiming First Blood.  
The Twelve that you know, but yet you don't know eight  
Waiting to go home once the prophecy's sung."*

The lights returned to normal. Angal bowed and so did Eirek. As he looked to the carpet, he couldn't help but wonder about this *Other* Ancient. Who was he? Why hadn't Angal ever mentioned it to him whenever they talked about religion? Did the Mourses know anything about it?

"You may stand straight," Lady Lynda Clayse said.

"Thank you, my lady." Angal returned to his normal posture, and Eirek did as well, handing the flute over to his uncle.

"You said there were three Ancients. Explain yourself."

"My lady, it is a story. I do not have any such idea." Angal fidgeted with his fingers.

"Well, then, how can you tell it?"

"I assume there is. How else could both Ancient Lyoen and Ancient Bane take leave of this universe at the same time?"

"Angal," Linn spoke. "What is this prophecy that the Twelve wait on?"

Angal cleared his throat and said:

*"Chosen will be blood from all five domains.  
Hope they will bring through chaos, anger, and pain.  
Twelve will lose favor, four will regain form.  
Bringing with them more death than the Great War."*

“And who came up with such a prophecy?” Linn asked.

“The Four Smiths, if legends are true.”

“And are they the Four that will regain form?”

“My lady’s daughter, if you truly wish to learn about lore and prophecy and the olden days, I suggest you study under one of your starseers or lorels.”

Eirek looked toward the dais. Lady Clayse seemed taken aback by Angal’s shortness with her daughter.

“Angal, that kind of shortness is not appreciated, but I understand the truth of what you say, so I will not berate you further. You are skilled with your tongue; make sure you do not lose it.”

“Mother, I took no offense.” Linn blushed.

“Lynda, Angal is right.”

“I know, Rybert. Let us have no more discussion of this. Now, Angal, about your payment?”

“Yes, I hoped to talk with you in more detail about that. Perhaps over a meal? The airroads to Syf today were nearly as busy as the land roads. We had no chance to eat during our ride here.”

“Food will serve well enough for conversation. Cathreene, please ready something.”

“Yes, my lady.” A maid with silvery hair and a narrow face retreated into a chamber attached to the thrones room’s rear.

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Eirek and Angal were led through stone entrances to the dining room. A large carved granite table stood erected around stumps of stone. A chandelier lit the table from above. Windows stood open with beaded curtains down either side. The scent of either pork or chicken held Eirek’s senses in the heavens of Axiomé—or was it the sweet acorn paste for the bread? Eirek swore by Trema’s garden there was another smell—pine needles, ever so delicate and faint.

“So, Lady Lynda,” said Angal, “before talks of business, let us first talk pleasure.”

“And what kind of pleasure would Angal the Bard like to hear?” She buttered her bread with the acorn paste.

“Any new tidings, the likes of which might call for a song someday?”

“Linn. Share your news with Angal; it would surely make a great song.”

“My twenty-fifth birthday is coming soon in four months. If what our starseers say can be believed, it will be near the time when the two suns eclipse.”

“Pirini Lilapa,” Angal muttered. “Are you certain, my lady’s daughter?”

“If that is what it is called, then, yes.”

Eirek saw distaste on Angal’s face. “Aye, then I am sorry for you.”

Linn’s smile quickly faded. “Why is that? It is supposed to be beautiful.”

“Beautiful it is, but bad things have happened when the suns eclipse.”

“Are you referring to Deimos?” Lord Clayse asked.

“I am.”

“Guardian Eska locked him away, and there has not been trouble since.”

“There has not been Pirini Lilapa since,” Angal said.

“You will need to be here then to tell a tale and make good things happen,” Linn said.

“Yes, Angal, your stories are rather great. Will you come back to tell a story for her?” Lady Clayse plucked a carrot from her tray.

“If it pleases you both, I may.”

"It does. And her especially. The next few months will be quite dry for Linn. She will start courting other families of power. Upon her twenty-fifth, she can take the ladyship if I should die, as I am sure you are aware."

"I am."

"She has a courting with Marchioness Albony Evengale's younger son, Ezra, tomorrow."

"Why not Oswyn?" Angal asked.

"That one is denied. I would never let Linn marry someone who cannot cast; that is like marrying a cripple."

*So I am a cripple?* Eirek couldn't help but glare a little at Lady Clayse. Perhaps if Marchioness Surg had been more receptive to his delivery, it wouldn't have stung as much. How they clung to their status and authority as basis for mannerisms. How would someone like her react to him being guardian?

"It's only a courting, Mother. He still needs to win my favor. And my favor is not so easily won." Linn looked at Eirek and smiled.

Did she smile to taunt him? She was nicer than her mother, yes, but did she think of him as a cripple the same way her mother surely would if she knew?

"I have a feeling it will turn out well. But enough of pleasures and favor. Let us speak of business. Angal, if you will," Lady Clayse said.

"My business comes with a sort of favor. But before that, let me extend my gratitude to both you and your husband for your recommendations of Eirek."

"Recommendations for what? Angal, please refresh our minds."

"Two years ago, applications for apprentice to Guardian of the Core were being accepted and you helped write a recommendation for Eirek. Well, just yesterday, Eirek received a letter declaring his acceptance."

Gasps of astonishment escaped from throats. Eirek's face grew hot. Eyes beamed at him, for better or worse.

"May I see the acceptance letter?" Lady Clayse asked.

*Do they assume I'm illiterate?* In truth, Eirek hadn't believed so either, but Angal had made a convincing argument for why he should attend. *Strength comes from understanding; it has to be realized . . .* What made the Mourses any different than the Clayses? Both endured strife, both were human. But one had finer clothing. Was this what he was supposed to find?

Eirek retrieved the letter and held it out. A butler emerged from along a pair of beaded curtains, snatching the letter from his hand and handing it to Lady Clayse.

After reading it, the lady passed it to her husband.

"Congratulations indeed are in order for you, Eirek." Lord Clayse gave a faint clap.

"Yes, they are. Now, what is it you need for the favor, Angal?"

Eirek shivered as Lady Clayse stared him down like a guard eyeing a prisoner.

"A telecard accompanied the letter. Conseleigh Luvan Katore instructed Eirek to arrive at Domnux Plains in the allotted time."

Lord Clayse picked up the letter and searched for any sort of number.

Angal took notice. "No, it was a separate card altogether. Eirek, will you please read how much time is left."

The thick-stocked card had not creased in Eirek's pocket. "Only fifteen hours."

"We were hoping perhaps you could transport us there. Time is our enemy," Angal said.

"This is certainly no small request." Lynda had put away her utensils and started to fan herself again. "Tell me, Eirek, why do you want to become guardian?"

She stared at him then—with Linn’s eyes, just older. Judgment waited for his answer. And as matriarch of the family in power, she would be quick to do so.

“He wishes to—”

“Angal, you made your case for the boy years ago. I want to hear Eirek’s reasoning.”

Eirek tilted his head and looked toward the chandelier. Time seemed to crawl and flicker like the candles above. He remembered the way Mara Surg tossed flame to the candles, how she controlled everyone below her because of her title and her power.

“I am sorry, Angal. If Eirek has no ambition to become guardian, then—”

“I want to be able to support those who have never been supported,” Eirek cut in.

The lady seemed taken aback. “Like the beggars, whores, and drunkards?”

*Tread carefully.* “Perhaps ... In stories, you hear about great men and women doing extraordinary things ... but ... it is only great people who receive the opportunities. Not anyone from my cloth ... By helping me get there, a story might eventually be told of an ordinary man doing extraordinary things.”

Lady Clayse looked around the room. Her husband nodded, as did her advisor and receiver. And, finally, Linn. “Very well. I offer you my support wholeheartedly. Aeryn ...”

“Yes, my lady?”

“You will transport these two to Domnux Plains. They must leave twelve hours from now at the very latest if they wish to make it there on time.”

“Aye, I will ready the ship for tomorrow morning.” The advisor got up and exited down the hallway from whence he had come.

While Lady Clayse was busy exchanging private words with her receiver and her family, Angal grabbed hold of Eirek’s shoulder. “Did you figure out what you left here?”

“Yes.”

“And what is that?”

Eirek turned his head to look at Angal’s blue eyes. There was a glint of purple in them, Eirek had failed to realize, sort of like his own eyes. “Strength and purpose.”

## CHAPTER 5

### LAKE KILMER

From the cockpit of his brother's ship, Zain saw the deluge of raindrops beat like ratamacue, but no bolts of lightning accompanied it. With each splash, Zain's anxiety grew. Would Zakk make it? Zain already knew the answer—yes. Each tournament's top prize wasn't solely a trophy. There was a monetary value as well, and Zakk had used the silver spells and golden bonds from his winnings to buy a hovercraft two years after Zain moved in. Before then, he had relied on Zain for transportation, and Zain obliged because of their friendship.

"This storm certainly brewed up out of nowhere," said Jamaal. "I wish I could get you closer."

Zain wished so as well, but he didn't want to push his brother too far. It had taken a lot of convincing to even get him to agree to take him. Jamaal was too analytical; Zain couldn't blame him. Jamaal needed to be in order to analyze every angle of senate policies and bills, but that kind of thinking wouldn't take Zain to Lake Kilmer. It was only when Zain pried apart Jamaal's past that he found a connection.

"What is the one thing you regret in your life the most?"

Jamaal exhaled. "Zain, don't go there. Don't bring her up."

"How can I not? Guardian of the Core can do anything—"

"No one can bring back the dead, Zain. No one can reverse the past. You need to move on, and stop continuing to live in your dreams."

"The problem is when you don't live your dreams. What if there is a way to bring her back? What if I can finally get this ... this ... guilt off of me?"

"It was an accident."

"And one that I still live with every single day. Sometimes I can still feel her fingers slipping through mine ... " Zain turned around. He needed to convince his brother. In deep contemplation, Zain exhaled.

"It was the middle of summer seven years back when Reine and I were strolling through a park with curved wooden bridges over a small stream. We were headed back from sitting on a plain and overlooking the arcs of rainbows. The arcs! It went up and over Boras, if you can imagine. Anyways, with the rainbow still in the air and the water sparkling more than ever, I thought it was the perfect moment to propose to her. The only problem was that I didn't have a ring. After that, after that date, I knew I wanted to be with her, so I called Dad, and he said he would make one. And he did. I carried it around with me all the time after that, waiting for the perfect moment, but it never came. The winds were especially brutal one cold day, so I let her put on my jacket, and she found the ring in there, ruining any chance I had at surprising her."

"Why are you telling me this?" Zain asked.

"You asked what my largest regret was ... We all have them, Zain ... but we learn to live with them."

"But if you had a chance to make up for that, you wouldn't take it?"

His brother didn't have a comment after that besides, "Go get your things." And now, here they were, combating the elements as they tried to land. The alcove that his brother found was double the size of his ship, but in a storm like this, it still made it hard to land.

When the ship touched down, Zain was bounced around in his chair. He was thankful to be strapped into his seat. Jamaal opened the cargo ramp, and Zain proceeded to struggle to gather his things without falling backwards.

“How much longer do you have?”

“Half an hour. Should be enough time to get there.”

“I hope you find whatever you’re looking for.”

*I hope so too.* “Thanks ...” Zain turned around but was stopped by his brother placing a hand on his shoulder.

“Mom has a right to know where you are.”

He hadn’t told Mom about his acceptance. She had been with him all through Ava’s death, the hearings, the trials, and Zain never forgot the longest and hardest hug he received once the judge found him not guilty, but if his mom knew he was going to become apprentice to atone for her, she wouldn’t have let him leave. She would have been even more stubborn than Jamaal saying that he already paid for his accident and shouldn’t open up old wounds.

“Then tell her ...” Zain looked into his brother’s hazel eyes.

“I will ... Make sure you answer your telecommunicator if she calls.”

Zain searched for any signs of lenience but found none. Jamaal had shifted to acting like a father figure instead of a brother. “Bye.”

“Good luck, Little Bear.”

Zain grinned and gave his brother a hug. “Bye, Big Bear.”

He turned around and exited the ship, facing the onslaught of rain and wind. The rain obscured most sound, but there was the faint sound of birds squawking their protest of the storm. Branches thrown aside and acorns and pine needles ripped from trees littered the floor. Even the thick canopy of trees failed to keep him dry. The smell of worms and fish stuck to his senses like sweat after a sparring lesson. Zain had always been told that when one sense fades, the others strengthen in order to compensate. With his vision reduced, he felt as if he could hear more. A faint crack in the air popped like knuckles on a hand. Zain looked around. No fallen branches.

As Zain reached the last set of trees that enclosed the small area of land before a white pier, he noticed Zakk standing halfway out onto that pier amongst the wind and rain, bags over each shoulder. The soft mud and the loud cracking of thunder covered the sound of his advance. Skiffs tied to the pier kept Zakk occupied as Zain continued to walk farther. *Any minute now, the ship will be here.*

As Zain’s footsteps transitioned from mud to the whitewood boards, Zakk turned around. “Zain.”

Zain’s neck tightened.

“What are you doing here?”

Zain reached into the inside pocket of his Gazo’s uniform and pulled out a red envelope. “You weren’t the only one who was accepted.”

“Two warriors from the same school. What are the odds of that?”

*Do you not think I am capable?* Zain tried ignoring the comment as best he could. He looked out onto the lake, watching the ripples roar with intensity.

“Did you know when I was telling you?”

Zain nodded.

“Why didn’t you say anything?”

“What was I supposed to say? That I was accepted too? I hadn’t even opened the letter; I picked it up from my mailbox at Gazo’s after my training session with Kendel and put it in my pocket. When I saw yours, I knew.”

“Zain, you don’t have to be jealous of me ...”

“My family *gave* you everything you have! Without me, you would be nothing!” Zain looked at Zakk, who had reserved himself to looking down at the dock.

“I . . . I . . . think you’re wrong,” Zakk said. He looked up and held Zain’s glare. “Without me, *you’d* be nothing.”

“How so?”

“I was the one who helped you pass your continuance exam when you couldn’t figure out the order of combinations you had to block while blindfolded. I was the one who gave you purpose to even continue through Gazo’s. I have always been the one pushing you. I’m not going to say, ‘Sorry that I’m better than you.’ I’m not—”

A low reverberating noise cut the air, the sound of continuous thunder. Except it wasn’t thunder; it was the ship.

*The ship’s coming.* Zain watched it descend. His fingers started to flex. His side started to ache as the scenario of Zakk beating him crossed his mind. Such a victory would ruin any hope he had of atoning Ava’s death. Of finding some way to see her again.

“Why can’t you ever just let me win? Always you have been there by my side, shoving the victories in my face.”

Lower and lower the ship descended. It was almost at touchdown now.

“Zain, you’re like a brother to me; of course I’m going to be by your side. We advance together. That’s always how it has been.”

Zain closed his eyes and shielded his face as water splashed up from the ship’s landing. The deluge crashed upon them like a tidal wave on an island. Zain maintained his balance throughout and looked over at his friend who was doing the same.

“Not this time,” Zain muttered. He heaved his shoulder into Zakk, forcing his friend to fall—with bags and sword—into the lake.

The pier shook as the ramp landed harshly on the rotted surface. Zain spun around and sprinted up as fast as his wet clothes would let him. Once inside, he threw his bags to the ground, sheathed his sword, and tried to walk to the pilot’s area to demand its departure. The area was blocked with glass, so Zain pounded, but the pilot would not acknowledge him.

From inside his pocket, Zain pulled out the soaked telecard to see how much time remained. Less than a minute. *Come on. Come on. Take off.*

“Strap in and prepare for takeoff,” a man’s voice boomed through the cargo area’s speakers.

Zain didn’t listen. He dropped his bags, withdrew his sword, and watched as Zakk pulled himself up out of the water. *Come on. Come on.* Zakk sprinted toward the ramp. The ship started to take off, causing Zain’s knees to buckle and lose a moment’s readiness. The ship was in the air, the ramp slowly closing, and that is when he saw the last of Zakk.

Zain sheathed his sword and took a moment’s breath. He looked up and saw a forearm make its way over the top of the ramp. Did Zakk make the jump? Zain crawled on his knees to the cusp of the cargo area; his body felt as if it would be sucked out. A set of fingertips struggled to gain traction. The ramp apparently sensed Zakk hanging from it and stopped. When at the cusp, Zain poked his head out. Zakk now dangled fifty feet above the lake’s blue exterior. And that distance was increasing.

“Zain, help me up!”

Zain wanted to help. He knew he should help. Scenarios started reeling in his mind: Zakk coming on board and killing him for his near betrayal, Zakk showing off his skills during the Trials, Zakk winning and leaving Zain once again—behind and inferior. Zain extended his torso forward and gripped Zakk’s wet forearm. Although Zain couldn’t hear it from the roaring engine, he could

see his friend's teeth chatter from the blowing wind and the cool water that soaked him. He looked down into the dirt-brown eyes of Zakk. They were soaked, sullen as the earth below. Zain couldn't see the helplessness in those eyes, only the choler that rose like hills and mountains from Zakk's pupils. Zain's hands shoveled under Zakk's forearms.

"I'm sorry. I can't." He couldn't say it. He mouthed it instead. But the intention was clear. His hands pried apart Zakk's grip, his eyes watching as Zakk plummeted through the air. Zain had never seen such a look before ... except once. A while ago. The look of pain, betrayal, fear—it was all there.

The ship's ramp proceeded to close. Chilled air vanished. Its absence, though, did little to soothe him.

Vapid breathing conveyed his sorrow. His side ached—enough for two this time. Daggers of guilt sliced through his intestines, forcing him to limp across the ship's interior over to a bench on the right side. *What have I done?* Water mixed with tears slid down his face, keeping him cool and vulnerable. *What have I done?* Zain sat like *The Thinker* of Pelopon, watching droplets crash on the floor below. Then as he looked up, he saw another body—a woman—seated upon another bench across the cargo area.

Three-inch black heels pecked the floor. Crossed legs subtly revealed a fuchsia garter, a dagger attached to it. The slit purple dress covered her body tightly, and her crossed arms accentuated her breasts. Her lips, pierced on the lower left side, smirked at him. A hand, weighed down by bracelets of varying colors, brushed brown bangs out of her familiar blue eyes.

"Well, Zain, zat was razer unbecoming."

## CHAPTER 6

### BLESSING

Hydro could not believe how many people managed to crowd into the castle walls. With his father, Hydro progressed slowly, all eyes on him, all knowing the task he was about to accomplish. Roy Tityle of Katarh and his wife, Luuise; Marqiss Puwl of Rhemu and his wife, Lyane; Hekter Sigurd, the young Marquis of Roil; the dark-skinned Alyn Bloctor of the Summer Isles and his wife, Ayanna; Cadell Periwinkle of the Hart Isles and his wife, Enya; and even the old hermit Seth Axyel, Marquis of Talyn, stood before him in front of their respective families and thousands of others to pay Hydro homage. *How did Father arrange this?*

He had seen them from the veranda when his father made a speech about his new adventure. “Families of Power, and those of Acquava lucky enough to catch wind of this momentous occasion, I received word yesterday that my son is to compete in Guardian Eska’s Trials . . .” His father had let the announcement sink in before continuing, “It means a great deal to my family that you could come on such short notice to our castle to see him off. Once he leaves here today, he will not return a prince; he will return an apprentice and a soon-to-be guardian. Even once the Trials complete, though, there will still need to be approval from the lords and ladies of each nation. So I encourage you to make contact with the families in power in other nations and start rekindling any connections you may have. Tell them why my son is competent to become apprentice . . .”

Hydro started sweating at this point and tapping his leg as he waited for his father to continue and hopefully finish.

“He will become apprentice because of his determination, because of his perseverance, because of his skill, and, finally, because he has the blood of an Acquavan!”

Roars and cheers burst out at this point.

“He has seablood in his veins!” More cheers. “And because of this, he will have the ability to adapt to each trial, whatever it may be, just as water changes its form. We have lasted as a nation because of this ability, and it has given us confidence, and this confidence will be used to win the Trials. So, my son does not leave to attend these Trials for his own gain; he attends for the sake of Acquava.”

Hydro had never heard such applause before. It sounded as strong as thunder. As discreetly as he could, he wiped his hands on his tunic, glad that the speech was done.

The feeling he had while up on the veranda, of being an idol for everyone to worship, continued through the progression. Eyes upon eyes upon eyes watched him progress, his father at his side and his mother and brother behind him. The acqua guards were close, as well as Darien and Len of his father’s council. Hydro walked at his father’s gait—a slow pace that allowed for all the more admiration.

“Thank you, Father,” Hydro said. They were almost to the castle gates now, where a hovercraft waited for his father and him. The gates were open to allow for an overflow of people, and Hydro saw all the spaceships and hovercrafts parked on the flat plains outside the castle walls.

“You deserve a parting that befits your rank. I am glad you approve.”

Hydro did. It was a nice gesture, but now there was no choice but success. (Like there ever had been anyway?) “It seems like everyone in Acquava is here to see me off.”

“No. Not everyone. One wishes to see you off personally.”

Hydro stopped. The hovercraft was less than fifty paces away. *There is still more. . . .*  
“Who?”

“Pearl.” His father smiled, put his arm around Hydro, and walked the rest of the way to the ship.

Hydro had a feeling his father was going to say that name. *The goddess herself wishes to see me off.*

As Hydro walked the remaining paces, he thought about the weight this visit would hold compared to the three other times he had been brought before her. His father told him that upon his birth, he had been brought before Pearl. After Hydro cast his first spell of power and officially became a blessed at the age of nine, his father brought him to her as well. But the time that Hydro remembered most prominently was when he killed his first man and ascended into manhood. A man with no promise besides that of thievery was brought before his father, and Hydro could still feel the hilt of his father’s coveted ether blade, Purge, in his hand when he commanded Hydro to swing the sword. That was at the age of thirteen, and Hydro had needed both hands to wield his father’s longsword. The splatter of blood that caused Hydro to look away, the head rolling on the floor of the stone court, had been worth it then to hear his father say, “Congratulations, Son.”

Hydro entered the passenger side of the hovercraft and waited as the trailing servants piled the baggage in the back. Though he never looked back, he could feel the eyes still upon him.

“Bye, Brother.” Aiton was at the side of the vehicle.

Hydro smiled. “Bye, Aiton.” He looked up and locked eyes with his mother. “Bye, Mother.”

“Bye ... may the Twelve be with you.”

The comment seemed rather forced, but so was Hydro’s. His mother walked away, pulling her son backwards with her so that the hovercraft could be started.

As his father pushed the start button underneath the container of anitron, Hydro asked, “How do you know she wants to see me?”

“She bid me. You cannot deny a goddess’s bidding.”

“No. You cannot ...” The hovercraft jolted off the ground. “Why does she wish to see me?”

“You will see.”

The hovercraft drove off, and as it did so, Hydro took one last look at the people he had known, the people he would never see again.

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Greedy eyes took in the sights like a newborn. Checkerboard-blue-and-white mosaic tiles stretched the length of the hallway. Between ivory columns sat white-washed statues carved in the likeness of the past rulers of Acquava. The Hall of the Lords.

“Do you remember these halls, Hydro?” asked Lord Paen.

Hydro nodded and said, “They always seem more magnificent than the time before.”

“They always are.”

Hydro walked with his father, passing the statues. Their soles shattered silence with brisk steps of anticipation. He bypassed earlier lords—such as Graynon Paquar, the first ruler of Acquava, and Symian Symer, founder of the city Symeria. And he also saw lords who ruled after the Great War—such as Karl Katarh, who froze to death in his own kingdom and had his lineage pass to Louis Hammersfall, the husband of his daughter, Karla. Their reign was short, and it was then that Hydro’s family started rule under Lyonell Paen. History lived here, untainted by the salty air or unwanted eyes.

Hydro’s grandfather, Áylan Paen, from whom Hydro received his middle name, was the last statue added, shortly before Hydro’s last visit. Frail and old and suffering from mindloss were the last things Hydro remembered of him. Whenever he would talk to Hydro, he called him

Hymn; it had become a nickname for Hydro, but Hydro wished he could see the man his father talked about—a man who stood as a symbol of their continued reign through three uprisings. One thousand feet from where his grandfather stood, the hall started to decline.

“Are you nervous, Hydro?”

“Never,” Hydro lied.

“Your voice quivers. What is wrong?” Lord Paen stopped and looked at his son.

“Father, why are we here? The ship leaves from Encenro Falls, not here. We will never make it.”

“You will see, Hydro. Be patient. Before you leave here today, you will see the true power of a goddess.”

Hydro exhaled and tapped the side of his body but continued walking with his father. The last time he met Pearl, her deformity had left Hydro speechless. Gods were supposed to be flawless, not some creature in the form of a mermaid with seaweed hair and scaly arms that were as shiny as pearls. Hydro saw no magnificence so far, only those cruel yellow eyes. Did that make him wicked?

Minutes passed, and only their soles spoke. Down and down they went until the air became cold and he could taste the brine of the nearby ocean water. As the earthy path leveled out, the sconces that had lit the way earlier stopped. Hydro did as well.

Before him and his father stood a wall of water, fifteen feet in height and held in place as if encased in a glass box. The dark path hid from most of the suns’ rays. It shone a little—enough to see that before them lay an endless expanse of water. The Watery Path led from this island to Pearl’s Cove, and only the rightful rulers of Acquava could pass unscathed by the dangers that lurked within.

“Before we enter, we must pray. Would you like to lead?”

“Pearl, navigate me through your waters, steer me to land, and drench me in your power.”

Hydro trailed after his father as they passed through an invisible threshold; the glass-like material rippled up and down, sending out a low hum that reverberated throughout the hallway.

Power is how places like this existed—how Hydro and his father were able to breathe underwater, how their clothes did not get wet even in a chamber filled with water and sharks, and how they were able to stand on a surface while that same area rippled with the ocean’s traffic. It was wondrous and rare, like the leviathan that roamed Leviathan’s Bay near Talyn Island. That is how power would stay, too—in the hands of the powerful, until the Ancients came again.

Books and schooling taught Hydro that ever since the Great War and the disappearance of the Ancients, power stopped surging through the veins of just anyone. Those who had it before the Great War kept it in their lineage, but even that wasn’t a guarantee. Children could still become denied instead of blessed, and families in power might have no power at all after centuries. Rulers on other planets had lost their reign due to their child’s ineptness to cast. *A good change, too*, Hydro had thought at the time. *Everyone having Power seems too fair.*

After rounding a few bends in the path, a school of sharks circled them. Red eyes examined Hydro’s worth. He did his best to ignore his heavy breathing. The sharks circled for awhile longer until some became bored and swam away from the Watery Path.

“You do not have to be afraid, Hydro.”

“Who says I was?”

“Your breathing, your hand on your hilt, and your tone. Control your actions; you will need to if you wish to win the Trials. Otherwise you may become too predictable.”

“That is only a small advantage.”

“An advantage all the same, and one that might cause you to roam these watery halls one day instead of the proper place of a guardian.”

Since the first ruler of Acquava, the deceased lords became guards to their god, even in the afterlife. Whether it was true or not, Hydro could not help but admit that he sometimes wondered if his grandfather lurked about.

After a few more turns, they ascended to a cove above land. The water sloshed against the granite steps. White-washed walls held the salty scent of the departing sea, and once the steps ended, the room opened up to a large, circular alcove supported by cobalt columns. After the columns, a mound of circular steps rose to support a pool of water with a golden fountain that misted the room. Open-mouthed clams—large enough to devour Hydro whole—lay waiting by each cobalt column. Mermen and mermaids inside of them carried various musical instruments. Above, the dome was painted with a ripple of waves that constantly changed to different views of Acquava.

Water rushed over the pool’s edge and dripped down the circular steps, wetting the soles of both Hydro and his father. Hydro relieved the slight trembling in his leg by kneeling. Even after he rose, he tried not to acknowledge it. His pride, if nothing else, would keep him standing.

“I hear you are to attend Eska’s Trials?” Pearl said. The goddess bathed in the pool of water. Hydro could only see her head and scaly, sleek arms. The moisture and mist made her seaweed hair cling to her face.

“Yes.”

“And will you win?”

“If you see fit, my goddess.”

“I do.” Pearl shifted her gaze. “Lord Paen, what is it you wish of me?”

“I want you to show Hydro the power of a goddess. One-twelfth of the power that he will obtain by becoming guardian.”

Pearl smiled. “Prince Paen. Come.”

Hydro gulped and walked forward. As he climbed the steps, he passed two mermaids strumming harps. The female creatures were of fair skin and covered in nothing but necklaces of pearls and shells. Seaweed hair fell past their shoulders. Hydro looked at them; they looked back with daffodil eyes that made his groin tighten. The sweet music they plucked from the air enthralled him. Too much so. He looked away to regain Pearl’s dark-blue eyes, but soon he regretted that decision.

To break the gaze, Hydro knelt at the top of the stairs. Pearl hoisted herself out of her pool and slid on her tail like a serpent around Hydro. The scales dissipated near her midriff. Bare skin lurked beneath her shirt of clams and shells—they rattled while she circled him. Hydro winced as Pearl dragged her long nails across the back of his shoulders. He closed his eyes.

A soft chant ruminated. It wasn’t power’s language—it was older, more guttural, a language privy to gods and forgotten by years. At the end of it, Hydro expected to feel something, but he didn’t. *Did it work?*

“Your destination is Encenro Falls.” Pearl’s voice was soft. Helpful. Seductive as the sea was to pirates. “I will transport you there now.”

Pearl moved past Hydro to the pair of mermaids. A claw from each hand stole perfection away from their faces. As she dug into their skin, creating a trail of cerulean blood, they whimpered but remained stationary until their eyes glowed a dark yellow. In some unwritten code, the mermaids smeared their cheeks, covering their hands in the blood, and then they played again. *Did Pearl control them?*

The song strung was soft at first. Slowly it intensified. Each of their cheeks healed and they began to sing. It was a song Hydro had never heard.

*The sea sways us.  
The sea guides us.  
The sea steers us.  
The sSea! The sea! The sea!  
The sea listens to us.  
The sea demands from us.  
The sea allows uus  
To see! To see! To see!*

From above, a swish echoed like waves on a beach. To his surprise, the watery dome shifted to one large image of Encenro Falls. Pearl said nothing; she only slid to the back of the room, circling around the throne. Hydro waited for his father, then followed. He stole a glance at the mermaids before he left. Their eyes pleaded for liberation.

On the wall behind the throne a large body-length mirror hung, its frame decorated in true gold. The glass shifted and reflected the image that rippled above them on the watery dome. The once-solid glass changed, as if it was liquid. It reminded Hydro of the Watery Path.

“This will take you to where you need to go.”

Pearl didn’t enter. Her blue eyes continued to look at them with slight satisfaction. His father stepped through. The act stupefied Hydro, but then, there were many things about a goddess’s power that left answers to be desired. Pearl’s gaze fell on him like a lone animal. “Do not abuse the power given to you, Hydro Áylan Paen.”

Hydro paused. *What does she mean by that? Does she sense my doubts?* But he crossed the threshold, and a slap of wind jolted his senses. Pine trees lingered in the air, and rushing freshwater filled his ears. A dozen paces ahead, his father stood on a jutting rock that overlooked a forest below. A flock of morning birds cawed. “They are migrating. Is it that time of season already?”

Hydro didn’t respond. He extended his arms, looking them over. “Father, I do not feel any different.”

A sharp slap stung his cheek. “Hydro, you question a god’s gift? Did you see that dome? She can see anything at any time—hear anyone at any time. Do you think Pearl would be pleased to hear disapproval?”

Hydro’s flared temper subsided. “No . . .” He understood that he overstepped his place. It was not his right to question the authority of a goddess.

A low rumbling like thunder pierced Hydro’s ears. From the cloudy sky, a ship descended. It was a massive black-and-green army cargo transport. The roaring engines hushed the rushing water. “This is what Guardian Eska decides to send to pick us up?”

Lord Paen did not comment until it descended a few hundred more feet and hovered in clear sight of the jugged rock. “At least there will be no question of your safety.” Lord Paen took Hydro by the shoulders and looked into his eyes. “I may not know when I will see you next, but I have no doubt that you will do our family proud. You have Pearl’s blessing, the strength and sigil of the House of Paen, and also my praise and tidings—not as Lord Hydro Paen, but as your father. Atesia and Aiton will miss you. If you do return, I hope that it is for the better.”

Hydro couldn’t escape the hug that followed. During that embrace, he thought of Aiton, of his mother. When a tear slid down his cheek, he turned his head, leaving it to dry on his father’s

shoulder. For the first time, he realized how many duties would fall upon Aiton's lap at his departure. A heavy thud jolted him, and the embrace ended. "I know my departure will leave Aiton more responsibility to the family. But please let him maintain his youth for as long as possible. I do not want to see him grow too old too fast."

"I will keep that in mind. Now go. Make Acquava proud."

Hydro walked up the ramp and entered the empty cargo hold. He claimed his spot on the far right wall, just underneath an audio box.

"Please strap on your harnesses and prepare for takeoff. Next stop, Gar."

Hydro chuckled to himself. *Garians? They don't know how to fight. Not truly. Even their precious Elites are nowhere near the caliber of Father's Acqua Guards.*

Hydro didn't worry. He tilted his head back on a hard red neckrest, which comforted soldiers traveling long distances for war. He closed his eyes, but even there he couldn't escape the thousands of people who saw him off today. Even there he couldn't escape Pearl's gaze and the amount of confidence she put in him by her blessing. Even there he couldn't escape the duty he owed his family to win and uphold their pride.