

# KING ALVIN

*This book is for those struggling to release themselves from the shackles of past wrongs, and hindering themselves from stepping forward on a new path of deliverance.*

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# 1. CAREER CHANGE

My past isn't all that impressive. I lived in a small, one bedroom stone hut with my mother on the outskirts of a small town called Highland, several miles away from the giant port city: Mai. Let's just say that I was a dreamer; I was absolutely certain that there was some great destiny for me to fulfill; perhaps as a noble knight, or even a mysterious scholar. My mother often took me to the library where I would study all sorts of maps and the history of every single kingdom to ever exist. When I was thirteen, I traveled alone to Mai and began my knight apprenticeship under Sir Rochel: a difficult man.

Apprenticeship was nothing to glorify. It was a bone-tiring, mind-exhausting experience to work under the knights. Those people were haughty and pretended as though they ran the streets, but when faced by the king, or any other person of higher status for that matter, they would return to the boot-licking scalawags they internally were. However, I wasn't bitter. Running errands and cleaning stables were enjoyable times for me as they were spent in my lonesome. It took me out of the condescending eyes of Sir Rochel; though I now appreciate and value the time that had been spent under him. Back then I had yet to realize how it was preparing me for my future role.

I wasn't the most popular since, well, I wasn't "on-trend" with the city's worship. In fact, my faith had been placed in a certain, very high place. But the people around me brought down their own reverence and placed it in molded gold statues of animals. *Animals*. That was a no-no. I at first didn't understand the significance of what was happening, as my origins were from a small town where my upbringing involved already knowing of where I would be going once my fleeting time came to an end, and of who ruled over the entire universe. It wasn't until a few years later, when being pressured by Sir Rochel and his wing of knights to partake in their ritual of skinning a rat alive and burning it on an altar while it slowly died, did I finally take notice of how awful their actions were. I turned away from those practices, but it cost me dearly.

Not even a day after refusing to commit myself to such atrocious paganism, Sir Rochel demanded that I either find a new mentor or toss aside my apprenticeship. Now, I wasn't all that attached to my role, but it didn't settle right with me to just sit down and take that punch. I stood toe to toe with the man and growled to his face, "I quit." It felt better to leave on my own rather than be kicked out. But that didn't wash away the bile taste that rested on my tongue.

When my vision eventually cleared of red, I found myself in the middle of town square after having stormed out of the watchtower, where I had previously

been cornered. It was freeing to be apart from them now, but I was also feeling unsettled. From the tower in the center of the city, above town hall, chimed the massive bell of Mai exactly once, ringing throughout the city. Chills erupted on my arms; I had never been in Mai during the time of the festival, as I had always escaped to visit my mother who would preach to me about the Holy One. It was a week of festivities praising and worshiping the goddess of fertility and other things I do not wish to mention: Ashteroe. *What do I do?* I wondered, eager to escape the boundaries of Mai's walls which seemed to steadily be closing in on me.

I kept wandering aimlessly around the square until a quiet voice, though still far louder than even the chiming bell and busy streets, penetrated my mind.

*Prepare yourself, for you are to be a king.*

These words resonated behind my eyes. It was enough to set me over the edge; never before had I heard another voice which inspired such bone-chilling fear yet a deep calmness within. However, I was knowledgeable of the possibility of such experiences occurring, as they had before been recounted to me by my mother.

I stepped forward, searching with my eyes but knowing I would not see His face, "Lord?"

*I am here.*

My heart jumped, "What do you mean that I am to be a king?"

*I have chosen you to lead My children.*

“Am I worthy?”

*You are chosen.* He said it clearly and without any hint of hesitation. He was One Who Could Not Lie, so there was no reason to doubt or suspect His words.

“Then, I accept my Purpose.”

And that was how this whirlwind of a journey began.

Not even five minutes after I heard the voice of the Holy One, my name was being shouted over the bustling noise of the central square and echoing off the walls of the colorful buildings. My eyes searched for its source and found themselves peering at a tall, thin man with dark hair which fell loosely over his gaze.

“Me?” I pointed to my chest, just to be sure.

The man met my stare and regarded me, his face clearly showing that he had not in the least expected a runty, scuffed-up malnourished teenager who was on the brink of manhood but appeared as though he had yet to even reach puberty.

*Go with him.* The Lord commanded.

The man’s eyes flicked to his right as though someone were whispering in his ear, then proceeded to demand, “You are to come with me, if you follow the Lord so.”

“Yes, I will come.” It was a nerve wracking decision as I didn’t know what was to come, but there

was no room for any hesitation. Not when it came to the Way Maker.

We weaved through the city's maze of people, avoiding the main streets, and left just as the gates were beginning to close. The man led me to the woods above the hill, and behind us the final bell chimed. With that final ring came an ominous sensation. It was as oppressing as a declaration of war.

Behind the wall of trees were six other people laying in wait. A woman with golden blonde hair and eyes greener than the purest of emeralds stood, coming forth and embracing the man and then me. It wasn't an unwelcome hug, but was unexpected. The only person who had ever embraced me before was my mom.

"Welcome. It is an honor to have you join us." She smiled brilliantly, showing off her perfect set of teeth.

"The honor is all mine," I responded. In all honesty, I had no idea who any of these people were; I was just told to follow the broody guy. But, an undeniable awe settled over me when seeing them all standing together. It was an inexplicable sensation. Power radiated from each and every individual in their group. These people were not your normal everyday traveling caravan. They introduced themselves as Genesis, Skuggi, Vlam, Valgus, Angelique, and Neró. The one who had brought me out of Mai was called Helel. Apparently, they were named as the Guardians of



the Elements. What they could do, I had absolutely no clue as not even a whisper of the title had reached my ears until that moment.

As the sun disappeared, Genesis, the lady who had first spoken to me declared, “I’ll go first and lay waste to their fortress.”

I frowned, *That’s a mighty big statement. What’s going on?*

“Yes, that sounds great. I shall melt down each and every idol with the heat of my breath, until they become nothing but puddles of gold.” Vlam, the buff dark-skinned man stated.

*Hold up—his breath?* I thought.

“I’ll use the ocean to pull away their dwellings, and send the buildings to their demise at the bottom of the sea.” Neró, a man with dirty blond hair and eyes that matched that of the deepest ocean depths announced.

*How is he going to use the ocean?* I wondered, genuinely confused.

“My winds will ravage the city and lay waste to all that remains.” Angelique, an odd-eyed, white haired girl with thick double braids snarled.

“Skuggi and I will devour the sight of the sinners, so they are left with nothing but their remaining senses until they are taken by the Heavenly Arrow.” Valgus, one who had honey eyes and hair the color of caramel, proclaimed.

“Devour—?” I choked. What were they even talking about? The declarations were a bit too extreme to be jokes.

“I will wait here with Alvin until it’s my turn.” Helel nodded to me. I nodded back, obviously, but that didn’t mean I knew what was going on.

The way they spoke made me nervous, and I could feel my heartbeat growing louder. The pounding grew so enormous that it resounded within my ear canals. I then realized that the sound wasn’t coming from my internal muscular organ at all; it was the sound of drums. The noise came from within the city walls, shaking the very earth and sending a chilling sensation through the region. It was such a powerful, malicious feeling that it inspired sweat to pour from my body. *And the festival begins.* I realized with dread.

“It is time.” Neró stood. They exchanged determined glances, then left.

I remained where I sat, following their disappearing silhouettes with my gaze. It was strange; only a mere few hours had passed since meeting them, but it felt like even my life could be entrusted to them. There was no real reason other than a feeling. “So. . .” I pursed my lips, “What’re they doing?”

“Destroying the city and reaping their souls.” Helel responded.

“And. . . that’s a regular thing?”

He nodded, his dark eyes trained on the crumbling walls of Mai. It was quite the sight to witness; the towers exploded and sent bricks and soot everywhere. Water surrounded the city, pulling back to the ocean. Residue could be seen as it was spun throughout the city, flying high into the sky. Then the heavens opened and stars rained down, smiting the torn down fortress until it was left as nothing but a crater in the ground. The event transpired for barely ten minutes before the drums died and the sounds of destruction fell away. My breath escaped as a gasp when they stepped out from the wreckage; six mighty figures with their heads held high as they claimed another victory.

“Wow. . .” I gaped. “Did you see that? It was amazing! So that’s what the Guardians can do. . . why haven’t I heard of y’all before?” I asked, my eyes still glued to the cloud of dust being lapped away by the ocean’s grasping waves. I finally tore my gaze away from the scene and looked to Helel, who was staring with a mesmerized glaze over his eyes at a swirling vortex floating before him. His hand rose, and his fingers stretched towards the blackness.

*Save him, Alvin, before he commits a grave mistake.* The voice of absolute authority compelled me. I lurched forward and grabbed the man’s tunic, struggling against his weight as he leaned toward the whirlpool of darkness. “Hey!” I shouted. He faltered, but didn’t respond. “Hey.” My voice came out more

calmly this time, but with power. It surprised even me. Helel stopped and turned to me, his jaw slack and eyes wide. “It’s your turn. Don’t run away from your obligations.” I demanded. *Obligations for what?* I had no idea. The words just spilled from my mouth, as though someone else was speaking through me.

“Right.” Helel pulled away from the vortex, which slowly disappeared. He stood and walked away, but unlike the proud figures of the other Guardians, his shoulders were hunched and his feet dragged. I watched as he drew near the city, but then vanished.

My eyes went round and searched the horizon, but could see nothing of him. “Where did he go?” I wondered. *Is this his power? Invisibility? What in the world can that do?* I frowned. Invisibility only sounded useful for going on undercover missions or something; or pickpocketing, but with that sort of destruction I highly doubted there were any pockets left to pick; so why he was using it after the city was destroyed and the residents smote was beyond me.

Several minutes passed but there was still no sign of Helel. However, the other Guardians were nearing my hiding place. I jumped up and ran to meet them on the hill. My mind was bustling with so many questions: What happened? How can they do that? Who are the Guardians?

As soon as I reached them my thoughts exploded from my mouth. They all smiled with something similar

to amusement and guided me back to our original meeting place, promising to explain anything and everything they could.

“So, who are y’all? You told me that you’re Guardians, but what are those? How can you do such incredible things? And why is Helel invisible?”

Vlam chuckled, which sounded more like the rumble of a shaking volcano, and said, “Us Guardians are the molds of the elements. We are not Man, nor are we Angel. We were created to extinguish the Evil that is blanketing the Creator’s good creation. That is why we bury the cities under the rubble of their own buildings. It is our Purpose.”

“I see. How inspiring, especially since you’re all so young.” It was true; I’d always believed that I would play some big role in the turning of the times, but they were already making such huge moves, and none of them could’ve been a day over twenty-five.

“Well, we *were* born last week.” Angelique shrugged.

I scowled, “What?”

“It is true. We were given life only a few days ago, and have laid waste to any corrupted territories in our path.” Vlam grunted.

“But you’re older than I am!”

“Mentally, yes. Physically, only by appearance.” Valgus leaned against a tree trunk, his arms crossed.

“So, you really aren’t human? You don’t have any parents?”

Skuggi laughed, “We don’t need any. We have our Heavenly Father.”

“I suppose. . .”

“You’ll come to understand us eventually. You’re a part of our crew now.” Neró ruffled my hair.

I wanted to ask more questions, like how their powers worked or what it felt like, but Genesis cut in, “Don’t you think it’s taking Helel a while?”

The chatter immediately died. The group then realized that the Guardian had yet to return. Worried whispers were exchanged across the circle, with words of concern and anxious glances riling up a nervous, sick feeling within me. We decided to wait until he returned, as there was literally nothing else we could do. Apparently, he wasn’t simply invisible, but in another dimension entirely, reaping the dark souls of the sinners of Mai.

*That’s an even more incredible job. . .* I thought. He had to capture every single soul and imprison them. The task sounded not only arduous, but stressful. *What is the other realm like? Is it any different from this one?* I wondered. When thinking of another dimension, I imagined something like walking among the stars, or breathing in a world of water. Something that was impossible for any normal human here.

Time trickled like water from a crack in a reservoir. Slowly and painfully. The Guardians were growing agitated, and the world was responding to their restlessness. The grass shuddered and the winds switched directions. Sparks flew from Vlam's crossed arms, water clouded the woods. Valgus began to glow and tentacles of shadow crept from Skuggi's back. "Hey, guys. . . why don't we uh," I paused, "play a game?"

"A game?" Angelique scoffed, "We don't have that sort of luxury as things stand."

"Sure we do. It's not like we can go anywhere, so let's make use of this time instead of wasting it away by worrying. You guys trust him, right?"

"I suppose so. . ." She sighed. "What kind of game?"

"Well there's this one that my mom taught me; it's called Sticks." I brought up my hands with both index fingers raised, "It's basically a game of calculation. Both players will start with one finger on each hand, and you can either attack or split. Attacking would mean adding on fingers to the other player's hand, and splitting would be transferring a number of raised fingers to your other hand. It's really simple."

"Very well. I'll duel you." Angelique smirked, moving to sit directly across from me, fingers raised.

I, being the gentleman I was raised to be, of course let her go first. She immediately attacked my left

hand, where another finger was added. I attacked her right afterwards, so she had three fingers raised. She returned my attack and added three to my left hand, which struck it out. I bit my tongue, *Ugh, I should've split*. She completely dominated the game, and won within seconds. "Beginner's luck." I huffed.

She smirked, "There's no such thing as luck. Everything is determined by your choices."

"Is it not determined by the Way Maker?"

"Oh it most definitely is. But He works around the free will that was given to Man. Think about it, if I slapped you right now, do you think that was something that He had planned for you?"

"Well, I don't know."

"The answer is no. He doesn't want you to feel pain, but He keeps His promises and doesn't interfere, because slapping you would've been *my* decision. However, it can be used as a lesson as well. He utilizes what happens and turns it into something that can mature you."

"But then what about—" I started, but was cut off by a man appearing out of nowhere. "What the—?"

As soon as Helel's feet touched the soil, he collapsed. It looked like he was having a seizure, but was still conscious.

Vlam jumped up but stood as though he'd been glued in place. None of the Guardians looked sure of



what to do and stared helplessly at him. I was on my feet as well, just as clueless as the rest.

Genesis was the first to move; she fell to her knees and gathered up the trembling Guardian, “Helel, are you all right?” I couldn’t see her face, as her back was to me, but I could probably guess what it looked like based on the concern in her voice.

“I’m,” he swallowed as though he’d been deprived of water for a week, “fine.”

“I don’t think you are.” Vlam frowned, crossing his arms.

“No, I am.” Helel promised, his head falling back. We all stayed still for several moments, and then it looked like the man’s entire body sighed with relief as he said, “Yeah, I’m okay now. . . I’m okay.”

## 2. JUMPING INTO THE FIRE

After leaving the rubble of Mai, we ventured further inland, eliminating anybody in our path who committed heinous crimes against the Holy Judge's Book of Law. It wasn't hard to tell the cities of Chaos apart from the cities of the Peace Keeper. Usually, they dabbled in taboo rituals such as human sacrifice or denouncing the name of the One Above. I am ashamed to admit that I hadn't realized how much corruption lived in these lands. I was aware of the kingdoms' practices, having studied their history before, but I'm talking about millions of people collectively taking part in the pagan customs, stripping their brothers and sisters of their lives. It boiled my blood to such an extreme that even the earth's magma couldn't compare.

"Alvin." Genesis called.

I strode over to the Earth Guardian, who was leaning on the opposite side of a tree, faced away from the group and staring blankly at the ground. "What is it?"

"Why has this happened?" She sounded choked up.

"What do you mean?"

"You say that this has been happening for over a century. From the beginning of time! *Why?* I don't

understand. I know that this has something to do with the spirit of deceit, of whose name I do not even want to think of as it abhors me, but how has the corruption come to such a point that men and women will *willingly* give up the child they had been blessed with in order to appease a false god? I have seen morgues of skeletons, skulls on pikes, children's blood painted on walls, the list goes on. Why does Humanity choose to live those lives? Of murder, falsity, lies, corruption. What has happened to my Lord's Good world?"

I didn't say anything. If there was a proper response, it wouldn't come to mind. She had a right to ask these questions. The earth had been dirtied and stained with the blood of innocent lives and evil-summoning rituals. "Well, that's why you're here, I guess. To fix it."

"If only there were no need for us to exist." She said tiredly.

Words failed me. It wasn't easy to wrap my mind around: the desire to not need one's own existence. *I suppose my life isn't like theirs. I don't have the powers to mold the world as I please. I am not to live in such close service to the Holy One, as they have a direct connection to Him.*

After several more days of walking, the fortress of Freed came into view. A heavy scent of juniper flooded my nostrils since the terrain was completely

covered with dark green cedar trees and feet-grabbing underbrush. The fortress was built beside the Rio de Vida, and wagons were carting buckets of water from the river.

“Let’s set up camp before doing anything else.” Skuggi suggested.

Everyone agreed. My body was aching from the enormous amount of walking; knight training didn’t hold a candle to purging evil. Angelique cleared through brush with condensed wind, cleanly slicing through blades of grass and trunks of juniper with one motion of the hand. Genesis reached down and pulled up two large slabs of stone from underneath the soil as easily as if she were simply picking weeds. They slowly fell inwards until they were leaning on the other for support. I tossed my sword into the pyramid; it wasn’t a fancy sword or anything, basically just a wooden stick that was used for training, but Sir Rochel insisted on calling it a sword. It felt good to have that weight off my hips. It was like tossing aside my worries and freeing myself. Maybe not to that extent, but there’s no denying the emotional baggage attached to that twig.

“What can I do to help?” I asked Neró who was unwrapping loaves of bread from their cloths.

“Give any intel you can to Helel for now. We don’t know much about Freed, just that it needs to be *cleansed*.” He shrugged casually as though we were here for a janitorial job.

“All right, I’ll do that.” It was easy to agree, but a bit tough to follow through. Helel still made me a little nervous; his presence was intimidating enough, but his stare startled me. It was so strong that it could be felt everytime he looked in my direction.

The Guardian was squatted next to the river, poking at the water with a stick. “Hey Helel,” I said awkwardly, running my hand through my hair nervously. “So I was told to give any information to you.”

“Okay.”

He didn’t say anything afterwards so I just nodded and said, “All right! So Freed. . . it’s definitely a place full of baddies. They’re pretty notorious for their brutality. They don’t differentiate between their own citizens and their enemies. If they are set to crush someone, they will trample anything and anyone in their path. Their eyes are blind to the line between good and evil, and they don’t follow the doctrine. This fortress is a hotspot for human trafficking. As we speak, there are children, women, men, people of all ages and colors holed away in that blasted building. They raid villages, towns, tear down city walls and slaughter the fighters, then whisk away the powerless and sell them off as slaves. If they find any who follow the Lord’s ways, they throw them into concentration camps where they are massacred. I’ve wanted to demolish this place for a long time, but didn’t know how. Now, there is a way.”

“Who do they answer to?” Helel had turned away from the river and was drilling through me with his black eyes.

“Their king, Heshmael of the Gebusites, worships the god Ba’al. His reign reaches over this entire territory, but his castle is in Heeju, north of Geban.”

“How dare he. . .” Helel snarled, baring his teeth.

“Yes, how dare he indeed. But it won’t last long, because you and the others are here.”

“You are here as well. We will help you build your kingdom, where the people of our Father will come together and rejoice. Hope is not lost yet for those who believe.” Helel declared.

I nodded, thinking that I’ve fulfilled my role, but then Helel did something unexpected. He rose and extended his hand, “It’s good to have you on the team.” Then, he *smiled*.

I felt the corners of my mouth being tugged, but suppressed that feeling and gathered together all of my dignity, “I’m thankful to be of use.”

“You’re more than just a tool. You were chosen for a reason, Alvin, and I’m putting all of my trust in that decision.”

“You know. . . you’re not as scary as you seem.”

“Scary? Me?” He lifted his eyebrows, then burst into laughter. It was a pleasant sound, something that

drew me into the same action. “I guess I can see why you perceive me as such. My appearance isn’t the most friendly.”

“No, it definitely is not.”

He chuckled again, his shoulders lifting with every breath, then went back to poking the river.

“So what are you doing?”

“I’m bored. They won’t let me do anything since my strength needs to be *saved*,” he formed quotations with his fingers. “Honestly. . . they should just let me help.”

“Well, I agree that your strength should be preserved, especially after what happened at Mai.”

“Well it hasn’t happened since then. Nor had it happened before, it just turned out to be the first impression I gave you, is all.”

“Perhaps. But it doesn’t change the fact that it had happened. It won’t disappear from history, no matter how much you wish it to. Nothing from history can ever be erased; its mark will forever remain.”

“That’s easy to say when you don’t know everything about history. People come and go like wildflowers, their lifespans are short and their bodies are fragile like petals and stems. Not everything in history has left a mark.” He retorted.

“That’s where I disagree. Everything and everyone has left a mark, we might not be aware of it, but it’s there. A mark doesn’t need to be physical, nor

does it have to be a memory. It can be either, it can be both, or it can be neither. The fact still remains that the thing or person existed once; they lived and died and their shells were left behind to turn to dirt. Their mark was left in the timeline of the earth's life, and will forever dwell in that spot. Every action, every word spoken, every thought that crossed that person's mind will forever be in history, in the past. The thing that doesn't exist yet is the future. In fact, the future could very well never exist, except that it does. Time is a construct that only we abide in. The Heavenly Father, for instance, does not live in Time, for He sees all Time. He lives in the Past, Present, and Future. For He is the One who Was, Is, and always Will Be. The Never-changing. But we do not know of the Future, only the Past and Present. That's what makes this life special, because we forge our Future in the Present. Our lives differ based on what decisions we make. That is why I am here, and not buried beneath the rubble of Mai. My decision to follow the Lord faithfully has brought me out of disaster, and given me a Purpose."

"Yes, but you chose to be here. I did not. What good is a life of Free Will when Free Will was never an option?"

I scowled, "What good is living a life where Free Will pulls you away from the Creator? Why do you desire a life that can lead you astray? You have been blessed with the Purpose of serving the Heavens, how



many people would hope to have such a calling? If I could choose to be in your position, I would. But my path is different. To be a leader over the King's people, and a servant to the Lord. That is my Purpose, and I will follow it faithfully.”

“I can see why He chose you, of all the scrawny, short people in this world.”

“I'm going to be optimistic and perceive that comment as a compliment, rather than an insult.”

“It was meant to be such.”

“Very good then, thank you.”

After our discussion, we returned to the campsite, where everything was already pitched. There would be no campfire, since the smoke could alert the fortress, as was pointed out by Genesis, the ever perceptive one she is. Her caution was at times overbearing, but on occasions such as these it proved to be worthwhile.

Sleep was not an option that night. The excitement of finally being able to demolish such an evil place was running through my veins, sending a thrill throughout my entire body. I couldn't allow myself to fall asleep when on such an adrenaline high.

I sat in the corner of the pyramid, smiling wildly to myself. *Finally, we can bring justice to those who have suffered at the hands of tyranny. Finally, we can free the enslaved, slay the torturers, and burn down the building whose bricks are imbued with the blood and*

*tears of the unrightfully imprisoned. When I take up the throne as per the Lord's Will, I will put an end to such wretched actions. Slavery will be among the first to be outlawed. My knights, whoever they may be, will capture any person who partakes in such practices, and they will be thrown into a dungeon, left to rot among the mice and rats.*

The sound of rustling interrupted my thoughts. My head turned and caught a glimpse of the silhouette of a Guardian sneaking out of the pyramid. Naturally, I got up to follow. The moon was nearly full, so everything was more or less visible in the silvery, washed-out light. Ahead of me stood the Guardian. His back was to me, but I could tell from the muscular build that it was none other than Vlam.

He was standing at the edge of a small creek which split off from the river, only to rejoin it downstream. Vlam was staring up at the fortress which was like a tall shadow against the star-filled sky. It was tall and foreboding, with an ambience of sorrow.

I wanted to say something funny, or ask him why he was sneaking around like a mouse in a cat's home, but sensed that it was better to be more mature in this situation. I approached Vlam, careful to make some noise as to announce my arrival, that way I didn't end up getting barbecued from surprising the Fire Guardian.

"What are you doing?" I whispered upon reaching him.

The man didn't look at me; his yellow eyes were glued to the structure, "Scouting. I heard something. . . a scream. It was agonizing."

I chewed on the inside of my cheek, suppressing my rising fury. "They must be torturing someone." Suddenly, my anticipation spiked, "Why don't we go now? We can take them down."

"No. We must wait for the right time." He said shortly.

I deflated. My desire burned to tear that place down brick by brick, but Vlam was right. If we did anything before the determined time, then we could very well bring about disaster. "I understand."

"Let's bide our time for now. We will get to work first thing in the morning, when everyone is properly rested and can hear His words properly."

"Very well. I will do as you say."

I couldn't do as he said. As soon as we had returned, I heard the wails. They were sharp and piercing, digging straight down into my heart until it was unbearable. I waited until I was certain Vlam had fallen asleep, then left.

Now, I stood at the base of the fortress, hugging the wall and searching for an entrance. All the while, my breath hissed prayers for blessings of protection and guidance as I walked under the watchtowers. Light from torches flickered within the windows, but thankfully the

night and shadows covered me. Not even the moonlight gave away my positioning.

While turning the corner, I stumbled and fell into a doorway. The door opened behind me and I tumbled into the room. There was a muffled scream and I was whacked in the back of the head. I groaned as I blinked stars from my eyes, massaging the forming bump.

“Who are you?” Someone hissed.

My eyes raised but could see nothing due to the lack of light. “Uh. . . who are you?”

The sputter of a flame jumped to life as a woman struck a match. She lit an oil lamp and held it next to my face, leaning over me. She squinted suspiciously, “I’m not obligated to answer an intruder.”

“I suppose not. I am—,” my words were cut short by a rising screech. The woman grimaced, and her eyes flashed with anger and disgust.

“I don’t know who you are, I’ve never seen you around the fortress, but if you’re using such means to come in, then I’m hoping you’re here to wreak havoc in this condemning place.”

“I am. Do you hate it here?”

“Hate would be an understatement.”

“Then, it’ll be an honor working with you.” I whispered, properly studying her face. Her eyes were almost as dark as Helel’s, and her hair was a fair ginger.

Her dainty lips curled up into a smile, “Yes. I’ve been waiting for this opportunity for a long time.”

We didn't do any introductions. It wasn't necessary. All we needed was to know that no matter what, we would not utter a word of the other if either of us were to be caught. We would take the fall alone. The corridors of the fortress were nearly empty, save for the few patrols that passed through every now and then. When we saw the bouncing light of a lamp, we would hide in the nearest doorway or disappear into a dark room. The place was haunting. There was such a thick air of negativity which hung like fog.

“What are we going to do?” The girl asked.

“We need to start small, then build until there is absolute chaos within this place. So I say first: we steal the confidential documents.”

“But those are under guard twenty-four-seven. We have no hope of reaching them.”

“We do. Just follow my lead.”

We ascended a flight of stairs. As we were sweeping through the hallways, I kept a mental note of everything. I wanted to free the slaves, so figuring out where they were was of utmost importance. The girl probably knew, but I decided not to ask until we were at that stage of chaos. Wherever the documents are, the slaves will not be. They probably wanted to keep a distance between the cries of the imprisoned and their own offices. It was the least they could do to keep their humanity. If they couldn't hear the screams, then who says they were happening?

“Here.” She hissed, pulling me into a doorway and pushing down my head as the voices of guards were caught by my ears.

I tried to hear what the guards were saying, but their hushed whispers were too faint to decipher. I could only pick up a few words, *shipment. . . week. . . smell. . .* I frowned, *Are they discussing another shipment of slaves? Is there another one coming soon? Too bad. . . there won't be anywhere to ship them to.*

“So what do we do now?” The girl hissed.

“How many hairpins do you have?”

“Enough. Why do you ask?”

“I’m going to need three.”

“Very well. And what of the guards?”

I scoured everything that surrounded me. There were no pebbles or rocks or anything to throw, but there was a hole in the wall right across the hallway. I lowered myself onto all fours and crawled across the corridor, then reached into the hole and felt around. My hand bumped into something that squirmed. My fingers grabbed a hold of the furball and extracted it. The rat squealed in my palm. I moved back to the doorway and asked, “Do you have a ribbon perchance? And maybe a bell, or something that will make a lot of noise?”

“I do. . .” She said, sneering at the rat and undoing her hair. She handed me the ribbon and then pulled a tiny flute from her dress pocket. I handed her the rat, which she held at an arm’s length, then

configured the ribbon and flute together, proceeding to tie it around the rat's neck.

“Okay.” I said, taking back the rodent. I leaned into the hall and gently tossed it toward the guards. It landed with a squeak, then scurried down the corridor. It only ran faster when the flute began clanging behind it.

“What was that?” A guard audibly asked.

“I don't know. Do we check it out?”

“I think so. Better to be safe than sorry.”

Their footsteps followed the sound of the clangs, further down the hallway. We took this opportunity to quietly sprint to the door, which was locked with several different locks. I opened my hand and the girl put three hairpins in my palm. Each pin was stuck into a different lock. I picked open two, then went to the third while moving a hairpin. There were seven locks in total and it took me just under thirty seconds to fully unlock them all. We slipped into the door and closed it behind us. I locked the door from the inside, just in case they noticed that the locks had been tampered with.

The girl lit a torch, and I stripped off my vest and shoved it against the bottom of the door, so no light would escape. The room was grand and expensive-looking. Bookshelves lined every wall and held all sorts of writings. Scrolls were stacked on top of the shelves and parchments were strewn out over a desk in the center of the room. A large window displayed the

night sky, which had a hint of morning as the darkness was lifting.

I stood at the desk and gathered up the parchments, skimming over them as I stashed them in my belt. The girl was grabbing whatever she could and shoving them into her pockets and corset.

Everything had to be done silently since the guards had returned, complaining about there being a ghost in the fortress. I pulled open the desk drawers and rummaged through them, taking anything that looked mildly important. I also grabbed the big, fancy stamp that was on the desk's corner. The girl and I exchanged glances. I motioned to the big window with my head, and she looked at me as though I were insane.

I slid the glass out of place and stuck my head outside to gauge the drop. It was about ten feet down, enough to possibly hurt something but not enough to die. "You go first." I hissed.

She looked like she wanted to argue, but growled, "Fine." She slid onto the windowsill and inched forwards.

"I'll lower you down." I said, holding out my hands. She took them then lowered herself against the wall. A gust of wind ripped through the room, sending papers into a flurry. As I panicked, I hastily lowered her then released her hands.

"Why is there so much noise?" One of the guards asked from outside the room. I clenched my jaw



and leaned over the edge. The girl had landed safely and was sprinting towards the cedar trees.

“Wait, it’s unlocked!” The guards realized. They pushed the door, only for it to rattle against the inside lock. “Get it open!”

I swung around so that I was holding onto the sill and hanging over the drop.

“Raise the alarm!” The guards barked. I dropped down, but my ankle twisted and I fell to the ground, rolling around in pain. “There!” A soldier pointed at me from the tower. I twisted to my feet and began hobbling towards the forest, but a group of knights had already made it out of the fortress and were running towards me. I swiftly emptied my clothes of any documents and stashed them underneath the low branches of a juniper, and hobbled in the opposite direction. They were on me in no time, and I was tackled to the ground.

“You little rat.” The one on top of me sneered, jabbing my head with the butt of his sword.

### 3. FORTRESS OF FREED

They had me dragged into the courtyard and tied to a pole. Honestly, it was horrible hospitality. I was being made an example of; the only thing is that there really wasn't anybody to show me off to. Everyone here had basically already committed themselves to afterlives of endless pain and suffering, so what was it to them that I was tied to a pole after breaking and entering? The only thing they could really do about it was sneer and make degrading comments to pass the time. Anyways, their doomsday was coming soon, they just didn't know it.

*Actually, wouldn't that be today?* I realized.

This was the day that the Guardians would bring their mighty fortress to ruins. *Oh shoot, this is the last place I want to be then.* The courtyard was directly in the center of the fortress. Of course, I wasn't here solely for show; they planned to burn me at midnight as an offering to their goddess, Ashteroe.

Above me, the sky turned a light purple, then pink. The sun was rising and soon the Guardians would notice my absence. They'd find out that I had run off on my own without consulting the Guide about what actions to take. *I was hasty.* I recognized, a sinking feeling in my gut.

Then, a feeling of power, but not my own, washed over me, *Why did you not trust Me?* The words tightened a band around my heart, squeezing it with regret, “You know my heart better than I ever will, Lord. I do trust You, but I didn’t wait for Your timing. Please, forgive this servant of his sins, and save me from the wretched claws of these ones who forsake You.” I begged. I so desperately wanted to collapse to my knees and bow down onto my forehead, but the pole would not allow me to. “Who are you to keep me from my Lord?” I grumbled, struggling against the ropes which restrained my movements.

*You are safe.*

“And the slaves which are kept holed away in the cellars of this blasted structure?”

*They are safe.*

“Thank you. Truly, You are more magnificent than life itself.”

*Well, I am Life itself.* A warm, bubbly feeling brought itself to my chest.

“Truly, You are.” I smiled, peace replacing my desperation. And just at that moment, the walls of the fortress combusted in all directions. Rocks and soot were strewn across the courtyard; the grounds were covered everywhere except for the perfect circle clear of any residue around me.

I looked up to see the stoic silhouettes of the Guardians, standing in front of me. The ropes caught

aflame and burned away, then I was lifted by a gust of wind and kept afloat in the air. From the ground, geysers of water broke through the earth, flooding the courtyard and collecting the crumbling bricks of the fortress walls.

Valgus joined me in the air, except he soared far higher. It was like the sun had hastened its arising, as the light which shone from his body was blinding. Then his light departed from his body and grouped into seven orbs around his head. Beams shot from the orbs, dissolving anything they touched.

Skuggi stood directly underneath Valgus, and tentacles of darkness protruded from his back and sides. With immense speed, they reached out and grabbed at anything that moved. Shivering fruit trees, vibrating pieces of metal, and people. The two guards which were caught up in his tentacles screamed in terror as they were thrown through the air. However, their squeals were cut short as they were airborne, and their bodies crumbled to ash as they hit the floor.

Genesis was in the courtyard as well, but the tentacles of darkness did not touch her. Instead, they protected her from any oncoming material which was being swept up by a wind gale. She sat with her legs crossed and eyes closed, and the earth began to tremble. Below, the courtyard split in two and magma reached up from the depths of the earth. Vlam jumped in to control the flow of the earth's blood.

In the midst of the turmoil, Angelique had come to be right beside me. She startled me by suddenly saying, “Now it’s your turn.”

“My turn?”

“Yes. Don’t think you’re getting cut out of the work when you ran here on your own accord.” She scowled.

“Yes ma’am!” I saluted, “What do I need to do?”

“Guide the enslaved to safety. Helel is at the campsite preparing food; take them there.”

“I will.” I promised, and was carried away by Angelique’s wind.

After being delivered safely in the middle of crumbling walls and flying rubble, I searched for the door to the cellar. I found it quickly because it was basically the only thing left standing in the wreckage; as the Lord had promised, they were indeed surrounded by a protective barrier, as I had been.

The door swung open with the slightest touch, and a spiraling staircase led down to a vast, dark, and damp room which smelled of week-old animal carcasses and dung. Several gasps ensued as I took the final step into the cellar, and people of all ages and genders cowered into the corners of their cells. Animal cages would’ve been a more proper term when looking at their imprisonments; they were smaller and degrading.

“Lord, what do I do?” I whispered, searching around for any keys to unlock all of the doors.

*Touch each lock one by one, and they shall come undone.* He instructed.

I did so and ran down the rows, touching each padlock with the tip of my index finger. And as was promised, each lock undid itself and clanged to the ground. The doors swept open and slowly the enslaved peered out from their cages, staring at freedom as though it were a stranger.

“Come, follow me! You are covered by the shield of the Protector, and I will be your guide to safety!” My voice reverberated within the concrete room.

The people began chattering mutedly amongst themselves, but followed nevertheless. The fear of what might come reflected in their deepened eyes, but determination set their jaws and kept their bodies moving forward.

We climbed up the stairs and out of the demolition. The cedar trees welcomed us with a strong scent, and I led the group to where Helel was hovering over a large bonfire, turning over a roasting goat as it baked over the flames.

He looked up and flashed a smile, “Alvin, you made it.”

“Of course I did.” I huffed, smacking his shoulder. Then I turned to the crowd, “Please, find somewhere to rest, bask in the morning sun, you can even leave if you wish. You are free.”

Their chatter grew, and soon the group began to break into smaller circles, and they spread out across the river bed, some drinking from the stream, others sleeping in the sunlight. Then someone caught my eye.

She was speaking with Helel as I approached, “You can really do that?”

“Yes. I am a Guardian, after all.”

“You made it out.” I smiled, greeting the maid which helped me raid the fortress’ office.

“Yes, and I’m glad to see you did as well.” She said, “You travel with the Guardians?”

“Yes, I do. They pulled me out of Mai before destroying it.”

“*I* pulled you out. *They* destroyed it.” Helel corrected.

“Yes, yes, thank you, oh powerful Guardian.” I bowed, throwing out my arms for some flair.

“The Guardians truly are spectacular.” She said, her mouth round with awe.

“Yes, but none of it would be possible without the power of the Sovereign.” Vlam rumbled, emerging from the trees.

“Quite so, Vlam. Quite so.” Skuggi agreed. The rest of the Guardians appeared behind them.

“Helel, we can take over food duties, we need your power now.” Angelique said, taking the stick which suspended the goat over the licking flames.

“Very well, I shall return shortly.” Helel promised, stepping backwards and disappearing into another realm.

“He disappeared!” The girl gasped, stumbling back with her hand clasped over an agape mouth. “I mean, he mentioned he could, but I didn’t expect to witness it before my very eyes! This is monumental! I should write a song about this, that way this very moment can be carried on for generations. I’m no poet, but I can certainly whip something up if I try!”

“You seem to be having fun,” I chuckled. She had been so serious in the fortress; it amazed me to see a childish side to this girl.

“Fun? Not at all. I’m simply in awe. I hadn’t even heard of Guardians until now. Though, there have been whispers of supernatural beings wiping out the major cities one by one. To think they’d show up here!” She then turned to Angelique, “What is your mission here? Have you all really demolished those cities? Wow, your eyes are stunning. I’ve never seen two different colored irises on a single head!”

Angelique smiled adoringly, “Yes, we have erased those cities from the face of this planet as per accordance with the Creator’s Will. Our Mission is written upon our very hearts. We are eradicating the influence of Evil in this world, starting with reaping the souls he has already blackened.”

“So you’re killing. . . everyone?”



Skuggi interjected, “We do not bloody our hands. And we shall not until instructed to. For now, the Father is collecting the lost spirits. In the first place, He was the one who had created them and placed them in the world, so why shouldn’t He bring them back?”

“Isn’t that cruel? He put us here in the first place, why kill us when it isn’t our natural time yet?”

“Cruel?” His eyebrows shot skywards, “Answer me this, is it more cruel to create for the purpose of Good with the best intentions for those Creations, only for them to be tainted and spiral into self-demise, and rescind those who had been taken into the darkness so that those remaining in the light shall live peacefully? Isn’t it crueler to create for Good, have it fall into Evil, and let the world and those living in it rot away at the hands of the Fallen? We have passed through countless towns and villages which were burnt to the ground; corpses were littered on every street corner, and heads on pikes were used as interior design. Within those cities we conquered for the Lord were trenches filled with the skeletons of infants, children, women, men, those who were used as sacrifices for the false gods and goddesses. Wouldn’t it be less cruel to save those who live for peace than to allow such happenings to transpire?”

“Well. . . yes, I see your point.” She conceded.

“I apologize on his behalf; you see, us Guardians get a little energetic when speaking of our Mission. We feel the heat of the Lord’s fiery anger when recalling the

sins of those who have forsaken Him.” Genesis smiled apologetically.

“No, not at all! I apologize for asking such an insensitive question.”

“What is your name, child?” Genesis asked, taking the girl’s hand.

“Valerie. I am of peasant descent, so I have no last name.”

“We have no last name either, but we come from the Highest of royalty. If you accept Him as your heavenly father, you will be crowned royalty as well. It may not seem so in this realm, but when you shed your body and pass into the next then you will bear witness to the most beautiful kingdom.”

“Yes, I would like that. I have held faith within my heart, but was afraid to live through that power, especially under the tyranny of this territory’s king. I didn’t want to be enslaved or tortured as they were,” she gestured towards the small groups of people, “so I became a maid instead in the most awful place. So many times. . . I considered giving it all up, and letting go of everything, but now that I see you, the Guardians. . . and your companion,” she nodded to me as though I were simply an afterthought, “I have hope. I can live proudly as a daughter of the Holy One.” Her face brimmed with confidence.

Valgus stepped forward and placed his palm upon Valerie's shoulder, "Welcome to our family, young Valerie."

"Family. . . what a nostalgic word." She smiled a sort of bittersweet, sad yet joyful smile. I understood that feeling all too well. My mother still lived, but I couldn't see her as easily now. She was still in the small town several miles away from the destruction of Mai; I hadn't even told her of my new path. However, it was necessary for me to drop everything and leave immediately.

*I hope she isn't too worried.* I thought. However, notions such as those wouldn't do me much good when it came to completing my own mission. *I'll visit her when all is finished.*

While we waited, I approached Genesis who was speaking with several of the rescues. "Genesis, I have a question." It was something which had been weighing on my mind for a while, and after bearing witness to such a fearsome display of might, I had to get it off of my chest.

"What is it, Alvin?"

"What is the purpose of the Guardians? I know you do good, and you bring good, but is it only through destruction?"

She pulled me aside so we were hidden by brush and our voices were drowned by the river. "You think

my powers are only those which destroy?” She cocked an eyebrow, seemingly amused.

“Well, I don’t know what to think. I would hope not.”

“Let me show you something,” she leaned down and spread her palm over a bare piece of dirt. Slowly, the soil began to shift, and from it poked out a small sprout. The sprout grew until it was a decipherable juniper sapling. “Our powers are of Creation, we are a part of it. We cannot create life, only the Father can do so, but we are here to help and nurture it. Yes, we tear down buildings and split apart mountains, but from those ashes will rise a new type of life. Rather, a type of life which is much older than the current, before evil took root in the tree of humankind. One that is for the betterment of the world, which brings peace and tranquility to those living in it. That is what our powers are for, not destruction, but for rebirth.”

## 4. A GLORIOUS DISCOVERY

It had taken nearly four hours for Helel to return from the other realm. Once he did, he was taken aside by Genesis and Skuggi, as he was having an episode. His mouth was foaming at the corners and his breathing was more haggard than that of an old man who walked up a flight of stairs carrying a basket of bundled wheat upon his hunched back. It was concerning, to say the least.

After Helel recovered, we went to a small town nearby, which had somehow escaped the carnage of the fortress' ruler's tyranny. It would normally be a three days' hike if there were no breaks in between while traveling only when the sun was in the sky, but with such a big assembly it took an extra four sun cycles to reach the hamlet.

The town was hesitant to take in such a copious amount of refugees at first, as there were only about a hundred people already living there and their food and resources were scarce, but the rescuees persuaded them with their skills. Many of the women could tend to farms and the kitchen, and the men were able hunters and sharpshooters. It was confusing as to why they were enslaved rather than enlisted, but all is such in the game of war and pillage. Dominance is apparently the most

important thing to a person in power, and showing it was a must when it came to entities smaller than your own.

*I will not live like that, showing off for the sake of my own pride. My mind rambled, It only leaves behind destruction and leaves the world in distress. Who am I to be so great as to turn the world upside-down in order to be placed beneath my feet? I am not the Creator, nor am I anything greater than a mere human. 'Till the end of my days, I will strive to bring peace and spread the Light throughout this crumbling world. I am told that I will be a king, but there is only one true King.*

We left them behind and continued on to the next location. It was a city without walls, as it was so big and powerful that it feared nothing. No other king was tempted enough to attack it, as they were convinced that it would only bring their own demise. I had never been close enough to the city to see the famed castle made purely of marble and gold, but I could imagine the prestigiousness of the structure. The thought of such riches being in the greasy hands of awful individuals made my stomach turn; but nothing was without a purpose. *They will soon find out that their riches aren't truly theirs.*

The journey would've taken several months if not for the Guardians. They used their elements to travel at inhuman speeds. I was carried away by Angelique's air. It was incredible to see the ground moving swiftly

below, as though it were a water channel flowing furiously beneath my feet. The terrain smoothly transitioned from wooded hills into grassy plains, then into lush green fields. Lakes dotted the scenery and hills rose and fell into the horizon. Mountains edged the world far in the distance, piercing the rolling white clouds.

Against the hazy mountains stood a blinding white, swirling castle. The towers grew as they spiraled upwards to a point in the center, where a giant golden bell hung. The castle was perched atop a hill that wasn't large enough to be considered a mountain, but not small enough to simply be called a hill. Around the mound was the city.

The city itself did not have walls, though the castle did to separate itself from the middle class; different districts were spread out in all directions. The shopping district was bustling with activity, and the residential district mirrored what one would imagine as cordial.

“It’s amazing how much of a perspective you can get on things from so high up.” I commented, receiving a knowing smile from the Air Guardian. “Where’s the temple?” I frowned. As someone well-versed in the history of each kingdom, I knew for a fact that this city in particular was very strong in their faith to the goddess Ashteroe. They had built a temple purely of gems, precious metals, and beautiful stones within the castle

walls, but from my vantage point, there was no trace of it.

“Ah, right. You wouldn’t know yet. This kingdom has been delivered into the hands of the Waymaker’s people. You are not the only king to be anointed.” Angelique grinned brightly. “That temple has since been torn down, and a new one dedicated to the Lord is being built.”

“So. . . we aren’t destroying it?”

“No. We are not here for a razing.”

“Wow. . . so the king was defeated?”

“Not just the king, but every individual who rebelled against the Father was slain. I was not there when it happened, but I’m sure it was a sight to be reckoned with.”

“Why have I not heard of it?”

“Because of fear. The kings of the people are terrified of the kings anointed by the Lord. They recognize the power granted to those who fight with the Heavenly One behind them.”

“Incredible. . .”

We passed right over the castle walls and landed in the courtyard. Imperial knights were quick to surround us, pointing swords and arrows at us. However, someone stepped from behind the lines and motioned that all weapons be dropped. All blade points that were ready to skewer us like shish kabobs were then lowered, and a man dressed in a purple cape stepped



forward with his arms outstretched, “Guardians, we have been awaiting you.” He said grandly.

“I’m not a Guardian.” Was all I could think to say.

“Is that so? Then—,” he flicked his finger and the weapons were immediately trained on me once again.

“No, no wait.” Angelique stepped in front of me, her hands raised. “We are the Guardians; Alvin, however, is a companion.” She explained.

“Then, who is ‘we’? There is just you and the boy.”

“We are ‘we’.” Helel said, his voice echoing as a portal opened right beside me. He stepped down and stared the man directly in the eyes, as though challenging him to refute his claim. A sunray bent down and scorched the pavement, and Valgus emerged in all of his shiny glory. Genesis showed up next, having forced her way through the gates and passing the troops behind us. Skuggi separated himself from the shadows, and Vlam dropped from the sky. Neró was the last to show; he was propelled into the sky using water pressure akin to a geyser, and he not-so-gracefully fell before the man in the cape.

He lifted his head and laboriously pleaded, “You guys. . . please don’t leave me behind next time.”

“Apologies, Neró.” Vlam helped the Water Guardian to his feet.

“Then, are we all here?” Valgus asked.

“Yes, we are.” Genesis said, holding up eight fingers.

“So, you truly are the Guardians of which I have been informed of?” The man asked.

“Do you doubt us?” Helel asked, raising an eyebrow.

“Any doubts I had have been washed away with your appearance.” He bowed. “Please, follow me to the throne room. I’m sure we have much to discuss.”

“Of course, King Leander.” Genesis smiled politely.

“*KING?*” I gasped. “Really?” In all honesty, I had no idea.

“Of course, who did you think I was?” King Leander cocked an eyebrow, peering over his shoulder at me.

“I don’t know, some sort of knight or something.”

The man burst out laughing, a hearty, thick laugh. “I suppose I’m not dressed for the part. I just prefer keeping my attire simple. There is One who is far greater than I am, after all.”

“Amen, brother.” I said, striding to the man and clapping his back.

The throne room was as glamorous as one would expect. Normally, the Lord would require that

everything be destroyed if it was occupied by pagans, but this castle was originally built as a *really* big altar to Him. The ones who had built it, a king whose name was forgotten in history and his court, turned to the goddess Ashteroe, and built a separate temple for her. The castle they decorated to please themselves, and their minds slowly warped into believing that all of this wealth was gathered by their own skills rather than given by the Provider. Now, it seemed like it was transitioning back into the altar it was constructed to be. The throne itself had been fenced off and a more simple chair was placed at the foot of the stairs leading up to the fenced off throne.

Fountains spilled in all corners of the room, their sources of water hidden. The escorting knights positioned themselves outside of the large, heavy doors, which then closed us in. Leander's cape swished flamboyantly as he took a seat. "So, what brings you to this castle?"

"We seek a tranquil sanctuary where we can rest for a few days. Then we will be on our way." Genesis explained.

"We would be honored to host the Guardians of the Elements. Shall we hold a banquet to honor your arrival?"

"Please, there is no need for such grandeur. We are simply the Lord's humble servants, and do not wish to receive more hospitality than we deserve. Otherwise

we would become too comfortable, and lose sight of our Mission. As an anointed, I'm sure you can understand our reasoning." She politely smiled.

"Of course. I shall respect the honorable Guardian's wishes. Allow me to personally show you to your rooms."

"Whoa." I gawked at the gold trimming around the white door made of hickory. My jaw dropped even further when that door was pushed open. Inside was a king-sized bed with goose-down bedding. The bedframe was carved out of the same hickory wood, and all of the furniture matched it. There was a giant sofa staring out of a large half-circle window; a vanity with a polished mirror sat at the opposite side of the room from the bed. A wool rug spread across the floor, and purple patterned curtains were hung above the window. A writing desk was placed in the room's corner; ink and a quill along with several sheets of paper and a wax seal were orderly placed upon the surface. There were two more doors aside from the one leading into the hallway.

"I'll send a maid to tend to you later. Dinner will be held in the banquet hall; you shall dine with me tonight." King Leander patted my shoulder. It was just me, him, and a few escorting knights left as the Guardians had been shown to their rooms first.

"Yes sir, thank you." I entered the room, taking note of every detail. This sort of luxury was something

I'd only dreamt of, and it was intimidating. This was what turned the people against the Lord. The accumulating wealth of this kingdom had twisted their mind with pride, and watered their seeds of greed. How long would it be until I fell for that same very trap? *I absolutely must not allow such a thing to happen. I would rather be scraping my food off of the streets than be turned away from the Father.*

The door clambored shut behind me, and I was left alone. The first thing I did was unbelt my sword and prop it against the wall. Then, I explored the room. The two doors led to the bathroom and the closet, where toiletries and clothes were laid out neatly. I'd always imagined myself in a castle, but never as an honored guest. My fantasies had always been that I would be defending the walls or fighting on the front lines in order to save my country, but this was never in those dreams.

I snooped around the bathroom. There was a tub suspended over a pit where firewood was stored. I frowned, *Is this how they bathe? Being cooked like stew?* I was inspecting the pit when a knock came from the bedroom door. I hurriedly made my way over and opened it; outside stood a maid pushing a cart of various items. On the top rack was an assortment of snacks, and on the bottom was a can and a burning candle.

“Can I help you?” I asked.

She smiled, “Actually, I’m here to help you. Would you be interested in a bath? If you are to dine

with the king tonight, then you should be properly cleaned.”

“In that case, I would appreciate one.” I stepped aside so the maid could enter with the cart.

She was proficient in her work. Within ten minutes, the bath water was being heated by the fire in the pit. After another thirty minutes, I was told to begin my bath. There were no attendants, as I’d requested to be left alone for the duration of my first warm-water bathing experience.

The prospect of a warm bath had been foreign to me at first; we rarely bathed back in my old town, and when we did it was always in the frigid river waters. This was an entirely new realm of satisfaction. “My eyes have been opened,” I sighed, sinking into the tub until only my forehead was exposed.

I soaked for half an hour, and was going to remain as such but was interrupted by a pounding at the door, “Honored guest, it is time to begin preparations for the meal with His Majesty.”

Groaning in disappointment, I reluctantly left my bath behind. “I’ll get back to you later.” I promised, patting the rim of the tub. After this bath, I would never look at bathing in the river the same. Once upon a time the feeling of being clean had been enough, but not anymore. Turns out being boiled wasn’t all that bad.

I wrapped a towel around my waist and left the room. It was uncomfortable being so exposed when in

front of the attendants, but they promised that they didn't care. This was simply their job. I put my undergarments on myself, though. They didn't protest when I grabbed the clothing from the cart and hid myself in the bathroom.

They dressed me in a fancy coat and breeches. The coat was beige, and the breeches white. It didn't do much for my complexion, which looked as though I'd been working in the fields, but it was nicer than what I had before, which was a ratty cotton shirt and leggings. My hair was combed flat to my head, which made my ears stick out like a mouse, and my shoes were buckled way too tight. The attendants stepped away from me once they were finished; I looked at myself in the mirror and grimaced. I normally looked younger than my age, but this was just too much. My appearance resembled a ten year old boy getting ready to go frolicking in the fields while my mother had a picnic with her lady friends. I almost threw up in my mouth when looking at my reflection.

"How do you like it, sir?" One of the attendants, a young man with poofy brown hair and dark eyes asked.

I looked at him from the corner of my eyes and gave an uncomfortable smile, "It's great. . ."

The meal was the most beautiful thing I'd ever laid my eyes on. Every color of the rainbow was present at that table, and the aromas wafting through the air was

glorious. But the real show-stopper, the thing that truly changed how I viewed the world, was the taste. The steak that was served was seasoned so perfectly that I don't think I could ever see a cow without remembering it. Not when I knew they could be *this*. All in all, my stomach was about to burst by the end of the seven courses. I retired afterwards, and fell fast asleep in my room thinking to myself, *What a life of luxury. If only every day could be like this. . .*



## 5. SHOP TILL WE DROP

I woke up the next morning with a stomach ache. As difficult as it was to move, I forced myself to roll out of the sheets and dress myself for breakfast. As I was buckling my belt a knock at the door startled me. I hustled over and turned the knob. Standing outside was Helel, shifting uncomfortably and looking at the ceiling.

“What’s up?” I asked.

“Are you bored?”

“Not really, why?”

“Do you want to go to town with me?” He asked nonchalantly.

“Yes! Let me grab my boots.” I gushed; it was back to the gross, unwashed, grimey shirt and leggings.

We left the castle walls by carriage and were taken to the shopping district. The shops were brightly colored, and the people strolling along the street were dressed in fancy clothes. “It’s so different from Mai.” I noted, remembering the port city. It was filled with statues of gold at every turn, depicting their worship to the gods. I was uneducated back then of just how much evil those idols spawned, despite the obvious. It was finally revealed to me during the festival when the city was wiped by the Guardians; the sinister energy could be felt radiating from that place. “I’m so glad to be out of

there.” I sighed, then turned to Helel, “Thank you for saving me.”

His gaze which was directed out the same window was turned to me. His dark eyes seemed to swirl with a foreign feeling; they weren’t just dark, but had depth, like his scleras were instead two portals leading into the unknown. “I only did as told. So you shouldn’t be thanking me. If I hadn’t been informed, then we wouldn’t have known you were there. Thank the Lord instead.” He said. His rejection of any credit was minutely surprising.

I smiled, “Of course. I live every day in thanks to Him.”

Several seconds of silence passed; Helel was the one to break it by asking, “What was it like living in Mai? Had you been there since you were born? Did you have family there?”

“Mai was a . . . *strange* city, to put it simply. I didn’t have any family there, nor was it my birthplace. I left my mother in my hometown to become a knight, but that didn’t work out too well. Honestly, I get angry with myself for putting up with that place for as long as I did. I should’ve been more aware of my surroundings, of what was going on. Sacrifices to Ba’al happened right underneath my nose. I always knew that what they did was wrong, but if only I’d taken the time to think of why.” I placed my forehead in my palms, leaning forward. “It’s frustrating to think of how I could’ve

done something, but didn't." *There it is again. . . the feeling of guilt. . . of regret.* It was like an anchor in my chest, dragging my esteem down to the depths of lament. *If I had just known; if I had been more inquisitive to their goingabouts, maybe I could've saved even just one person from their demise.*

Helel absorbed this all silently, nodding as he listened. I appreciated how he paid appropriate attention when someone was speaking. He waited until my words were finished and then stated, "I see. Ignorance isn't always a bad thing, but it also isn't necessarily good. We should seek to know more by the day."

"What about you?" I asked, "Is there anything you got frustrated about. . . because you just didn't know about it?"

With no hesitation he answered, "Life."

"What do you mean?"

He inhaled through his nose and turned back to the window, "Not long before I met you, before we demolished Mai, we stayed in a village of tents and campfires. I was stripping a stick by the fire when I was told by a boy younger than you of how I was doing it wrong. He corrected me in my method, then sat next to me and spoke of being a spark whisked away by the wind, leaving its pit and exploring the vast wilderness. He spoke of being free to do whatever he wished, but was shackled by responsibility. He asked me what to do, but I didn't know. I've never been like a spark in the

wind, so how could I tell him how to be one? I am also chained by responsibility; I am in a position where I can never be free.”

I scowled, “How can you not be free? Are you not roaming now, while also completing your mission to the One Above? Helel, what do you think you are. . . *who* do you think you are?” I leaned back, “I can tell you what I see. Your powers are a gift. I may have been anointed as a king, but the pristine of that position means little when compared to the Guardians. I admire you, Helel. Do you see differently?”

“Isn’t it obvious that I do?”

“I’m not sure. The way I see things, you can either rebel against it, or accept it. It’s up to you to choose the better path. You should know better than anyone which road would be the best. If I know, there’s no way you wouldn’t.”

“Yes, you’re right. I do know which course to take; it’s ingrained into my bones. But for some reason, everything is trying to tear me away from it.”

“Everything? Are you sure about that? I’m pretty sure the Guardians and I haven’t tried ruining your relationship with the Lord. Helel, you’re listening to the wrong voices. Those whispers that you hear? They talk to *all* of us, trying to trip us up. You’ve got to either ignore them, or beat them.”

“Right. . . I’ll try doing that then.”

“Good. And if you ever need help, or someone to talk to at least, then you’ve got me. We’re brothers.” I held out my hand, and he grasped it. We had a firm shake as the carriage came to a halt.

We were parked right outside of a weapons shop. Helel took the lead and pushed open the door. The inside smelt like metal polish and cigars. Some big, burly dudes were chatting up a storm to the right, and there were some others who were keenly inspecting the different tools of violence.

“What are we doing here?” I asked.

“I figured you can’t do much with a stick.” Helel shrugged.

“We’re here. . . for me?”

“It’s not like *I* need a weapon. I’m a Guardian.”

“Fair point. . . but, we don’t have any money.”

“We’ll just bill it to the castle.”

“Are we allowed to do that?”

“Of course we are; King Leander lent me his crest.” He pulled out a small block of polished gold with the imperial crest embedded on the surface.

I stared at the cube of pure gold, speechless.

“Well, I should’ve expected such a thing.” I shrugged, then walked down the aisle of swords. There were countless types of blades: longswords, broadswords, claymores, falchions, cutlasses, shortswords, and more. I ran my finger down the edge of several, but nothing caught my eye. I was no professional in choosing a

sword, and was grateful for being given the opportunity to purchase a real blade for myself, but none of them piqued my interest.

I turned the aisle into the spears. The spears and javelins ranged from small to large, with different sized tips. Several had some ornaments tied to the base of the tip for decoration. Still, none suited my tastes. There were bows on the opposite wall, but I didn't feel like skirting around the group of men who looked like they could crush me in between their toes if they so wanted to.

I made my way to the back corner of the shop, where the miscellaneous junk items were cast aside. The items weren't even displayed properly; they were either tossed into a crate or lazily hung on a rack. It was obvious that the majority of these weapons had already been used. I didn't want a blade with the blood of another already contaminating it, so I was about to walk away when a particular tool grasped my attention.

A double-headed axe was propped in the corner of the room, shrouded in shadows. It had a strange aura which drew me towards it, not a sinister energy, but mysterious. My hand reached out on its own, and my finger stroked the top of the axe. I reached down and grabbed the handle, hoisting it up. It was heavy, but not impossible to lift. *It'll take some muscle building and training for me to be able to properly utilize this. . . but with enough effort, I can use it.*

“You can lift that?” Helel approached from behind, startling me.

“I’m stronger than I look.” I refuted, lifting the axe above my head.

“So, you want it?”

“Yeah, I do.”

Helel handed me the crest, “Then, it’s yours.”

I stared at the block of gold which was now in my hand, “What am I supposed to do with this?”

“How am I supposed to know? I’ve never used one before.”

“Come with me then.” I smacked his shoulder. He couldn’t just hand such an important object off to me and expect me to handle it alone. I mean, *honestly*; what if the cashier asked questions, like where I got the imperial crest from? How was I supposed to answer that?

“Fine, let’s just get it over with already.” Helel sighed, following me to the checkout in the back of the shop.

I lifted the heavy axe up and set it on the desk. The cashier glanced down at the tool and then up to me, as though wondering why I would be buying a rusty, heavy, double-headed battle-axe. He forgoed any questions and said, “Thirty silver.”

I placed the crest beside the axe, and he practically jumped out of his skin. “Bill it to King Leander, please.”

“Yes, no problem at all.” He blubbered, clearly unsure of what to do. “Would you like a container of polish with that?”

“Sure, why not?”

He pulled out several containers and put them beside the axe. “May I be so bold as to inquire of your name?”

“Me? Alvin.”

“And your fine knight beside you, Alvin sir?”

“Knight?”

“Yes, I’m assuming you’re here in disguise, since your clothing is so . . . distinct.” He whispered, “I promise I will not disclose this information to anyone, no matter what price they plead.”

“We aren’t in disguise. He’s a Guardian—I’m just a friend,” I pointed back at Helel with my thumb.

We finally escaped the weapons shop after answering a slew of questions from the cashier. Helel had finally grown tired of standing there and whisked us outside. The carriage was gone, so we decided to window shop while waiting for it to return.

“I’m starting to realize that shopping is not an activity suited for all.” Helel sighed.

“Why, are you bored?” I asked. Though, I did agree with him. My heels were growing sore from aimlessly wandering around, though I was normally on my feet. It was as though shopping was an entirely new



sport which reset my strength. In simpler terms, it was exhausting.

“I’m ready to go back.” He muttered, his feet dragging.

“Me too. I need to put this somewhere.” I held up the battleaxe; it was earning me incredible stares from whoever was passing by. I wasn’t much of an attention seeker, so the amount of eyes peering at me was unnerving.

It took another hour before the carriage returned. The driver was surprised to find us laying on the sidewalk pointing at passing clouds as people stepped over or around us as we waited.

As soon as we got back, Helel was called by the king for an audience. Having been left by myself once again, I decided to explore the castle. The palace was huge and blindingly bright. A royal purple carpet lined every hallway, but the inside was made entirely of marble and gold, as were the outer walls. The castle had taken no less than fifty years of constant construction to complete, but by the time it was finished the ruling king had lost his faith, and turned it from its original purpose of serving as the Lord’s Temple to becoming a castle to glorify himself. I scorned that thought.

*I might not have been perfect before—actually, I was blinder than a bat when it came to what was going on.* Thinking back on it, it was so blatantly obvious just how screwed up things were in Mai; to say I was upset

with myself for not realizing it sooner would be an understatement. This just shows exactly how important it is to open your eyes and see what is happening. The animal sacrifices, the “executions”, and other, more discreet ways of human sacrifice were right in my face, but I chose to turn the other way and play oblivious just to keep my position as a knight apprentice. *Why was I, of all people, chosen as an anointed king?* I couldn’t help but wonder. Especially with my negligence as His servant.

*Because I knew you would see.* His voice resounded in my ears. My knees buckled and I found myself with my forehead to the floor.

“That. . . I would see?”

*I know your heart thoroughly. You were chosen because of who you are.*

“But. . . who am I?”

*Don’t you know? You are my child.*

My eyes opened slowly, as though those last four words had awakened something within me. *His child. . .* “Whoa. . .” I breathed in slowly, savoring the phrase. It was something I already knew, but something about hearing it directly from His Majesty hit it into an entirely new dimension.

“What are you doing down there, and what’s with that goofish grin on your face?” A sharp voice stung me.

I lifted my head to see a man garbed in a white linen robe with a gold-threaded sash, secured by an

ornamental pin. He stared down his hooked nose at me. I stood, unashamed of having been found hunkered down in the middle of a palace hallway. I had just spoken with the Almighty, after all, so there was no sense in being embarrassed. It was the greatest honor. “Good day, sir.”

“Yes, it is a fine day. What is your name, son?”

“Alvin.” I held out my hand.

He took it, “A pleasure. I assume you’re the Alvin who has been traveling with the esteemed Guardians.”

“That I am.”

“I am honored to make your acquaintance. I am the prophet Malachi. What might you be doing here in the hall?”

“Please pay no mind to it. I was simply listening to a Word.”

The prophet’s mouth grew three times wider, and he broke into a grin. He then asked me a series of questions as to what I might’ve heard. I answered them all accordingly, and we walked down the passageway deep in conversation. Our topic changed many times; we spoke of the Guardians, of the kingdom’s history, and of the temple.

“Speaking of which, would you like to see the newest part of the temple?”

“Is it not the palace?”

“No,” he waved his hand around, “this place has already been tainted with the selfishness of those before. We are building a new, grander temple for the Creator.”  
“I would love to see it.”

We stood at a distance from the building. I was rendered speechless by what was already standing. The pillars were plated by gold, and various jewels were patterned around the walls. It wasn't nearly as big as the castle, but was far more beautiful.

I wasn't allowed to go inside yet, but was satisfied enough just by being within the vicinity of such a masterpiece in the making. His presence was flowing through it already.

“What do you think?” Malachi asked.

“Words can't describe its beauty.” I smiled, then turned to the prophet, “Why are you called ‘Prophet’?”

“My life has been given to be His servant. I hear His words and have anointed kings under the instruction of Him.”

“So you anointed Leander as king?”

“That I did.”

“Is it necessary for a king to be anointed by a prophet?”

“Kings who haven't been anointed can be found everywhere, but the kings called upon by The All-Knowing are placed in the seat as ruler over *His* people. Those kings face many difficulties, as they are

expected to follow all of His commands, and never place themselves before Him. Leander has failed in numerous areas, but has always returned to his place.”

“So he won’t get executed by the people for failing?”

“No, of course not. He is, afterall, the king they have been longing for.”

“What if there is a different king who was anointed but not by a prophet?”

“Who else could anoint a king but a prophet?”

“Well. . . what about a Guardian?”

“Oh, undoubtedly they would be able to; if that were to happen though. . . it would make things interesting.”

## 6. THE CREEPY LIBRARIAN

“If a tree falls in the forest falls when no one is around, does it make a sound?” I poked Genesis’ arm.

She stopped and considered it, “It should. There aren’t any flaws in Creation, so if it makes a sound when you are near, it would make a sound even if you weren’t. I can’t prove it, though.”

The inspiration of my impromptu question was the large, dark wooded, ominous trees surrounding us. It had been several weeks since we’d left the marble castle behind, and we’d laid waste to several major cities in between that time and now. The Guardians were starting to look a bit worn, but Helel’s condition was the most worrisome. His dark bags had gotten even deeper and his complexion was paler than a corpse. He’d spent a lot of time in the other realm, wrangling up darkened spirits and imprisoning them. There were times where he would also linger there, which he had grudgingly admitted to Skuggi who pressed him with questions after one specific time where he’d appeared the morning after. I couldn’t figure out why he would even want to spend more time in the realm that held evil.

My eyes focused on Helel, who sat across from me, fast asleep in his chair. His head shook violently with every rock that the wheels hit. We’d been gifted

two carriages by Leander, who insisted that the Guardians of the Elements should not be walking themselves to their destinations. Valgus was steering our carriage, and Vlam manned the other.

We were currently heading towards the powerhouse of the north: Kristol, located in the Lynites' territory, and under the reign of the king Heidel. Without using the elements, the trip would take another week or two with few breaks.

As I was locked in my thoughts, the carriage came to a sudden halt. Genesis and I were flung forward into Helel, who caught the both of us before our heads were bashed into the wall. I scrambled out of his grasp and stuck my head out the window, searching for what caused the disturbance.

"What's going on?" I called to Valgus, but there was no response. I faced Genesis and Helel, who were now sitting next to each other on the seat, "I'm going to check on him."

"I think it would be better if one of us checked instead." Genesis refuted, starting to stand.

"I'll be fine. I'm just popping out and coming back." I promised, grabbing the handle of my axe. I practiced with it as often as time allowed, so my skill in handling such a large blade had improved. I had also polished it before we left the kingdom; now the blackened steel reflected the sunlight. So, if there ever

came an instance where mutilating someone didn't work, I could always blind them and run away.

It felt good to finally be able to move around. After riding in a stall on wheels for so long, my rump had become sore and my limbs stiff. I went around the carriage to find that Valgus wasn't even in his seat. I leaned around the back to see that the other carriage was stopped as well, with no Vlam in sight.

“—think you're doing?” I heard the faint sound of Valgus' voice. I cocked my head to try to hear more and searched for the Guardian, looking on all sides of the carriage. The horses didn't seem to be panicked, so nothing bad had happened.

I heard more chatter coming from behind a blockage of trees and bushes, which I stepped around to come across the scene of Valgus and Vlam scolding four brusque men who sat on their knees with their heads hung low.

“Honestly, how have you been living your lives thus far? For shame, trying to attack a defenseless man who was just trying to deliver his friends to their destination.” Valgus frowned.

One of the men spoke up, “Sir, I wouldn't really describe you as defenseless—”

“No excuses!” He commanded. They all flinched. “Why have you been resorting to petty thievery? Do the words *‘Thou shalt not steal’* mean anything to people?”



“But. . . we have *nothing*.”

“Why are you trying to take something, rather than make it? Who will respect someone who only takes for his own wealth?” Vlam asked solemnly.

“Well. . . no one, I suppose.” Was the response.

“So,” I stepped out from behind the bush, “bandits?”

The four men shrunk back when they saw my battleaxe. I swung it around casually as though it were just a twig that had been picked up from the roadside.

“Yes. They tried cutting the ropes to the horses and, had they succeeded, would’ve tried stripping us of everything we own.” Vlam sighed, crossing his bulging arms.

“Oh, well we wouldn’t want that.” I raised the axe and laid it across my other palm.

“Please, don’t kill us. We were wrong!” The biggest of the bunch’s face fell to the ground and he groveled at our feet. The sight of it made me uncomfortable.

“Seriously, get up. You’re bowing to the wrong guys.” Right then, more than anything, I wanted to forget this ever happened and leave.

“Right your ways, build up your possessions in an *honest* manner, but don’t love them as though they supplied you with life. Gold does not breathe air into your lungs, and silver does not put blood into your body. It is never too late to correct yourself. No hill is too

steep to climb; so even if it is difficult, straighten your act and walk the path of life.” Vlam sighed, tossing a bag of coins to them.

“Thank you. . . but why?” The one who picked up the bag asked. His eyes showed a genuine, pleading curiosity. “Why show us mercy? Why give to us when we tried to take from you?”

“Because that is how the Father shows His kindness. Give to those in need, forgive those who offend you, and you will also be forgiven in the eyes of the Merciful One. Remember, forgive, learn, and love.” Vlam smiled, his pale yellow eyes sparkled even in the dim forest light.

Kristol: a *really* messed up city. It’s known to be a hotspot for human trafficking, idolatry, and famous for its improper “industry”. The streets were so crowded that just getting from one side to the other was basically a suicide mission, which I’d been tasked with. I shoved past the drunken men, harassing ladies who were on their way to salons or parties. The worst part was that they were *enjoying* the mocking attention.

It was imperative that I succeeded in my mission: getting to the library. The purpose was so that I could get my hands on some of the more recent maps and battle records to memorize. I’d already committed the older layout of the city to memory, but that map had

been drawn up over thirty years ago, which is almost two of my lifetimes.

“Aha!” I triumphed when finding that the library was still in the same place it had been drawn. The walls were crumbling and covered in moss. The roof sank inwards and the door was worn and cracked. It creaked when opened, and the musky smell of ink, paper, and dust clung to my nostrils. I coughed as I inhaled the dust and waved the swirling particles out of my face. The inside was lit only by candlelight, which made the haunted looking building even more creepy.

There was an older man flipping through papers at the checkout desk. His hair was silver and there was a bald patch at his crown, he wore a monocle and vest, and his mustache was not to be reckoned with. He didn't even glance up as I strode past the desk to the bookcases. I bee-lined straight for the scroll rack to find the maps and blueprints of any kingdom, city, or town that I could find. Once my arms were full and the load weighed a good fifteen pounds, I rolled them all out on a table in the corner. There was a candle on the corner of the table which I held over the maps to see clearly. My eyes scanned over every marked building, street, trade route, field, and unmarked territory. The blueprints were of the exteriors of castles, which used in the wrong way could pose a threat to those living within, as anyone could derive places with hidden entrances. In my case, this was the correct manner in which to use these. However,

many of the sketches I was looking at were of castles which had either fallen long ago or had been destroyed by the Guardians.

I left the scrolls on the table and went to find the battle records, which were on the shelf in the far back corner. I took whatever was on the shelf and carried it all back to the table. The entire day was spent scouring through every single report. Most would find this kind of work tiring or a source of boredom, but this was what brought me excitement. It helped that my hobby would be of assistance to the Guardians.

While scanning through the last of the books, a voice alarmed me from behind, “You have quite the collection there.”

I nearly jumped out of my skin. The librarian was stooped over my shoulder, looking over all that was laid out on the table.

“Um yeah—this stuff interests me.” I wasn’t lying when saying that, though it wasn’t the main agenda.

“I see. It’s good to see the younger generation taking a fascination in this.”

For some reason, just the sound of his voice sent creeping chills up my spine. It was like he breathed an invisible toxin that sent my body into flight mode.

“Aha, yep. I’ll be out of your hair,” I looked up at his bald patch, “or at least what’s left of it, in no time! Man’s honor.” I placed my hand over my chest.

“There’s no need to be in such a rush. You look like a strong young man, so I was simply curious about what you were so engrossed in. It wasn’t at all what I had expected, though.” He stroked his mustache.

I nodded, unsure of what to say.

“Say, how old are you?” He asked. There was a dark glint behind his monocle; I couldn’t tell if it came from the candle’s reflection or his pupil.

“My mom said not to give my personal information to strangers, sorry.”

“Nonsense, there’s no harm in sharing your age. I haven’t seen you here before, are you from out of town?”

“I’ll leave once I finish this book.” I assured, avoiding the question. This wasn’t an ideal situation. It was hard to tell what time it was due to the lack of windows, but the candle had melted to a quarter stick since the time I began reading. The Guardians were waiting on me before destroying the city and everyone in it, so I needed to hurry before I was caught up by either the evil schemes of this place, or the wrath of God.

“Very well. I’ll leave you be then. But really, you don’t need to hurry.” The man squeezed my shoulder and trained his eye on me as he walked back to the front desk. To say I was uncomfortable would be an understatement; my instincts were screaming at me to get out of there, but I had to finish. There were still books left to read, but with how things were, this much

would have to suffice. “They’ll understand.” I muttered under my breath, skimming over the ink and flipping the brittle page.

As soon as the back cover touched the page I skedaddled out of there. I could feel a pair of eyes on me the entire way down the street; as I turned the corner, I checked back to see the librarian standing in the doorway to the library, watching me. A man cloaked in black was standing with him. I began sweating nervously. *This is really weird.* I thought.

Now all that was left to do was navigate through the city and find the gate. It wouldn’t be difficult considering I’d already memorized all of the routes, however there was a creeping feeling of dread that made me doubt myself. “What’s going on?” I wondered aloud.

I made sure to keep an eye out for anything strange; the only problem was that everything seemed strange. There was a horse randomly wandering the streets, a lady crying in an alley, and just an ominous ambience in general. The housing places which were skywards almost seemed ready to collapse onto me, but they were being forced apart by measly wooden beams and laundry lines. A raindrop fell onto my head, but the skies were clear. All of the plants, the potted and the wild, were wilted. I peeked my head into an alleyway to see a bloodstain coating one of the walls, and there was a foot peeking out from under someone’s tossed-out rug.

“Are you a follower?” Someone asked mockingly. I spun to see the man in black standing directly behind me.

“Follower?”

“A lamb to the *High Shepherd*.” He hissed cunningly, taking a step forward and forcing me more into the bloodied alley.

“Yes, I am.” I confirmed.

“Then,” he paused, “you must perish. But not here; no, I’ll sell you to the lowest of lords and have you rot in his cellar as a servant. Wouldn’t that be more deserving of a pathetic child who lives as though he owns the world?” He spat.

“Me? Own the world? No, not at all. I’m simply living in service to my Father.”

“Hmph, *father*, what a familiar term to use when referring to your god.”

“Well, it is what it is. Now, I want you to apologize.”

The man didn’t say anything further; he lunged forward and wrapped his long, thin fingers around my mouth. I was finally able to get a decent look at his face, which was hidden by a low hood for most of the time. His eyes were crazed by madness and hostility, and his teeth were rotten and crumbling. I thrashed against his grip, but the man was larger than me and had the upper hand.

My jaw unhinged and clamped down on his hand, biting as hard as it could. The man bellowed, and his other fist came up to nail me in the temple. I fell to the side, slamming down into the nook between the wall and ground. Before I could regain my wits, he was on top of me, trying to twist my hands into a position to be tied. I could resist to some extent thanks to my battleaxe training, but was still completely overwhelmed. He eventually had my hands behind my back and my face pressed into the dirt.

I called out for help, but no one came to my rescue. Not even the Guardians showed up. “Please. . .” tears welled up in my eyes. My eyelids fell and I clenched my fists, “Father, please. . . *save me.*” I whispered so softly that not even the cloaked man could hear. Then again, he might not have been able to hear me due to his steady stream of curses toward me, my family, and my Lord.

The slightest sound buzzed in my ear. My vision turned completely white, even with my eyes closed. My skin felt hot and the weight forcing me to the ground fell away. I slowly opened my eyes to discover a new black scorch mark which surrounded me. The assailant was on the ground just an arm’s length away, completely charred. The hair on my arms were raised, and sparks of electricity dashed between the tresses of the man’s cloak.

I stumbled backwards into the wall, then dashed away. “Thank you.” I breathed, flying to the gate. Even



after finally making it out of the city, my stride didn't slow until I reached the Guardians' camp. They could all tell that something had happened, but didn't interrogate me; instead, they asked me to repeat any and all information that had been gathered.

## 7. A SENTENCE OF DEATH

I didn't want to go back into the city, but the Guardians had insisted that there was still needed information there. They wanted me to uncover any sources leading to the human trafficking ring which was taking the north by storm. Any recent scuffles would have some sort of connection to them, so I was to return to the library while the Guardians spent the day in deep prayer.

By now, the strange occurrence of a lightning strike in an alleyway was the gossip of the town. Everywhere I went, whispers of the event existed, flitting between mouths to ears. There were now guards stationed on every street and patrolling the deep, dark depths of the city. It made me feel more assured that it would be easier to avoid being dragged into the shadows and slain, but it also made my work more difficult. As an outsider, suspicion would naturally follow my steps.

"I heard that it was a sorcerer—" A lady whispered to another.

"No way—" The other woman gasped, covering her mouth with a dainty hand.

"It wasn't sorcery." I grumbled; I was too loud, however, because the two ladies shot me inquisitive glances. "Uh—pay me no mind," I chuckled nervously,

then turned down the street and hurried away, “Why can’t I keep my mouth shut?”

It didn’t take long to find the library again. I made my way to the back corner as discreetly as possible in order to not attract the librarian’s attention. He was behind the desk again, writing letters and sealing them. He didn’t acknowledge my arrival when the door creaked open and the bell above it clanged.

I skimmed the records but didn’t see anything that hadn’t already been read. All of the books and scrolls were back in order, despite me leaving them on the table the other day. I went to a different section and found several works on the histories of nomadic tribes. Most of the tribes were already entangled in more political affairs or had already been completely wiped out by the monarchical giants in their territories.

I piled those books in my arms and also grabbed one about recent advancements in weapon technology. It would be beneficial to educate myself on what could potentially be hurdled my way one day when I sit upon the throne as the anointed king of the Father’s chosen people. There were also other useful things that I could memorize, such as edible plants in the territory, types of animals around Kristol, and the lineages of every noble in the kingdom. Who knows when something could come in handy? I also took a book titled “Building an Army 101” which I rested at the top of my trembling tower of literary knowledge.

I tore through these books until my head split with pain. When I finally looked up to rest my eyes, the light outside of the musty window was already dimming. I still hadn't found what was needed, so I continued to read late into the night. The librarian had yet to kick me out, so I didn't bother worrying about staying past closing time. After closing the last book I went back to the shelves and held up my candle to search the spines for a title reflecting the information the Guardians sent me to collect. I moved on from section to section until a book detailing the different human trafficking groups caught my eye. There was another one which depicted the different religions through the years which I grabbed as well, and another written in a different language which was added to the pile.

*Finally, something actually useful.* I sighed with relief when reading through these books. It was a bit more challenging when skimming through the foreign book, since I had to take extra time translating, but it was also vastly informative. It told of the tribes living on a different land far away, across the sea, where the sun rose when it set here. Their way of life wasn't that different from some of the tribes here, except several were more, I dare say, barbaric than even the worst of the groups roaming these lands.

Dawn was already breaking by the time the last book was closed. Voices were filling the streets and somewhere in the distance crowed a rooster. The

librarian was still at his desk, filing through papers and sealing envelopes. There were several ceiling-high piles of letters on his desk, and his source of wax was almost exhausted. I returned all of the books to their original places, stopped by the scroll rack to quickly study some more maps, and then left the library. All the while, the disturbing librarian's eyes never left his task, which was even more odd considering how close he had gotten the other day. *Maybe the lightning bolt threatened him.* I thought. I smiled knowing just how powerful my Creator was.

It was straight for the gates from there, where the Guardians would be waiting. Deciphering them apart from the morning rush crowd was easy even from a mile away; their presences were overwhelmingly strong. I had only gotten used to their auras from being surrounded by them. Not to mention their physical countenances, and how they carried themselves as though they were the only royalty to walk the earth.

"Humble guides. . ." I mumbled as I came into contact with the merchants and traders trying to get the early jump on positions in the market square. It became a shoving fest as I fought my way to the gates. It was a tough battle, but I prevailed in the end.

"How was your search?" Angelique asked as soon as I was ejected from the crowd and into their circle, huffing and heaving.

"Informative." I replied, catching my breath.

Neró stood and clapped my shoulder, handing me my axe, “Good work soldier, it’s good to have you back safe and sound.” He gave me a crooked smile.

“You have no idea.” I groaned. I had yet to tell them of the incident with the cloak guy. I mean, how dangerous is going to the library supposed to be? I doubt anyone would expect to be the victim of an attempted kidnapping when all they planned was to read a book or two. *People these days are insane.*

“What do you have for us?” Helel asked, leaning against the gate post. A guard approached us and shooed him away, “No loitering.” He grunted.

“Let’s go.” Valgus motioned for us to follow.

We stopped back at camp, where we were surrounded by various trees which swayed with the blowing wind. Vlam built a fire where we all huddled around. I hushedly recalled everything that was written in the books and scrolls, expressing my opinions on several matters.

“The tribes don’t have nothing to do with the trafficking, despite being large victims of it. I think some groups are selling their people for either money or some other sort of sick trade, or even just for an alliance with the bigger entities. They could’ve been pressured or threatened into it, or they were desperate for something.”

“Your guess is as good as mine. I can’t understand why anyone would sell another person as

though they were livestock. Humankind is not so low.” Skuggi scowled.

“What are y’all’s plans for Kristol? Are you going to destroy it?”

“We have to. We spent days fasting and in deep prayer, asking if there was even a single soul loyal to Him. There isn’t.” Angelique mentioned quietly and shook her head, disheartened.

My own stomach dropped, “But it’s such a big city. Surely—” But I stopped when noticing the downcast expressions on everyone’s faces. I couldn’t keep pressing; they knew better than I did since they heard it directly from the Heavenly One. “Very well. When are you to go?”

“At dusk.” Genesis answered, the words rolling off her tongue as a death sentence for tens of thousands.

The sight of the watchtowers and wall crumbling to dust was devastatingly fascinating. The display of sheer power was bone chilling. But, there were no screams; as it had been in every single city until now. No agonizing wails could be heard, because the souls of the evil had already been reaped.

I leaned back, admiring the destruction. Helel was next to me, twisting the end of his shirt. Drips of sweat were coursing down his neck. I frowned, “Are you nervous?”

“No, I just feel. . . weird.”

“How so?”

“I don’t know how exactly to describe it, but it’s like something bad is going to happen. It’s foreboding.”

I sat up, “Do you think something is going to happen to the Guardians?”

“Not exactly. . .” He let out a deep sigh, “Alvin,” he breathed.

“Yeah?”

“If I end up doing something stupid, please resent me.”

It took a few seconds for his words to process, “Why would I resent you? Isn’t forgiveness our whole thing? Even if you fell away from where you are now, I can promise on my life that we would only want to bring you back. So no, I won’t harbor any ill-will towards you, my friend.” I nudged his arm.

He nodded and gave me a thin smile, “Thanks. I can always count on you.”

“Of course you can.”

Helel shifted, hiding his face for a brief moment and then stood, “It’s time for me to go.” His eyes were trained on the six figures walking away from the rubble. Then he turned to me and held out his hand. I took it, but he didn’t pull me up. Instead, he squeezed it and said in a quivering, scared voice, “Goodbye.” His eyes were shaking.

I frowned, “Why are you saying farewell? You’ll be back soon, right?”



“Yeah, you’re right. . .” He let go, and my arm fell to the ground. “I’ll—see you later then.”

“Yeah, later. . .”

And he disappeared, but not before he looked back at me with a telling expression. I jumped up and grabbed for him, “Wait—!” But he was gone. I crashed down to my knees, “No, Helel. . .” I whispered, the reality of what was happening quickly sinking in.

I remained kneeling with my head hanging low until the rest of the group returned. “What’s wrong?” Neró asked, ruffling my hair. “Did you miss us that much?” He joked.

“I don’t think Helel’s coming back.” I choked.

Silence ensued for a minute until, “What do you mean? He just left, right? He should be back once he’s done.” Angelique frowned.

“Alvin, what did he say?” Skuggi kneeled down next to me.

“Goodbye. . .”

The Guardians all exchanged uneasy glances. No one knew what to say or do; it wasn’t like we could follow him into the other realm. He was gone, and it was up to him to come back.

“Where did things go so wrong?” Skuggi looked defeated.

“Let’s not lose faith in our brother. He hasn’t left yet.” Vlam said, gazing toward the fallen city.

We waited in silence for Helel to return, but he never did. The day passed by slowly, but none of us stirred or left our places. The orange sun passed over our heads and dipped into the western horizon. The moon illuminated the earth, and the stars almost seemed like tears which were splattered across the sky.

Genesis stood and began crying out, “Helel!” She stumbled around, groping the air for any shred of the man’s physical body. “Helel. . . I sense you.” Her voice trembled, and she continued reaching for what wasn’t there. “Please come back. We need you; not just for your abilities, but because we love you!”

However, her words weren’t enough to convince him. I stood solemnly underneath a large oak tree, watching as the mighty Genesis collapsed onto her knees and began shedding tears which caught the moonbeams. Angelique swooped over the Earth Guardian and whispered words of comfort, all the while dropping pearls of sorrow herself. I breathed in deeply and sighed, all of my energy and hope draining from my body.

“He is gone.” Valgus shook his head. His words resonated within my mind; the man I once deemed my brother had abandoned not only us, but his Heavenly Master. What awaited him from here on was no mere slap on the wrist, but a condemnation that none of us wanted to enact.

## 8. I GET PROMOTED

It's already been seven months since Helel left. I would know since I kept count. The Guardians abandoned me—okay, *fine*, it was decided that I would be left to my own devices for a while. Until when was yet to be determined.

There was enough time to fully process what had happened. At first it was devastating; that hasn't changed, but it's easier to acknowledge as reality than before. I found refuge in the town where the people rescued from the Fortress of Freed—an ironic name that is—now lived. They welcomed me with open arms and put me straight to work, helping in the fields or assisting on hunts, wherever they thought I would be useful.

It was while I was laboring away in the fields that something caught my attention. Right on the edge of my vision were four-foot stakes stabbed into the ground with red fabric tied at the tips. I cautiously approached them for inspection, but threw myself to the ground when there were sudden yaps and calls from over a hill. I was hidden by the corn crops which had already grown up to my hip.

I crawled closer to the sounds whilst fervently praying under my breath that this would not be my end. It was my first time encountering random stakes in the

field, so I didn't know what to expect. In order to get a more optimum perspective, I rose so that only the top half of my face was above the stalks. My eyes scanned the area, searching for anything to connect with the barks.

There they were. Some young men with ferocious, untamed appearances were racing bareback on galloping horses, wielding spears and bows with quivers filled of feathered arrows. One pointed out a bounding rabbit and strung his bow; he knocked the arrow, pulled back, and released the shaft but missed the rabbit. He groaned and went to chase after the arrow, searching for a solid five minutes before giving up and going on his way, his friend in pursuit. When they were out of sight, I stood and uprooted a stake, then went to search for the lost arrow. After searching for an hour or two, I found it practically buried by soil in an entanglement of roots and stems, so it would be basically invisible to the naked eye from atop a horse.

I sat and placed the stake aside, rotating the arrow in my fingers. It was a foot and a half long, feathered with a goose feather and sporting a long, sharp tip. The workmanship was professional and clean; in fact, the arrow had even been polished. I frowned; this arrow was similar to one that had been in the weapons shop. *The one I went to with Helel. . .* My eyes dropped as a feeling of bitterness overtook me; I shook my mop of hair as though it would help get rid of my negativity.

*It probably didn't come from that specific shop, but maybe from the same dealer.* It was hard to tell. The nomadic tribes were experts when it came to shaping arrows, but this wasn't of that same quality. The maker had more of an eye for design rather than practicality. The feathers would've worked if they hadn't been fashioned to imitate a flower's petals.

I took up the stake and examined it. The fabric was silk, which was sorely expensive. The red was more of a burgundy, and there was gold thread embroidered on the corner in the emblem of a coyote head. "Ahh, Skender." I realized, referring to the king over the easternmost territory. "He must be dealing with the tribes to expand his reign." I sighed, twirling the arrow. It was a simple plan, really; promise the nomadic tribes of the region that the hunting grounds would be theirs to keep, and have them do the dirty work for you. Then, wipe out the tribes and have complete control over the land.

"What are they, amateurs? If even *I* could figure this out, surely others will be able to as well." I clucked my tongue, shaking my head. "But, I'm glad they're this sloppy, because now we can get out of here. We've been deemed as targets."

It took three days and nights to convince everybody I could to leave their homes and basically everything they had to their names. My mission to

evacuate everyone began the second upon my return; I had gone straight to the town's head, a proud man who went by Marrow, laid out the stake and arrow on his desk and implored that we left the town behind. But he would have none of it.

"Fine, if you want to fall with your buildings, then so be it. But remember, the town is not in the structures, it's in the people."

So after that fiasco, I went to the community well and called out to anyone who could hear, "We are about to be raided by one of the most vicious, bloodthirsty tribes in this territory: The Yorques." There were several gasps in the sparse crowd, but no one stayed to listen. That was, until Valerie showed up.

"Alvin? What are you doing?" She asked.

Valerie and I had become quite good friends in the past few months. She was the one who vouched the most for my honorability. Only afterwards did other freed ones join in, pleading on my sake.

I thoroughly explained every detail of what had been discovered. Thankfully, she believed my statement. "All right, I'll tell everyone from the fortress first. They'll be the least hesitant to follow you; you're the one who opened their cell doors and showed them the sunlight for the first time in months afterall."

"Thank you."

With Valerie's help, the word spread like wildfire. Not even a day later, half of the town was

packing up whatever they could carry and preparing their mules and donkeys for travel. Several wagons were loaded and oxen were being groomed before the big haul. I received numerous complaints, but no one questioned me. As people say, honesty is the best quality; it was what gained the trust of the people in the first place. It can be a bit off-putting to others at times, but I don't cut edges when speaking the truth. Doing so has never been a part of my character.

By the third day, everyone was packed and ready to go. There was a small group which decided to remain, as they followed the head of the town who was against me from the very beginning. I tried to convince them to do otherwise up until the last few seconds where I lingered behind the travelling group, pleading that they follow. They declined.

“Father, is there anything I can do for them?” I whispered as I walked away, my eyes on the grass being crushed beneath my sandals.

*They have made their choice. There is nothing you can do.* He replied, making it clear that in this situation, I was powerless.

“Can't you do something?” I asked, but there was no response. It was obvious that He could, but chose not to. I knew why He wouldn't, since we were created to have Free Will and it would be redundant if He forced someone to do something outside of their own decision. But still, I hoped that maybe, just maybe, at

least *one* from the group remaining would come running up behind us, claiming they'd had some sort of last minute revelation that their safety would be found with us.

I claimed leader of the expedition, taking the front and guiding the people south. I knew exactly where to take them, despite having no idea where the destination was. *The Lord is my compass*. There was a reason as to why I was so certain of my direction; I was an anointed king, leading my Lord's people to the land He was guiding me to. It would be the place where I build my kingdom; a beacon for all of the Heavenly One's people to congregate.

It was the crack of dawn when we left; once we were several miles away and the town was merely a speck on the horizon, we began hearing shouts and screams. I spun around, despair gripping at me. Dark, ominous, billowing clouds of smoke pillared toward the brightening sky. Hollars and whoops were mixed in with the sound of roaring flames. A lady who was leading a young mule fell to her knees; tears wet her cheeks as she watched her only home burn to ash. Several others followed suit, mourning the lives that they could never return to. I gripped my battleaxe, which was hooked to my belt, until my knuckles turned white.

"Let's go." Valerie held my elbow, pulling me away from the fiery scene.



For three weeks we walked with few breaks in between. The children and elderly rode in wagons while the young and able remained on foot. We trekked up a hill which spilled over into a ravine, where the River of Life flowed. The river was one which flowed unceasingly throughout the year, supplying several civilizations with fresh water through every season.

In the ravine was an abundance of pointed tents, spanning from one end to the other. People were bustling about the grounds, transporting pelts and baskets. There were some ladies ankle deep in the river, bent over washing laundry. Children chased each other around their mothers' legs, splashing in the cool shallows of the water.

I exchanged a curious glance with Valerie, who motioned that I go ahead. The rest of the group stayed behind while I descended the hill, hoping that this wasn't a short-cut to my possible death. I didn't know this tribe's customs, but didn't see any sacrificial altars or human skulls on pikes; so they were better than most places thus far.

"Um," I called to a young man who was stripping a stag of its hide, "Excuse me—" my words were cut short when there was the unmistakable subtle poke of a spear head in the small of my back. I froze, my mouth still half open and eyes wide. "Please don't kill me."

“Who are you?” The one behind me asked in a gruff, heavily accented voice. It sounded like he was choking on rocks as he spoke.

“Alvin.” I said simply, scared that saying any more would earn me impalement. The poke receded, and I was forcibly spun around to come face-to-feathers with a man adorned in a huge hat of hanging turkey plumage.

“I am Chief.” He pointed to himself while shaking my hand. “Come, speak with the Gill.” He ordered, taking me by the wrist and dragging me towards a huge square tent with smoke rising from the tip. I looked back at a frantic Valerie and shrugged, motioning that they stay put.

Inside the tent were pelts scattered around a firepit, alive with flames. On the other side of the tent was another tribe member, dressed in buffalo hide with a bow strapped across his back.

The chief set out a deep magenta cushion and gestured that I take a seat; I obliged. The reason for bringing me to this big tent had yet to be explained. I was just hoping it didn’t involve any imprisonment/hostage situation.

“Just so you know, I have a lot of people waiting for me, so if you kill me here then they wouldn’t know what to do. They aren’t ones to be reckoned with either, so they very well *might* just attack, with Valerie at their head. Let me tell you something, that girl can be a little

crazy sometimes, so she isn't anyone you would want to contest with."

"You don't need to worry, we aren't going to kill you." The man with the bow reassured, he spoke my language fluently.

"Really?"

"Yes; in fact, we've been waiting for you, King Alvin."

I frowned, "How did you know?"

"Everyone knows. The prophets have been professing your name, claiming that you will be the one to lead the Lord's people. Several kings are currently after your head, hoping to cut the tongues of the prophets. They don't want you to succeed, but we've decided to follow you, and help build the King of Kings' nation."

"Wow. . . really?" I remembered the prophet Malachi. If anyone had anything to do with that, it would most likely be him.

"Do you not believe my words?"

"No, no, it isn't that—I'm just amazed. I haven't met any of you before fifteen minutes ago, and now I hear that your tribe is giving me their loyalty. I'm honored."

"No, we are honored to follow such a humble king, who has been placed over the nations of the One Above. We trust that there is no error in His decision, and will follow you faithfully."

“I am thankful; however, I don’t have the means to accomodate all of your people—”

He cut me off, “*Your* people.”

“—*The* people, but I will do my best to lead you all appropriately, as a king should.”

We stepped out of the tent. *Before, I had only a ragtag group of escapees following me, and now I have an entire tribe.* My responsibilities were steadily growing; from the small town boy in a big city, to a king with nothing but an anointment to his name tagging along with the Guardians of the Elements, to now a leader with a congregation of at least five hundred. I could already see just how the future was being built. It would have a lot of ups and downs, especially now that one whom I had considered a close friend, who I’d confided in when feeling nervous or doubtful in my position, was now an enemy of the very one who breathed life into him. . . as well as mine.

## 9. A STRANGER'S MESSAGE

Travelling in such a large group was no simple task. We walked beside the river by day and slept in the grass at night. Food was either hunted or scrounged. Yet, for the entire duration of our journey, not a single person fell ill or grew weary. Nobody went hungry nor became dehydrated; everything was provided to us by the Heavenly One, who watched us keenly as we travelled towards His Predetermined Land. In this place the greatest kingdom will be built, and from that an empire.

It took another two weeks before we arrived at the ruins of Mai. Tents were staked where the entryway used to be, and more makeshift homes and market stands could be seen scattered throughout the field which was now growing green. This wasn't where my kingdom was to be built; it would be elsewhere: a place where the water never ran dry, where the crops would never wilt, and where the animals lived in the masses.

We continued following the river, which swung towards the southwest. It took another four days before we finally made it: the tip of the southernmost plateau. The grassfields were vast, the cliffs were steep, the trees grew in quantity, and the River of Life flowed all the way through, ending in a spill at the edge of the land. A pier could be built facing all directions. This would be a

commerce hotspot; roads would be sewn into the ground, reaching for the rest of civilization, and boats would be constructed to make contact with other lands.

“It’ll be a bit difficult if we were ever to be attacked from inland.” Valerie pointed out.

“Perhaps, but I’m not concerned about that. If we were to ever be struck down, then it would be for a reason. I trust that our Father will protect us in every other case.”

“Where should we lay the foundation?”

I studied the region. Hills were to my back and endless waters were before me. Grasslands stretched out on my either side. “We’ll build it on top of that hill back there,” I turned and pointed out the tallest slope. “The fields and farms will be near the river.” I looked at Valerie, “Do you still have those blueprints?”

“Yes, I can go and grab them.”

“Please do.”

I watched her mesmerizing auburn hair sway back and forth as she jogged away toward a covered wagon. The documents from Freed fortress had been an assortment of blueprints, treaties, and contracts. After dropping the papers I had snagged underneath a tree before getting dragged inside, Valerie went back to get them. At the time, it hadn’t even dawned on me that the documents had been forgotten, but they were thankfully not abandoned.

When Valerie returned she was struggling to carry an armful of scrolls. I grabbed the top few and unravelled them onto the ground. The best place to search when looking for inspiration was at things that have already been built, or other people's ideas. These blueprints were a goldmine of architectural knowledge. And I had the talents working under me to execute the operations. I already had an idea in mind of what the palace would look like; it would take several years to see my vision come to life, but it would be worth the wait.

We started with the town which would be on the outskirts of the palace courtyard. It was more of an immediate concern than a palace. Teams would chop down trees and drag them back to the site where they would be set aside to cure. For now, tents would be the substitutions for proper lodging; however, no one contested with the decision. They had already grown accustomed to sleeping under the stars, so it wasn't much of a challenge to wait a few more months in order to secure sturdy lumber for homes.

Fields were already being plowed for the next planting season and the animals were left to roam freely. Meals consisted of wild game and herbs. Some of our older adolescents found a hidden grove of fruit trees, and coconuts could be gathered near the shore. Everything was going smoothly and it remained this way for seven

months. We never encountered any harsh weather, only a few storms in the rainy season.

The hills were being mapped out for construction and the cured wood was being towed to the determined locations. It was all shaping up, and the town would be complete before long. In the meanwhile, people had started migrating here; I was meeting with up to a hundred people each day. Many had received the Lord's Word, and travelled great lengths to reach the sprouting civilization, while others simply stumbled across us. Any idols that were brought along were smashed and tossed into the sea; I would not tolerate such blasphemy within my territory.

It was on an overcast, windy day in which I was approached by a man leading a worn-down donkey by a lead. He bowed and held out his hand, and would not rise until I took it. His brown hair was streaked with gray, and his black eyes twinkled with wisdom.

"What is your name?" I asked, not in a condescending tone, merely a curious one.

"My name is Gabriel, a messenger." He replied.

"Gabriel. . ." I eyed him, it felt as though his presence would be dangerous if I weren't an ally. "What brings you to this humble village?"

"I have been sent with a word for you, Alvin. It is time."

"Time?" I asked, however, somehow I knew exactly what he was speaking of. "But, I can't leave



right now. We're in the middle of construction, and they need someone to lead them. How can I leave my people behind?"

"It is up to you whether you follow the Word, Alvin."

"How long do I have to decide?"

"When it is time, it is time. Your time does not align with His."

"All right, I'll go. Where are the Guardians?"

"They are coming to you on Steeds of Wings."

"On what?"

Right at that moment, the alarm horn was blown. "EVERYBODY RUN!" Someone bellowed.

"WHAT IS *THAT*?" Another squealed.

I turned to witness a giant golden-scaled lizard descending from the hazy gray overhead. The clouds parted with each flap of the beast's powerful wings so that the clear blue far above peeked through like a giant eye twinkling with anticipation. But at the time, my attention was drawn to the golden creature slicing through the gray mold. My jaw dropped as the bulk of mass landed; people were scurrying away like ants running from an anteater.

Sitting atop the monster was none other than Vlam, wielding a wicked mace and shield. He had acquired a new breastplate, which shimmered despite there being no sun. Five more beasts emerged from the clouds. They were all golden, however the one Vlam sat

atop was by far the largest; not even a warship could beat its size.

I faced back to where the man had been standing to thank him for delivering such an important message, but there was no one there. I frowned, “Who was that?” *His name was Gabriel, but where did he come from, and where did he go?* “I wish I could’ve invited him to the village.” I sulked. It would’ve been valuable to have such a man as a part of my court.

I ran down the hill to the Guardians, who were now all on the ground. Neró scooped me up in an embrace, grinning, “Alvin! You’ve grown up, haven’t you?”

“Yes, it has been a long time my friend. How do you fare?”

“We are well. As you can see, we’ve been preparing.” He gestured towards the beasts.

“Indeed. . . what are they?”

Vlam answered, “We call them dragons. They are originally creatures of evil, but I thought it would be ironic if we used them against the origins.”

“So,” I stepped back, “they’re evil?”

“No, no these are borne from the Breath of Life. I requested for their creation to be used in our army.” Vlam explained. He looked back and nodded towards the largest dragon, “No he isn’t trying to insult you. You must try to understand where he is coming from, he knows nothing of your kind. Very good.”

I frowned, “What?”

“Apologies, he was slightly offended at your questioning of their loyalties.”

“Oh. . . my bad.”

“He forgives you.”

Genesis stepped forward, smiling, “Alvin, how are you?”

“I’m doing great!” I grasped her outstretched hand and said, “As you can see, a lot has been accomplished in the time we have been apart. Many have come to serve me, and expressed their desire to follow the chosen king of the Holy One. The Lord has provided us with all we need thus far; not one person, not even the elderly nor young, fell ill during our travels. And no one starved or grew weary. Truly, we are being watched by the Eye of the Provider. Now we are building the town, and then we will construct the palace.”

“I can help you with the palace when the time comes.” Genesis offered.

“It would be an honor.” My heart leapt for joy.

“Of course, I will do it once the town has been completed.” She promised.

Angelique, Valgus, and Skuggi were conversing a few feet away. I wanted to interrupt them in order to give my greeting, but something told me to keep away for the time being.

“Don’t mind them, they are worried about Angelique’s requested animals. They did not follow us on our journey.”

“You mean to say that there are more dragons?”

“No, these are the only ones in existence.

Angelique requested a . . . different beast.”

“Interesting. Are there any more?”

“Yes, Valgus’ friends hide in his light, and my steed rests on another continent.” She waved her hand toward the sea. “So tell me, Alvin, how have you been spending your months? They’ve been fairly productive, I see.” She nodded at the crowd filled with gaping peers.

I spoke of my entire journey, from beginning to finish. Genesis soaked in the information gladly, nodding along as I spoke. She seemed excited when the tribe was mentioned, and then told me of how they had stayed with them briefly before meeting me. She then went on to tell me of their adventures. The Guardians had returned to their birthplace, solemn due to what had occurred with Helel, but determined to not let it affect their Mission. So, in order to prepare for the impending battle with him, they requested directly to the Creator that he bring these different creatures to life. The dragons were only one of four new species to roam this world. She also acknowledged the new pieces of armor, “We have been gifted the Lord’s very armor. We each wield or wear a physical piece from the set, however the armor exists for everyone in the Spirit,” she unraveled. I

had trouble comprehending her words, but nodded as though it made perfect sense. *I'll ask about it later.* I told myself.

The Guardians were already preparing to leave, but time to organize everything was desperately needed, so I invited them to stay for dinner and rest. While they feasted with the town around a huge bonfire, I gathered Valerie, Gill, and several others by the names of Cullen, Nikolaus, Leon, and Ellis. They were trustworthy people who I knew would carry out my duties flawlessly. Valerie had been by my side since the beginning of my solo quest, and Gill was the one who familiarized me with the tribe. The remaining four were all able leaders who took to my side when it was apparent we needed to abandon the town. Nikolaus and Leon were among those released from the Fortress of Freed, and the other two had been born and raised in the town. I was thankful to have their support.

“Valerie, you are to take most of the burden and act as temporary king. I know,” I held up my hand as she opened her mouth to object, “you are a woman and they might give you trouble, but you’re a *fierce* woman and I couldn’t think of anyone better for the position. Cullen, please oversee the construction site with Ellis, I trust the both of your abilities, and know that you have keen eyes for this sort of thing. Nikolaus, I need you and Gill to lead the hunts; I’m well aware of your talents in marksmanship and swordsmanship, so I trust that you

also have a knack for monitoring the lesser experienced ones. Correct them if you see any flaws, for it is best to break old habits before any real orders are established. Leon, I hope you will keep the guards in order. They are still in desperate need of organization, so if you find an opportunity, please get that arranged. I am not sure for how long I will be gone; it could be for a few days or even several years. But please, do not leave anything unfinished. I will return.”

“Of course, Your Majesty.” They said in unison.

It would be a long night of tossing and turning. My worries had multiplied over the course of time. I now had thousands of individuals depending on me to establish proper rule over them, and then there were the Lord’s expectations to live up to. I ran my hand down my face, *How am I to fulfill my role? I myself am unworthy of such a position, so why was I chosen?* It was difficult to wrap my mind around. I had accepted this role because it just felt right at the time, but who was I kidding? *I am me, Alvin, a man who was unable to save a single other person from his city. I do not pity them, for they made their decisions, but I am sorry that I could not bring them into the light I was shown.*

My mind continued rambling until I eventually fell asleep from exhaustion. My lucid dreams consisted of a knightage, saluting towards me, but not *to* me. I turned around to see a giant crucifixion cross looming above me. I didn’t know what it meant, but was in awe

of it. How simple, two pieces of wood fixated to be perpendicular, but it had me falling to my knees and kissing the ground beneath it in humility.

“Rise and shine, your eminence.” I woke up to Neró in my tent, smirking down at me.

I rolled over, groaning. He kicked my side playfully, “Come on, get up sleeping beauty. I know you missed my beautiful face in the morning,” he sneered.

“I definitely didn’t miss *this*.” I sighed, forcing myself to sit up. “Do we need to leave?”

“You bet. The others are already waiting on the dragons.”

“You mean we’re riding those things?” I scowled.

“Course, what else would we do?”

“What about y’all’s elements? Why not use those?”

“Traveling across the ocean is no joke, my guy. For the others at least. For me, it’s a piece of cake.”

“When did you get so cocky?”

“Don’t you mean confident? I was born this way, don’t mind my overflowing charm.” He had a smug expression and was stroking his stubble.

“Oh, I see. You’re finally growing chin hairs.”

“That is *not* the reason.”

“Oh no, of course not.” I said smugly.

“Well at least I can grow them. Your face still looks like a newborn baby’s.”

“I’d rather look like a baby than an old man.” I jeered.

“Nonsense.”

“Let’s just go.” I chuckled, standing and grabbing my travel pack and battleaxe.

The dragons were already shuffling their wings and shifting from side to side, anticipating their flight. *It will be a new experience; I’d been high in the sky before with Angélique, but I won’t have her security when on the back of one of these beasts.*

Valgus looked down from his dragon and smiled, “You’re here. It’s good to see you, Alvin.”

“And you as well.” I returned his friendly smile.

“You’ll be with Vlam. He is the only one of us who can communicate with the beasts.” Neró pointed at the Fire Guardian who was stroking the largest dragon while conversing with Skuggi.

“I understand.” I went to where he was standing and tapped his shoulder. “Hey, travel buddy. Guess you pulled the short straw since you’re going to be stuck with an inexperienced flier for who knows how long.” I joked.

“I’m sure your complaints won’t be nearly as bad as Genesis’. She hates it up there.” He chuckled. “Even with the wind in my ears and a mile’s distance in between us, I could still hear her grumbles.”



“It isn’t surprising, considering how she’s the Earth Guardian and all. . . are you comfortable with flying?”

“It does weaken my element, being with so little oxygen at such great heights, but it’s convenient, and rather thrilling. I’ve learned to enjoy it.”

“I see. I look forward to it.”

We mounted the dragon and I pivoted to the audience who had shown up to watch us leave. As their king, I couldn’t say nothing. I could no longer leave without saying a word and expect them to still have faith in me when I eventually return. They weren’t my mother, who would always wait for me.

“Thank you all for making the decision to follow me thus far. I would never have imagined that my kingdom would begin with so many, when there was not a single person before. I couldn’t ask for better subjects, who fear the Lord more than they will ever fear me. Continue building our home, and keep your prayers strong. Welcome all who follow the Father’s Word, and turn away all who deny it. We will grow with time, but it takes patience and perseverance. May the Provider keep a careful watch over you. Farewell for now, for I shall return with the Lord’s power guiding me.”

I sat myself in between two spikes and secured my bag and axe on the spike behind me, my heart thundering. Whether it was from fear or excitement, I couldn’t differentiate, but my senses settled when I heard

the cheers from below. Each face was glowing with honor and gratitude, and their hands reached towards the sky. Their voices rose into a single song of praise to the Lord for granting them a good king, and for being The Good King. Tears welled up in my eyes as the symphonies rose and fell. I could leave knowing well that they would be just fine.

My eyes met Vlam's, who was smiling at me, and my head bobbed with confirmation. I was ready. Ready to leave, to face the world, and to face my once closest friend. The dragon hunkered down low to the ground and spread open its massive, leathery wings, its movement making my stomach acids boil with anticipation. And right when it reached a point high in my throat, threatening to explode from my mouth, the dragon brought down its wings with a skull rattling *WHOMPH*, and it was as though all of the heavens decided to push my head downwards, and flatten me to the dragon's back. I couldn't lift my head and my skin felt as though it was being ripped away from my skeleton as the wind grabbed at me with its stinging claws. My ears popped as we climbed, and my breathing grew shallow. Dizziness and nausea ransacked my body as the dragon's jagged motions rocked me back and forth. After another few minutes of fighting the drafts, we leveled out and became parallel with the sky.

It took another ten minutes before I could lift my top half away from the spike that had been my

reassurance of life. When I was finally able to sit upright, I opened my clamped shut eyes to take in the dome of blue and white which held me. The ground was invisible as the clouds stretched out far beyond what the eye could see. The sun was still climbing the cliff of white behind us, throwing stripes of orange into the powdery floor. Despite the sun being so close, the air was beyond frigid. The cold clung to the water which I had stolen from the clouds when we had broken through their formation.

“Wow. . .” I breathed. It was the most crisp sight one could ever have. Everything felt so surreal, from the numbness in my face to the tears in my eyes being fished out by the cold’s hooks. I loosened my grip on the spike and relaxed. All of the tension in my body was whisked away by the air currents going under my arms. I giggled with the pure joy you would expect from a four year old child receiving candy from his parents.

We flew throughout the day and well into the night. I was growing weary from lack of nourishment and hydration, as well as an extended period of time in the upper atmosphere, despite Angelique taking extra care to regulate the air around me. It was growing difficult to keep hold of the spike. The dizziness had me swaying side to side. It felt as though time was passing by quickly around me, but excruciatingly slow within my mind. I leaned forward onto the spike and my eyes slowly drifted down, and the last thing I remember

looking at was the horizon of glittering lights staring down at me, as though they would ensure my eternal safety.

# 10. THE OASIS WHERE FRIENDS ARE FOUND

The new land was one of scorching sun and sand. And when I mention sand, I mean *strictly* sand. Absolutely nothing existed to distort the tan and blue stretch. There was no conceivable way that any sort of living organism could survive here; it was a wasteland. We had been in the desert for three days, and I was sick of it. At every opportunity, I would ask one of the Guardians when we would leave and find some sort of shade. Sitting under the wing of a dragon which literally radiated heat due to the fire inside of its blood did not help my situation whatsoever.

Although, it wasn't *all* that bad. We had food and Neró provided water. Angelique would also sometimes lower the temperature around me to provide a few moments of comfort. Genesis had built a shelter of red stone, but the sun only turned it into an oven. I couldn't even go within ten feet of it before feeling its overwhelming heat. It was nice at night, though. The temperature would do a complete turn around from incinerating to glacial. The heat which had been trapped in the shelter provided us warmth while we slept.

“I’m *dying*.” I groaned, leaning on my travel pack as I sat in the burning sand.

“Suck it up buttercup, we won’t be here for much longer.” Angelique flicked my forehead.

I sat bolted upright, “How much longer?”

“I don’t know.” She replied.

“What?” I exasperated in disbelief.

“It’s more of a sense. He’ll let us know when it’s time.” She pointed to the sky.

I sighed and pondered, *I wonder how Valerie’s doing. I hope no one is giving her any trouble.* The image of her freckled face and red hair was on the edge of my mind. I found my mind wandering to her more often the longer I was away.

It was nearly impossible to look up at the sky since the amount of sun rays penetrating the atmosphere would force my eyelids shut. The brilliance was nothing in comparison to the Creator, though. *If our sun were a candlelight, He would be the sun itself.* I sighed and decided to just stay quiet. His timing was perfect, afterall.

We spent another day baking in the sun, and then finally departed. The ride this time was even more uncomfortable since I had sand stuck in places where it didn’t belong, but at least there was a nice breeze to cool my burnt face. It hurt so much that even the touch of cool water was unbearable, which Neró had attempted

showering me with before we had gone to sleep the previous night.

The view was still breathtaking. With the swirling, sparse clouds and the rising sun touching the sky with a vivid orange and soft pink, I felt like an angel flying through Heaven, though I knew well enough that such a thing would never happen for me. *Human spirits and angels are two different beings; my role in Paradise would be different to that of an angel's.*

When the sun was high overhead, the dragons began their descent. The sensation left my stomach in the sky as we glided downwards. I leaned to the side in order to catch a better glimpse at where we were going. The land was still one of sand and dunes, but right smack in the middle was a dot of the most vibrant green. I frowned, *What is that?* As we neared the green, details gradually became clearer; it was an oasis.

We landed a few miles away, so as to not freak out the oasis' inhabitants, but that meant walking three miles through the sand. I took nothing but my battleaxe and a small bag of copper coins which fit perfectly in my palm; the axe was secured across my back and the bag was stashed inside my pocket. It took nearly two hours to traverse the dunes, when it would've taken half the time on grass.

Finally, after what felt like an eternity of walking, we reached the outskirts of the oasis. Tents were piked around the greenery, while the actual green itself was left

untouched. *I suppose they don't want to risk ruining the only vegetation in the area.* There were several people wrapped in linen scattered around. They were doing small tasks like frying lizards on baked sand, boiling water over a fire to purify it, sifting through sand for some reason, and other things you would expect one to do in the desert. However, they all paused in their actions and turned to us. It made sense since you wouldn't exactly be expecting visitors when you live in the middle of a sea of sand.

Valgus approached them with a smile that rivaled that of the sun's brilliance, "Good day, my friends."

I raised an eyebrow, *I don't think they would consider us friends.* But despite my pessimistic thoughts, the closest person stood and fell to his knees, weeping. He responded in a language I had never heard. It was a beautiful sound, the words he spoke, like a river flowing over smooth stones. Just his very phrase cooled the heat from my body.

"What did he say?" I whispered to Skuggi. I had learned long before that the Guardians had the ability to speak in any tongue. It was no wonder that both I and the man on his knees had understood Valgus, because he had spoken in both of our languages at the same time.

"He is elated that we have arrived." Skuggi translated.

"See, I told you. The Lord's time is the Right time." Angelique elbowed my side.



“Ow.” I rubbed my ribs, “Yeah, I know.” I broke a smile.

We were catered to immediately; they brought us the best of their foods: dates, olives, wheat bread, and salad dressed with olive oil were the main dishes. They had little meat since it was difficult to raise slaughtering animals in their environment, however they served the steak from a cow they had butchered that morning, in hopes that we would arrive. They told the Guardians that they had been receiving visions for an entire month now of the six who will arrive to lead them to the lion cub, who is to be their king. At that, I was introduced to the crowd.

“Your lion cub, the king of the Lord’s people, is here before your very eyes. He may not look like much, since he is still scrawny and yet to build much muscle, but is an able leader who is capable of building the Kingdom.” Angelique announced, gesturing towards me. I didn’t know whether I should be offended or flattered. I chose to feel the latter since the compliment to my abilities far outweighed the insult to my appearance.

I stood and bowed, my hand over my heart. “It is an honor to meet you.”

Skuggi translated for them, and the Oasians began chattering away. One of them stood; she was a woman of tall stature and dark skin. She wore a shawl and her dress covered from her neck to her fingertips and

then her toes. Her eyes were sharp and lined with black. She spoke in her language, a beautiful melodic sound like a harp being played by the wind.

“She says that they have high expectations, and are willing to follow you in order to see them fulfilled.” Vlam rumbled. It was strange to see more people of the same color as Vlam. I had seen them before, in small groups however, in the port city of Mai. It was intriguing to see just how varietal the human population was. *The Lord truly has an eye for Creation, to create such beautiful beings.* I thought. Even the tribesmen back home were of a different skin and hair color; their eyes and hair were raven black, while their skin was relative to copper. I looked at my own hands, dark from the sun, but a different type from the tribe. My hair was lighter than theirs, a dusty brown, and my eyes were the same color as moss. I couldn't help but appreciate just how different we all were, and just how powerful our uniqueness would be once we truly unite.

“I will not let you down.” I smiled, my excitement rising. *What a powerful nation we will become.*

After several hours of preparation, everyone piled on to the dragons and our flight began. There were only around thirty people living at the oasis, including children and elderlies. The majority of those teeming with time decided to remain, claiming that their paths

were reaching the end, and that it was up to the younger generation to fight against the forces of evil threatening to envelope our beautiful world. It was a painful parting, as the elders were the parents and grandparents of those who were leaving. They knew full well that once they left, there would be no returning, and this would be the last time they ever saw their loved ones.

The dragons were large enough to seat everyone, with more room to spare. We were headed northbound, to a land of barren mountains and luscious fields. It took two days to reach the range, where I spotted the specks of mountain goats and eagles dancing on ledges. We landed in a field at the base of the mountains, and the ones who had been living in the desert for their entire lives marveled at the sight of the lush, green grass. They bent over backwards when trying to stare all the way up the jagged teeth of the earth, hoping to somehow lay their vision on the peaks. However, the clouds wouldn't allow it as they protected the points from any unwanted peers.

I stretched my sore muscles and laid back in the grass, gazing up at the gray sky. A spot opened where I could see the crystal clear blue of the dome beyond the cover, however it was only the blue eye of Angelique. She blinked at me with her odd eyes, then disappeared from my vision. There was a *thumph* and a *whoosh* in my left ear as she lay beside me, also studying the veil above.

“Are you prepared for what is to come?” She asked solemnly.

“How could I ever be? I’m only putting my complete faith in the Lord. He will guide me, I am sure of it.”

“Of course He will. Then, you are prepared; maybe not completely, but your foundation is strong.”

“I don’t want to see him.” I blurted.

I could sense her wry smile as she responded, “We also dread meeting with him, only to see what he’s become. Where did we lose our grasp on him? How lost did he become without us realizing? It. . . pains me. In a way I never knew I could feel before.”

I glanced over. Her face was hidden by pale locks and the swaying green grass, but the sorrow which filled her was imminent. “We will win.” I couldn’t bring myself to say I’m sorry, because it would do nothing for either of us. She didn’t want my condolences, and I was in no place to give them.

“We have already won.” She declared with conviction. “The battle in Paradise was fought long before you ever walked this earth. The rebellion was cast out from the golden gates, and now they try to find refuge here, a place where deceit is used as a means of communication. I can’t even count the amount of times a king or queen, prophet or priest has approached us, demanding that we do work for them in the name of the Lord. They spout pretty lies and exalt themselves in our

presence, diminishing our Purpose and the Lord's Will. Must they believe that everything is done to accommodate them? In the time I have wandered these lands, I realize more and more the reason as to why the Guardians were sent."

"I must say, it is a shame that we have fallen to such a low point for us to need the interference of the Guardians. I say that with all due respect."

"I know you do. You would never say anything that you didn't feel truthful."

"You know me well."

We laid in the grass until sundown, chatting. I had never had a long conversation with Angelique, so this was a nice change. Conversing with her was much different than what I had imagined; normally, she was a free-spirited, bright person, but her mind went to levels deeper than mine could keep up with. She introduced me to new concepts, and we touched on the subject of Helel's realm. She assured me that she had never seen it before, but with how she described the feelings Helel had experienced when there led me to doubt her claims.

"Alvin, Angelique, come help with camp."

Skuggi beckoned, calling from the bonfire which was now roasting a mountain goat that had been caught along the edge of the pinewood forest which acted as a barrier between the fields and mountains.

"On our way." Angelique responded, sitting up.

The Guardians' beauty never failed to amaze me. It wasn't necessarily a physical attraction, but the Spirit of the Holy One shone through them. Their presence could grasp anyone's attention, even from a far distance. It wasn't hard to remind myself that they weren't human; if anything, it was even more difficult to think of them as beings similar to us. But the fact that they felt pain still held true.

I was put to work on gathering firewood and turning the goat. The intense heat from the flames licked my skin, creating a film of perspiration from my body. I labored over the crackling blaze, having to step away every now and then to escape the clinging smoke. My nostrils burned and my muscles ached, but this much was nothing compared to what I'd done before. Knight apprenticeship wasn't exactly a walk through the courtyard; it had been a grueling, vicious four years. I shivered despite the heat when remembering my time in Mai. It was like a ghost which had bound itself to me, haunting my memories.

While in the middle of turning the goat, a hand grabbed my shoulder. I dropped the stick and it spun back around. The fire sputtered as oils from the cooking meat dripped into its belly. I turned, grimacing because I had almost ruined everyone's food. Vlam was standing with his hand snatched back, seemingly as surprised as I had been.

“Hey.” He said.

“Hey. . .”

“Do you want a break?”

“No, I’m okay—”

“Valgus wants to talk to you.”

“Oh. . . all right.” I looked back at the sizzling bulk over the fire, realizing that I was being kicked off the preparation squad until further notice, “Be sure you turn it.” I mentioned before leaving the side of the flames. The night air felt exceptionally cold after being enveloped by heat for the past hour.

I didn’t have to search long when looking for Valgus; he literally glowed. He was like a giant firefly. The Guardian was standing further away from the people, who were busy tending to their weapons or setting up tents.

“You called?” Was the first thing I asked upon reaching him.

“Indeed I did,” he confirmed. “Follow me.”

The glowing bulb of the bonfire was erased from view behind me as we ventured deeper into the forest. I could only keep pace with Valgus since he was my only light source; his glow illuminated the under branches of the pines, giving them an eerie, mystique ambience. It wasn’t until we were deep within the wild, untouched woods that he stopped and faced me.

“What’s bothering you?” He asked.

I was taken aback. Apparently I wasn't as adept at hiding my emotions than I had chosen to believe.

"Am I that obvious?"

"No, you aren't. But to those who pay attention, you are clearly perturbed about something."

"Well. . . there has been a weight on my mind lately. It isn't of much importance though." I insisted.

"Nonsense. Even what seems like the smallest of problems is something that is creating a knot in your relationship with the Father. Therefore, every issue is important."

"But it isn't something of the present; rather, it's of the past."

Valgus nodded without saying anything, waiting for me to speak. It began to get uncomfortable just standing, so I sat on the moist soil of the forest floor and sighed.

"Back when I lived in Mai, so many evil things occurred around me. Right before me, even; and I didn't bat an eye. The thought didn't even occur to take a second glance and question the morality of those people. The slaughtering of animals on altars made of gold depicting *cows* and *pigs*. . . When a man was being stoned for carrying a copy of the Book of Law, I didn't stay to watch. I turned my back on him and his pleading cries. The sounds of his wails haunt me to this day. I have always been knowledgeable to our Creator, I've prayed to Him and sang songs of praise to Him, but



never, not once, did I stand up for Him. That is, until I was taken away by Helel, who introduced me to the real world. The world of the Holy One, the world of good and prosperity. Things that I hadn't imagined were possible happened every day, and they happen even more so in the Kingdom of Paradise.

I was thrilled and honored when being told by the Lord that I am to be the king of His nation. I still am immensely honored and humbled to know that such an important position has been bestowed upon me. But when I think back on my behavior before my life truly began, I question whether I'm worthy of standing in such high places. I have never done anything to deserve these blessings, so why was I chosen? Surely there is another far more suited for this role than I." My heart was heavy with these burdensome trivials. As I unloaded everything that had been bothering me for the past year, Valgus simply sat and listened, betraying no thoughts or emotions on his stone-set face.

A few minutes passed before he uttered a word. He was deep in thought as he processed all of what I had said to him. "You are not worthy."

"Sorry?" I questioned, confused if I had heard him right.

"You are not worthy." He repeated, this time with more conviction. "Not even us Guardians are worthy of our positions. How can *anyone* live up to our Father's gifts? Just know that He chose you for a reason,

and He has never made a mistake. Not a single one. Certainly, we make wrong decisions all the time; people aren't created to know everything, they learn as they grow, and they grow through their decisions. You made mistakes in the past, there isn't anyone who hasn't; ask for His forgiveness, and then forgive yourself. He forgives those who truly reflect and repent on what they have done. He knows His children's hearts better than they know themselves. But never forget those mistakes, because you don't want to make them again. This is what will make you a wise king."

"So I just need to apologize? But how will that relieve me of my guilt? How will repenting make things any better? I know He is merciful, but how can He forgive a person like me? There is nothing I have done to deserve His grace. . . there is no way that I can ask for such an audience with Him."

"There is no need to ask when He is already here." Valgus smiled, his teeth quite literally blinding me.

"What do you mean?"

"I mean what I say when I speak of His presence being among us. He is everywhere at all times, in the highest of places and the darkest of lows, he can be found anywhere. So by all means, He is *here*."

I remained silent, allowing the serenity to fill my ears. The silence turned into the sounds of wind brushing past trees, and animals scurrying along the

needle-ridden floor. *He is here. Right now.* I thought, closing my eyes and opening my heart to feel His spirit.

Immediately, my head fell. I leaned forward onto my knees and began to weep. It was an indescribable, uncontrollable feeling. Years worth of pent up emotions were extracted from my innermost soul. The heaviness which I had never realized was stuck upon my shoulders was lifted, and my spirit felt light. Just the knowledge that He was there was enough to bring forth all of my misery and rid of it as though it had never existed. I finally felt free of the thoughts which rubbed my own worthlessness in my face. “I’m sorry—” I choked, my throat being constricted by my own sentiments.

*You are forgiven.*

The words reverberated within my mind, and my cries were renewed. “I’m sorry, I’m so *sorry*—” I couldn’t stop. My guilts and regrets poured from my mouth like a waterfall. “If I had reached out even just a little bit, I could’ve saved so many from the fires of Torture.” Images flashed through my mind; those of families eating together at restaurants, and children playing in the streets. Those people who had no idea what they were doing, I could’ve given them a chance. A lifeline. But because I had no interest in searching for the salvation of others, they died. Their deaths could very well be on my hands. “I’m going to be different. I will change myself, and change the world. The Lord is with me, so I will do as He says until the day I am called

home.” My shoulders still shook from the turbulent emotions, but my tears halted. A fresh, hot wave of determination seeped deep into my body, even deeper than my bones. My spirit was raging against the forces of evil, it was flaring with the fighting spirit of the Lord. “I am a king. My kingdom is for my God.”

## 11. TURNING POINT

Not even the mountains stood in my way. My path had been cleared, and everything the Lord had created was behind me. My people were being gathered under one banner, every color and size imaginable were under my wing. We had traveled through the mountains and came to a civilization resting on the cliff in the northeastern ridge of the continent. The buildings were bright red and beyond them lay the vast eastern sea, the imagery as that of endless rich and pure blue silk rippling under the sun. There were people with their sleeves rolled up and tresses tucked into belts bent down in fields, pulling up crops from the soil. The grounds were lush with verdant grasses and dotted with wild antelopes. The dragons descended upon the city; rather than landing several miles away, we touched ground in the center of town.

A swarm of curious faces came from all directions to gather around us, gawking at the dragons and some even getting down on one knee to bow to them.

“Don’t do that.” Skuggi ordered sharply.

They flinched and righted themselves, unsure of what to do. These people had sharp, slanted eyes and pointed noses. A man dressed in fabulous robes of

white, red, gold, and purple trimmed with gold thread stepped forward, his eyes keen on Skuggi. His eyebrows knit together in a deep frown and he uttered a simple, short phrase that I couldn't understand.

"He asks who we are." Vlam leaned down to whisper in my ear.

"We are the Guardians of the Elements," Skuggi said with grandiose, "and this is King Alvin."

"Kingu Alubeen?" The man repeated, his words twisted by an accent and a skeptical look on his face.

"I greet you, sir." I stepped forward, my hand outstretched.

He eyed it warily and decided against taking it, so I remained standing awkwardly for what felt like eternity but couldn't have been more than thirty seconds before retracting my hand and stepping back behind the line of Guardians. The man spoke again.

"He is asking why we have come here." Vlam translated.

"We were sent here to fulfill the Mission bestowed upon us by the Lord, and your people play an important role in this Purpose." Genesis answered, taking lead in the conversation.

"He says that we are not welcome." Vlam grunted.

"Why not?" I asked.

As the man was speaking, Vlam translated, “They do not know of our Lord, nor do they care to find out who he is. He asks that we leave and never return.”

I scoffed and stepped forward, “Hey, yeah it’s me, Alvin.” I pointed at the dragons, “You see those? Have you ever seen them before today? No. That’s because our Lord created them! Can your gods create such ferocious beasts? I don’t think so—” I was cut off by Valgus who grabbed my hand and yanked me back, hissing my name. “What?”

“Do you think aggression is going to work on anybody? They don’t even know what you’re saying, so exactly what are you hoping to accomplish?”

“No, it’s just—I don’t know, I—I don’t know.” I sighed, my excitement simmering down. “I’m sorry.” I said to the man, who was staring at me with an incredulous look on his angled face.

He uttered one sharp word, which I could understand clearly despite not knowing his language.

“He said to leave.”

“I know.”

We staked out in the varietal deciduous tree-blanketed hills further inland. The Guardians were in constant discussion, exchanging words about what might’ve gone wrong and the likes. I kept more to myself, remaining on the outskirts of camp and observing everyone’s interactions. Angelique and Neró

had taken it upon themselves to teach the oasis-dwellers the language of my continent, since that was where we would be living. They were quick learners, and before long there were several who were conversing in broken phrases.

I did a lot of thinking when watching their correlations. *Why do they reject the Holy One so adamantly?* It wasn't like I hadn't met people cut of the same cloth before, but I just didn't understand. How had they as a civilization grown so distant from their origins?

A soft whisper spoke in the back of my head. It was so soft that it almost went unnoticed, *The seed of evil took root, and the vines of temptation ensnared their ankles so they could not move forward anymore. My children are lost, and I want you to guide them back.*

"I am no shepherd, Lord. How can I lead so many back to Your pastures?"

*I will bestow upon you the gift of tongue. No language is unknown to you.*

"I am honored. . . but why me?" I dipped my head and stared at my hands which were clamped together in my lap. It was a gift beyond anyone's imagination; I had believed that only the Guardians would ever be blessed in such a way. Normally, I would be ecstatic to receive such knowledge, but instead the feeling of nervousness grasped my chest, tightening it. How big was my role that I would have to know every language in the world? "I don't know if I'm ready. . ."



*Believe in Me, and all will be complete.*

The realization that this wasn't something I could rely on the Guardians for was dawning. They couldn't be the only ones uniting my people. This escapade would be just me and the Holy One. "Okay, let's go then." I murmured, standing and running from the camp. I passed Genesis and Valgus on my way out, but neither of them made any attempts to stop me.

My legs were shaking and my lungs felt like they had shriveled up by the time I reached the fields. It was a breathtaking panorama. The fields were on different elevations; stone walls had been constructed to hold the terrain in place. The fields were green and the water which filled the trenches perfectly reflected the extravagant blue of the sky, as the most carefully polished mirrors would. There were farmers scattered around, ankle deep in the blue while uprooting a variety of crops. There were potatoes, carrots, and a white radish type plant which I had never seen before.

They stopped in their motions to stare at me curiously. Their eyes weren't filled with any maliciousness, only intrigue. I nodded in greeting towards them and climbed up the hill, passing the vibrant grounds with my eyes keen on the bright red buildings ahead.

When I finally reached the first structure, there was already an entourage of five waiting to escort me. "You were expecting me?" I asked.

They exchanged glances with each other. “You can speak our language?” One asked. He wore a brown robe with a blue sash wrapped around his stomach. He was of similar stature to me, not tall but also not short and of lean build.

“As of a few hours ago, yes.”

“How can you learn our language in such a short period of time?”

“Anything is possible through my Provider.”

“I see. . . come with us. The lord of the land is waiting.”

“I will come.”

We traversed through the windy roads, through the red buildings with gold decor and up to a large, open pavilion made of maple wood and black granite. There was a chair covered in red velvet and studded with gold coins and rubies which was reminiscent of a throne atop a podium toward the back edge of the pavilion. Two gold dragons were standing on either side of it. I frowned at the dragons, since they looked entirely different to the real ones. Their backs were long and snake-like, and they had manes instead of scales. But the real reason for my displeasure was due to there being statues of them. I could now understand the statements of the Guardians, saying that the dragons were technically creatures of evil. *I suppose it's to fight fire with fire. Our dragons versus theirs.*

The man who had instructed us to leave before was sitting in the velvet chair. He had a very tall, box shaped hat on his head which had wings flaring to the side as though it were about to take flight. His long mustache was about two feet long and mottled with gray; his mouth was taught in a stern frown.

“How do you do?” I asked.

“So you do know our language.”

“No, I don’t. Or I didn’t, at least. I guess I do now.” I shrugged.

“Why have you come to this place on the backs of the mighty dragons? Have you come to destroy us?”

“But. . . don’t you like dragons?” I gestured to the statues which glared at me with ruby eyes.

“Of course, however we never hoped to meet one. It is said that if one meets a dragon and fails to appease it, their entire family line will be erased from history and everything to their name would be decimated.”

“Oh. . . I see. My apologies, for we brought our dragons into the center of your land. However, they will not destroy unless commanded to. Their master is Vlam, who answers only to the Merciful One. If you are loyal to Him, then destruction is not what lay in your path, but exaltment. However, if you don’t. . .” I didn’t finish my statement.

“Who is this Merciful One you speak of? Do you carry his statue?”

“He is One who does not need a lowly, despicable idol to be worshipped in His place. The mere thought of bowing down to a cow, pig, or dragon,” I gestured to the statues, “made of material objects absolutely nauseates me. It is a despicable act in the eyes of the Lord.”

“Then how does he hear you if you do not pray to an idol?”

“My Lord is everywhere all at once. He can be found in the lowest of lows and highest of highs. His presence is not limited to a statue; it is not even limited to this earth. We walk in Him, talk in Him, breathe Him, and live Him.”

The man squinted at me skeptically, “How can I know that what you speak of is the truth? What has this Lord of yours done that makes you so sure of Him when you cannot see nor touch Him, as we can ours.”

“It does not take physical sense to experience Him. You simply believe. Have you heard of the Book of Law?”

“I have not.”

*It shows.* I thought pessimistically, but instead explained, “It holds the accounts of the very first people to walk this earth. It documents the beginning of the world and the miracles of the Holy One. However, that evidence is not all the reason I have been given in upholding my faith. I once lived in a big city which specialized in trading overseas. There, the people

danced around bonfires while chanting, they stoned those who believed in the Lord, and they sacrificed their very own kin over an altar beneath a cow. I watched as it all happened before my very eyes, yet I did not utter a single thing against it. However, I believed faithfully in the Lord, and walked in His light while I let others around me perish in the dark. Then, one day I heard Him speak to me.”

“You heard him?”

“Yes, very clearly. He told me that I was chosen to be the king which would lead His people to the Light. Me, a tossed away knight’s apprentice, had been chosen to build up the most important position a man could be given. I, who had been unable to save a single person in my entire life, had been chosen to lead thousands. Their lives would rest on my back. Their eyes would always be on me, and their decisions would be my responsibility, as mine would be theirs. I was told that I would have to leave that city, and follow the Guardians of the Elements, who were cleansing the land of all the impurities. It has become so stained by sin that there was no way around a purge, as horrible as it may sound. So I followed Helel from that place, and we began to gather all of those who would become the future of my kingdom. The Kingdom of Migdal. And I invite you to my table.”

The man remained stagnant, seemingly in his thoughts, then proceeded to say, “If you want my people

to conform with yours, then you will have to prove to me that your god is more powerful than mine. If he far exceeds my expectations, then I will devote myself to him for the rest of my days.”

“Very well.” I agreed. Within, a familiar sense of displeasure arose. Who was this man to demand a show of my Lord? His powers aren’t a means to make a spectacle of. But if this was the way that was being presented in order to bring them under my flag, then so be it. *Lord, what shall I do?* I pleaded, unsure. He responded, *Tell them this*—and proceeded to instruct me on what words to say.

“How about we do this—” I proposed, “You will bring a cow to be slaughtered and set it upon your altar, then set fire to it. If your sacrifice is burnt, then your god is real. I will build an altar and pray to my Father and ask for Him to reveal Himself. If my Lord shows Himself, then He is real.”

“We will do as you say.”

It was an entire day’s process. I, being the perfectionist that I am, had to assure that the altar looked as esteemed as possible, despite being a chiseled away boulder surrounded by bricks given to me by the town. I asked for a bucket of olive oil, then poured it over the stone. When I was finished, I returned to the man, who was already preparing torches for his cow.

“Are you ready?” I asked.

“Yes, I am ready.” He hoisted up the torch.

“Then, let us proceed.”

The man nodded and turned to the altar. It was under a pavilion on a cliff which faced the brilliant blue outstretch of sea. A statue of a dragon was hovering over the altar, so that its nostrils would inhale the smoke from all sacrifices. He held the torch above the cow, whose blood was dripping over the sides of the table and soaking our sandals. From his mouth a chant was uttered, and he dropped the torch. The flames caught fire to the pelt of the cow, and the fire flared as it engulfed the entire animal. We retreated several feet back in order to avoid the sweltering heat of the burning sacrifice.

“So, I suppose my god is real then. My cow has been accepted.” He said.

I turned to him and saw the reflection of the blaze within his dark eyes, “I wouldn’t be so certain.” I chided, returning my gaze to the dying light. There was a collective of gasps when the fire fully subsided, as the entire cow remained untouched. There were no scorch marks or any hint that the fire had even existed. “Then, I suppose we shall go to the altar for my Father.”

As we walked towards the make-shift altar, the man asked me, “What is your name?”

I was pretty sure that it had already been mentioned to him, but replied anyway, “Alvin.”

“Chan’ge is my name.”

“I will welcome you to my table once my side of the promise has been fulfilled.” I smiled.

We finally arrived at the altar and I was handed a torch to toss upon the boulder. “I don’t need this.” I thrust it down and squandered the flame in the rich soil. I then fell to my knees and spread my hands. The heat of the sun rested delightfully on my face, and the soft breeze ruffled my hair. “Lord,” I inhaled sharply, feeling the overwhelming presence of my Father, “I am honored to have been led here by Your compass. I now have with me those who will help build Your kingdom, and I am aware that it is Your Will that they be under Your flag. Show them Your power Lord.” I asked. I then got off of my knees and turned to face the crowd of spectators. “Because my Lord is real, and is ruler of all, I now ask that you bear witness to His brilliance.” I grinned, outstretching my arms and turning my face to the sky. The winds grew strong and grabbed at my garbs, and hard pellets of rain struck the earth, plastering my hair to my head and my clothes to my body. Behind me, the stone was soaked from the downpour.

If the rain itself wasn’t enough to showcase His power, then what happened next was the turning point for their faith. A roar filled my ears as a spiral of white flames shot up from the boulder and pierced the black clouds, and a voice filled the land, drowning out the noise coming from the fire and storm, “*I am Here.*” The rain around the flames evaporated, and the searing heat



caused my skin to bubble, but I wasn't concerned. No harm would be done.

Before me, Chan'ge dropped to his knees, disbelief and excitement written into his expression. "What shall I do in order to prove my dedication to the Almighty One?" He asked.

"Tear down your altars and idols, and follow me."

## 12. A SHIP FOR THE SKIES

That night was filled with destruction and rebuilding. All of the golden statues that had depicted any sort of god were melted and the remains thrown off the cliff. It might've been a loss of gold and precious gems, but it was a huge gain of wealth in the Spirit. I could feel the reaping of the harvest; the souls which had been embraced by black had shed that cocoon and were now unveiling their wings as new children of Light.

The Guardians brought along the Oasians to help restructure the town. They patted my back with words of wellness, which filled my heart with gratitude and humility. I couldn't have ever accomplished it without the guiding hands of the Waymaker. We had a small meeting to discuss the next moves.

“We need a boat.” Skuggi noted.

“A boat?” I frowned. We had dragons, so why did we need a boat? “Are we going overseas?”

“Yes, we all are.” He turned to gesture at the people who were communicating, though roughly, in a cluster under the main pavilion. They knew bits and pieces of each others' languages since they had been in contact several times before now.

“Oh, so since we can’t all fit on the dragons, we’re going by boat. . . but that’ll take ages.” I observed.

“It will, if we go by sea. But we’ll be going by air.”

“In a boat?”

“Yes, in a boat. We’ll be putting the dragons to good use.”

“Ohh, I catch your drift. We’ll have them pull the boat, right?”

“No, they’re going to carry it.”

“The boat?”

“Yes.”

“In the sky?” I pointed up.

“Yes, in the sky.”

“How will they manage that?”

“I’ll show you the layout once I put it to paper. Though, you should be smart enough to figure it out.”

Of course, he was right. I could envision a large ship being hoisted up by six dragons, three on either side. There would be three masts in total which pierced through the ship’s body horizontally that they used to lift the ship. But this couldn’t just be a simple, run-of-the-mill fisherman boat; it had to be big, impenetrable, and ready to fly. “All right, let’s make a boat.”

The next few months flew by in a blur. We had all hands on deck when it came to building the ship. Every single person was put to use: old, young, and in between. The team only grew as even travelers passing through stopped by due to curiosity, only to end up joining the workforce and staying to become citizens of Migdal. The ship was going up fast thanks to the detailed blueprint drawn out by Skuggi. Not a single thing was missing.

At some point midway through the construction, a neighboring kingdom's ship pulled into the pier and spontaneously decided to generously donate heaps of materials which were essential for completing the ship. They left claiming that they would somehow get their king to come and have a diplomatic meeting with me to discuss future relations.

*Will a king listen to his subjects in this manner? This normally wouldn't happen. . . so why is it?* Was my thought process when it happened, but Vlam winked at me when I met his gaze, as though everything was happening according to an intricate plan.

Another month went by before my meeting with the king of Magen. He was a stout man by the name of Lemuel with a vigorous zeal for the Heavenly One. Upon our greetings, he bent over, removed his sandals, and handed them to me. "I will be the first to answer if you were to ever need assistance." He declared, despite us having no prior interactions. To say I was taken

aback would be an understatement, but I took the shoes anyway with gratitude.

King Lemuel was of immense succor when it came to completing the ship. In the time it took to finish construction and devise a plan of action, he gained my full respect. We discussed many things: rulership, fellowship, and the importance of servanthship. As a king, we would need to be a ruler over the people, a fellow to our subjects, and a servant to our Lord. His morals aligned with mine, and we built a strong friendship. It was overwhelming how quick things were progressing, but it wasn't something impossible to handle. He returned to his kingdom to gather his army, making a promise that his men would be in my ranks when we voyaged to distant lands in order to meet our greatest foe: Helel.

The season was well after the grass had turned brown but before the leaves transitioned to orange. The ship rested proudly in the field near the cliff, facing the endless blue of the ocean which was smudged by distance, anticipating the time it would finally set sail. The salty night breeze smelled of adventure and conquest; two things which shouldn't necessarily go together. This next trip wouldn't be one of exploration, nor one of excitement. It was going to be a grim, dreadful voyage.

“Is everything ready?” Angelique asked, adorning her helm. It was the only piece of armor she wore, and apparently was the only one she needed. It had originally been a band of silver with a sky blue gem protruding from the front which wrapped around her head, but had somehow morphed into a full battle helmet, complete with a blue plume at the top. The rest of her wardrobe was of pale blue and brown robes.

“Yes, I’ve triple-checked everything. We just need the rest to board.” I confirmed, gesturing to the people scrambling to pack up everything and quickly leave. It wasn’t until the sun had already begun its rise that we were finally able to take flight. We were on our way north to pick up King Lemuel and his army, and would then fly across the ocean to gather whoever was willing to fight from my territory. From there, we would venture to wherever Helel had taken refuge. I still didn’t know where that was, but the Guardians undoubtedly did. It would be a long, exhausting journey.

Everyone filed onto the ship. I was the last to board. Before stepping onto the ramp leading up to the deck, I stood to admire the creation. It was a vessel comparable to the size of the Fried Fortress. It stretched over a thousand feet lengthwise, and was nearly a thousand feet in height. It was about three-hundred feet wide and had the giant masts protruding from either side. Above, the sails were rolled up, waiting to be released to

catch the drafts. There was so much space on the ship that it could fit ten times the people in my kingdom.

I ran up onto the deck and several men started hauling up the ramp, but Genesis stopped them. “Wait one moment. There is still one who has yet to join us.”

I scowled, “Who?”

She smiled and gestured toward the woods. There was a faint cloud of dirt being kicked up, slowly growing in size as whatever was incoming drew nearer. Within a minute, the dust turned into the body of a giant stallion, who galloped up the ramp. He stopped before Genesis, leaning down to nuzzle her hair.

“Good day, Rene.” She stroked the horse’s mane.

“What happened to him?” I asked, pointing at my forehead to mirror the spiraling horn protruding from between its bangs. “I don’t see any blood.”

“He was created this way. I took inspiration from the mythical unicorn; that is what he is.”

“Oh,” I said, “He’s beautiful.” I took a cautious step towards him, appreciating his pearl coat. It shimmered with thousands of colors as the light from the morning rays caught it.

Rene lifted his head and nickered.

“Assuming you said thank you, you’re welcome.” I remarked.

“Ah. . . that isn’t what he said.” Genesis grimaced.

“Well you’re welcome anyways.” I smacked my lips, then turned to Genesis and informed, “I’m going to go check up on Vlam and figure out when we’ll take off.”

“Go ahead.”

There were five levels to the ship, and I was at the top. There were still some steps to climb in order to get up to the steering wheel, but it was all a part of the same floor. Vlam was at the wheel, leaning against it. He acknowledged me and gestured to the dragons dipping in and out of the sea, “They’ll be ready soon. Everyone is on I assume?”

“Correct. We’re just waiting on them.”

“Great, I’ll tell them to hurry it up then. Do me a favor and grab Angelique for me—I need her help with directions.”

I nodded and ran down the steps, searching for the Air Guardian. It took me at least thirty minutes to skim over the first level, but she was nowhere up top. I descended the steps to the second level where cannons and other various weapons were kept. Along with the weaponry was an armory—currently empty—on the level; the weaponry was full of gunpowder from the stock of Chan’ge’s town. Angelique was nowhere on this level.

I descended another floor. This was where the kitchens and banquet hall were located. We thankfully had plenty of food and clean water to last the journey.



There was also a great deal of alcohol which I hoped to test out later. Angelique was not on this floor either.

Descending another level, I went to the fourth level which was where the majority of the rooms were. There were many rooms on each floor, but this was where mostly everyone would be sleeping for the duration of the trip. The bottom floor was where the cargo would be kept and the place where people could relieve themselves.

I ran past every open door searching for Angelique, and finally found her in one of the rooms with Valgus and Neró. They were so deep in discussion that it felt awkward to try and interrupt. It took several minutes before they noticed my presence.

“Alvin, what do you need?” Neró asked. The Water Guardian stood with his arms crossed and seemed to be drained of energy, which was contrasting from his usual excessive liveliness. There were dark bags under his eyes, and his face was pale.

“Vlam was asking for Angelique. We’re about ready to take off, but he needs her navigation.”

“All right, I’ll be up in a second.” She assured, then turned back to Neró, “Listen, I know how you feel, but this is something that has to happen. We can’t turn away from it. No matter what.” She gripped his arm and walked out of the room. I turned and followed her.

“So what was that about?”

“He doesn’t want to fight Helel.” She revealed.

“I see. . . is there a reason?”

“His reason is the same as everyone’s.” The air in the hallway seemed denser and harder to breathe as her jaw clenched, “Helel is our brother. We can’t just go into this fight and pretend as though that isn’t the case. Our memories aren’t so easy to forget,” her voice was slowly rising, “it might be hard to understand, since you didn’t get the chance to know him for as long as we did, but he is our entire lives. When we first woke up in the meadow, he was the first face we saw.”

It was difficult to find a response. She was right, I could never wholly understand how deep their bond went, but it didn’t mean that my bond with Helel was as simple as a forgotten dream. “He was my first friend.” I claimed.

“And you want to fight him?”

“Of course not!” I snapped. My feet stopped, “I’m sorry—I didn’t mean to yell.”

Angelique sighed deeply, her eyes and shoulders dropping. “No, I should not have lost my temper. I forget how much you care for him. It seems like just yesterday we were sending off Helel to find you in Mai. It was agonizing to wait for such a long time, but the anticipation only made me even more excited to meet you. It was obvious that you had something special. You are the Heavenly One’s chosen king after all.”

I scoffed, “Special? I’m not special, only chosen.”

We climbed to the top deck where we met Vlam. Visible smoke rose from his ears as he demanded, “What took so long? We could’ve left thirty minutes ago.”

“We were talking,” Angelique confessed. “It was important.”

“Very well, but can we *please* depart? Time is of the essence.”

“Yes, I’m aware. Are the dragons ready?”

“They’ve been ready.”

“Then, let us go.” They walked up to the helm of the ship where they stood together confidently. I ran to the edge and watched as three of the dragons crouched so low to the ground that their rib cages brushed the grass blades. At Vlam’s sharp command, they sprung up in unison, grabbing the masts with their back talons and rigorously grabbing at the air with their spanning wings, laboriously climbing into the sky. I nearly lost my footing as the ship shook violently from being lifted. The boards creaked and moaned as the massive weight had to hold itself together.

This was the moment of truth. “Will it hold?” I clenched my jaw and held onto the rail for my dear life. It felt like we were fighting the sky itself as it tried to force us back to the ground as if saying, *a boat in my terf? I don’t think so buddy.*

I muttered a prayer asking that we be held in the sky and few troubles come our way; immediately the tug-of-war with the heavens ceased. The dragons stayed

below the cloudline and found a wind draft to carry them. Our sailing smoothed and the rocking stopped. It was finally beginning to sink in that our journey was truly beginning.

### 13. AN UNEXPECTED DETOUR

“I see it!” I shouted down from the crow’s nest. From up here, all sides of the ship were partially visible, so it was easiest to keep an eye out for land; we had already picked up the Magen Imperial Army and were on the way to rally my forces. I was looking forward to seeing what had been accomplished in my time away. It didn’t feel right to be gone for so long and expect others to carry the burden, but this was something I couldn’t ignore. And besides, the ones appointed to take care of my responsibilities had my complete faith.

Below, the line of steadfast, gray and green cliffs jutting up from the rambunctious sea were revealed as the clouds parted. Waves crashed against the wall, spraying water droplets in the air to catch light fragments, and then retracted back into the original body. Specks of people were already clumping together as they marveled at the spectacle of an airborne ship. The winds shifted as the dragons began descending in order to carefully deliver the ship to shore. I lowered myself onto the ladder and began climbing down. It was difficult not to slip as the winds picked up, trying to whisk me away by the shirt.

Waiting for me at the bottom was Genesis with Rene. The steed had made himself comfortable; he had

an entire room to himself where buckets of carrots and apples were kept. Not even I had my own room; my roommates were Vlam and Neró. Lord knows that I get no sleep in that cabin; Neró just has to have the urge to crack a joke right when I'm on the brim of a dream.

“Are you ready to see your people?” She asked.

“I am. . . but also a little nervous.”

“There's no need to be. Look,” she walked to the rail and gestured, “they're waiting for you.”

I smiled as the blob on the cliff turned into individual bodies. It wasn't before long that I could begin to differentiate faces. There was Gill standing together with Nikolaus toward the side of the mob. Cullen and Ellis were running down the hill to join the audience. And the clearest face to me was of the one of which I shared the deepest bond among everyone, the one I had yearned to see the most: Valerie. She was standing at the forefront with a wide grin on her face and her hands waving up in the air.

The emotions that went through me when I laid my eyes on her were indescribable. It was like a wave of relief and joy seeing that she still wore the same smile I had left her with. The immense oppression of missing someone was being alleviated. “Can we go down any faster?” I inadvertently asked.

“You want to go faster?” Genesis raised an eyebrow.

“No. . . nevermind.”

I waited anxiously as we drew nearer to the cliff. Behind me, knights and warriors were starting to gather on the top deck. King Lemuel came to stand by my side. His eyes scanned the terrain, “Your land is nice. The town also appears to be going up flawlessly. The Creator has surely blessed you with prosperity.” He gripped my shoulder and nodded with approval, “You are a good man to follow.”

“Thank you.” I reciprocated his smile.

It took about ten minutes for the ship to be lowered onto land. The kingdom’s population had grown by hundreds. There were now thousands of people swarming around the massive vessel, and more were coming from the direction of the fields and construction site. From over the hills peeked roofs and towers; it was apparent that there were now complete buildings in the town, and more nearly finished ones.

The boarding ramp was slid down and we departed the ship in an extremely unorganized fashion. It amazed me that no one actually got hurt as there were people falling off the edge of the ramp or rolling to the ground. I was one of the first down, along with Lemuel and Genesis who sat atop Rene.

“My king!” I heard.

I turned to see Valerie, Cullen, and Gill running to welcome me. I greeted them all with tight hugs. These people were the ones who had kept everything together in the time of my absence. “My friends, it is

amazing to see you all. Now tell me, what has transpired here during my expedition?”

They began speaking all at once, as though there was a dam within their mouths which broke to let loose all that had been stored away. Before I could process a single thing that had been uttered, Cullen grabbed my wrist and started us up the hill.

“Wait, shouldn’t I address the people first?”

“You can do that later. They’ll understand.” He replied.

They took me to where now thirty cottages stood. The wood was a beautiful, dark color, and the roofs had been stained plum. Tree saplings had been planted along the road and a market was already established.

“Wow. . . it’s really coming together!” I exclaimed, running through the street.

“Yes, we’ve even built a pavilion where all of our meetings have been held.” Cullen pointed at an open building further up the hill.

“It’s perfect! Once we get back, I can finally sit at that table. I won’t be an absent king anymore.” I promised.

“Get back? Does that mean you’re leaving again?” Valerie asked.

I hesitated, “Yes.”

“What do you mean?” Gill pleaded, “Why do you need to leave?”

“Well. . . let’s go to the pavilion.”



The pavilion was made of polished stone and cured wooden beams. The table was a slab of polished stone excavated from the cliff, embedded with shells, fossils, and dead coral; the seats were woven together with stripped twigs. A soft breeze passed through, ruffling the hair of all who sat at the table. When looking out from the pavilion, one could see the entire town and all the way down to the cliff's edge where the ship stood proudly.

"So tell us, king. Why have you returned only to leave again?" Gill asked.

"I have come to gather all who are willing to fight against the nature of evil. Our next voyage is to meet our dear old friend, Helel." Their eyes shifted upon hearing his name. They had all met the man at some point, and had once thought highly of him. *If only he had realized that his presence was much more important to us than he believed.* However, now it was one that couldn't continue to be left alone. It had to be dealt with, lest more chaos was to be released upon the world.

"I will fight." Gill stood, his hand over his heart. "I will not stand idly while a monster strives to flip our land upside down. I will gather all of my hunters; I am most certain that they will be more than willing to join you in this conquest of utmost importance."

"I appreciate it, Gill. However, we need to keep some of the hunters here, to help feed the ones who will not be joining us. There are more people now, which

means even more responsibility. So gather your most able fighters, but leave the better hunters.”

“What about the construction team? Will you need their help?” Cullen asked.

“If there is anyone who can wield a sword or bow, then it would be best to recruit them.”

“Understood.”

“Where is Leon? I have yet to see his face.” I observed.

“He is with his best squad of training knights in the north, meeting an envoy of another king who wishes to discuss trade with us. I’m certain he only wants access to our coast to build a port.” Valerie scowled.

“Very well. I am unable to speak to them under current circumstances, as we hope to leave within the next few days. . . but send a messenger to Leon and have him bring the envoy here. How long do you presume he will take to return?”

“With the time it’ll take the messenger to reach him included, I couldn’t say it would be before a week has gone by.”

“I’ll see what I can do. I might be able to ask a favor of the Guardians.”

“Understood.”

I stood up from the table and turned to leave, but noticed that they were all staring at me. “What?”

“Are you going to adjourn the meeting?” Cullen asked.

“Oh. . . right. Meeting adjourned.” I brought my fist to the table and ended the talk with a bang.

Right afterwards, I sprinted down the hill into town. Genesis was there being given a tour by Ellis, who was enthusiastically describing all of the future plans for the construction.

“Hey, Gen!”

She pivoted, “Alvin? Why are you running?”

“Can I borrow Rene?”

She made an incredulous face, “Borrow him? Why?”

“I need to make a quick trip up north to talk to some king’s envoy.”

Her expression hardened, “I wouldn’t meet him, if I were you.”

“Why not?”

“They don’t have pure intentions. In fact, at this moment, the earth notifies me of the panicked gallop of a horse.” She looked up at the pavilion, where a tan steed leapt over the edge of the slope and bounded toward me.

“My king! Thank the Holy Lord you’ve returned!” A man who I recognized from the group of those freed from the fortress was sitting up in his saddle and beaming at me with relief and what mirrored a refreshed sense of hope.

“What’s going on?” I asked. There were only a few reasons why a member from the knight squad would be rushing back without prior notice. A foreboding

feeling loomed over me, shrouding my future plans with change. *Please don't be what I think it is.* . .

“I have an important message from Sir Leon.”

He reigned in the horse right next to me.

“Speak.”

“The king of Ikraam is marching to us with ten thousand troops, and possibly more in due time. Sir Leon and the knights will do what they can to hold them off, but the odds aren't in our favor. Only fifteen went with him.”

I nearly cursed, but held my tongue. “All right,” I turned to Ellis, “prepare me a piece of paper along with a feather and ink. There's a favor I need to ask of a certain someone.”

The messenger was sent off on the back of Rene. That unicorn was going to have to run his guts out in order to make it work. I then went to the pavilion and slouched in my chair, resting my eyes as the cool breeze shifted my robes. This wasn't within my realm of expectations of how this pitstop was to go. I hadn't even had my coronation yet and already we were going to war.

However, this sort of thing was something I had expected to happen *eventually*. This land was a gem after all, originally coveted by Mai as territory to be left untouched. Now that the giant power of the southeast had been eliminated and the land was up for the taking, it

was only obvious that others would make attempts to claim it. But that wasn't going to happen. *No matter what, we need to win. But. . . how? I don't have an established military, nor enough people to face thousands upon thousands of seasoned knights.*

"Father, what do I do?" I groaned, running my hands down my face.

I only heard the soft breeze of the wind. My mind was running thousands of miles per hour, and didn't show any signs of slowing down.

"Please—I need your guidance." I whispered, leaning forward and resting my head on the table. My hands hung to the ground and my body slumped.

*I hear you.* He replied, his voice the calm whisper in a raging storm.

I didn't respond. It was all I could do to keep the welling tears from falling.

*Have faith, My child, for I am here.*

"But. . . I'm scared." I trembled. It was like the world which had seemed to be so perfect was twisting around and crashing down upon my back. This wasn't something I had ever prepared for. I had no plans, nor a single idea of how to go about this.

*Migdal will not fall, and the people of Alvin will not fail as long as you put your faith in Me. I will give you victory over your enemies, and they will cower upon hearing the name of Alvin.*

"All right. . . I give this to You, my Lord."

*You will win this battle. Go to the frontlines brandishing your axe. I will deliver your enemies to your blade.*

“I understand.” I slowly rose. My hands were still shaking, but I couldn’t tell whether it was from fear or determination. “The meeting with Helel shall be put on hold.” I muttered as I spun and sprinted to the ship where Vlam was resting with his dragons.

“We’re lowering now!” Vlam bellowed, grasping onto a rope which he used to lift the sails.

I nervously fumbled with my axe and checked to make sure my helmet was straight. This fight was something that talking would not have settled. After having spoken with Vlam about my plan, I received another messenger from Leon, notifying me of Skender’s intentions to seize the land and slaughter my people. That was not something I could sit and watch.

I checked behind me and saw the men of the Magen army along with what fighters I could garner. The majority of the Oasians were here, along with skilled martial artists from Chan’ge’s village. Several hunters had joined the fight, and more people whom I’d never seen before, supposedly having moved in while I was gone.

The Guardians stood by me, ready to protect my every side. I wanted to gaze out over the field to see

how many we were up against, but knew it would make me sick from nerves.

The descent took about thirty minutes as strong winds tried sweeping us up into the atmosphere. Drizzles were falling from the sky, weighing down the air and our spirits. My heart was racing; my body knew what was about to happen. I took shaky breaths to try and steady myself, but it did little to help the cause. It relieved me, however, to know that we had the Creator of the universe on our side. Nothing could escape His eyes, so if He said we were going to win, then by His name we were going to win.

“Ten feet till landing!” Angelique shouted. There were already warcries from below the ship, notifying us of Ikraam’s imperial army. They were probably confused about what was going on, so they hadn’t launched any sort of attack yet despite having skilled archers.

“Five feet! Slow it down!” Angelique ordered. By now, the opposing army had overcome their shock and were burying arrows into the ship’s side. Several whistled over our heads and ripped the sails, while others planted themselves into our shields, splintering a few into shambles.

At last, the ship made contact with the ground. The whole body of the vessel groaned as gravity claimed it once again. I uttered a quick prayer under my breath

and turned to the army. So many different types of people together, unified under Migdal's flag.

"I have already told you, but let me repeat this to calm your spirits!" I exclaimed. "The Lord has told me that He will be standing with us on this very battlefield, to direct the tide of the fight towards our victory. But the only way we can claim it is if we have explicit faith in Him! If you have yet to put your trust in Him, then either don't bother stepping off of this ship, or give yourself to Him right now! Otherwise, you're as good as dead." I then turned to where the ramp was being pushed and held my axe high over my head. The sun broke through the clouds for just a second to illuminate the blade's edges, "In the name of the Holy Spirit I proclaim, CHARGE!" I bellowed, taking the first step down the ramp.

Nothing seemed real as my body barrelled straight towards the enemy's ranks. The men held a line of large rectangle shields with javelins hoisted over their shoulders, waiting for us to run right into their death trap.

I swung my axe back and brought it down on the first shield with all of the force I could muster; a rush of exhilaration strengthened my body, and the shield split right down the middle. I jumped on top of it and forced the shield-bearer to the ground, breaching through the frontline and into the ranks.



The feeling of someone's skull being chopped into as though it were only a watermelon had to be ignored. If I let that gruesome, disgusting feeling stop me, then it would be my head on the ground instead of theirs. Halting would be unforgivable. I didn't even dare look behind me to see how everyone else was doing, but the sound of clashes, bones being crushed, and the screams of dying warriors were all that I could hear.

“AH!” I yelped as I swung my axe and lobbed off an opponent's arm. He had rushed at me from the side but didn't get the chance to harm me. I heard the twang of bowstrings and the hissing of arrows flying over my head. I couldn't tell who they were aimed at.

My legs didn't stop moving as they pushed through the thick of the battle. The ground was slick from the drizzle so it was difficult enough to keep on my feet, but I was on a mission: slay the rival king. He was on this field, according to my informants, but was nowhere to be seen. I threw my axe at a horseman ahead of me, His body tumbled to the ground and the steed was left riderless. I swiftly swept up my axe and mounted, kicking him to run toward the back of the ocean of bloodied knights. My people had already infiltrated all the way to the rearguard, and were wreaking havoc in the backlines. They knew that if they happened to see Skender, they were confirmed to slit his throat

themselves, but his death wouldn't be knowledgeable to me unless notified by my fighters.

The horse trampled over any who stood in his way; a beautiful creature raised to become a mindless tool for war. I swung my axe left and right, cutting down all who so much as even looked up at me. My heart was hardened to the taking of another's life, it felt unnatural to implode someone's skull and watch as the life left their eyes. But this wasn't in a setting where it was wrong. I wasn't fighting in a mindless, retarded battle. This was for the glory of my Father, the Creator of all things. He had already promised victory, so there was no reason to fear or back away. This battle was already won.

## 14. THE CONSEQUENCES

There was only silence, along with the occasional mournful howl of the wind. My axe rested on the ground, as my arms had no strength remaining to lift it. My steed was dead, having been slain by a now-diced mercenary. I stood, my face toward the blood-soaked soil and my ears twitching at any sound of movement.

The heavy steps of a man weighed down by steel armor and the clinking of mail approached me and the voice declared, “My lord, I report that the king of Ikraam has been found.”

“Is he alive?”

“No, my king. He was found dressed as a mercenary in the far off hills. A stray arrow pierced through his heart as he was fleeing.”

I turned my chin up and peered at the low, passing gray clouds. The drizzle had subsided and the veil was beginning to break. “Sound the shofars,” I commanded, “for the Lord has given us victory.”

I didn’t want to remain there for even another second. The field was littered with thousands of corpses. The smell of burning flesh from scorch marks created by the dragons’ breaths was mixed with the thick iron scent of blood. It churned my stomach, and whatever

might've been in there was threatening to come out. However, the knowledge that this battle was won with no casualties on our side proved that the outcome had been decided from the beginning. *If I had doubted the Lord's word even for a moment.* . . . I shivered at the thought of it.

We regrouped on the ship. I ascended the steps and stood above all of my tired knights. Three thousand eyes peered up at me, expectant of my next words.

I swallowed the knot forming in my throat; these people were my brothers and sisters, willing to toss away their lives for the Lord's Purpose. I held immense respect for them. "We will hold a feast in honor of the Holy One! This was our first fight as a budding nation, and it surely will not be our last for as long as we stand for the Heavenly One, we will face opposition. Bless you, who made the courageous decision to come and fight alongside myself and the One True King!"

Though there were few in number, and their bodies were probably overcome with exhaustion, the ship shook from their hoorahs. They filed down the stairs to the banquet hall, where a feast would soon be held. I stayed behind with the Guardians.

"Straight to him, huh?" I asked.

"Yeah, straight to him." Neró confirmed, his expression grim.

Long moments of silence passed by. I sat and leaned against the railing, “This was my first time killing a man.”

“Ours too. . .” Genesis had a long expression with saddened eyes.

“But you’ve felled so many cities. . . I *watched* as a man turned to ash. *How* is this your first time killing a man?” I asked, the memory of the crumbling body fresh in my mind.

“That wasn’t any of us.” Vlam answered, his voice low. “The Lord always sent His Angel of Death to sever those connections to this life, sweeping away the mortal bodies and returning them to the earth. Our job was only to level out the ground for rebuilding, *never* to take a life. That is. . . until now.” His eyes dropped.

“Things could’ve been so much different.” Valgus croaked. His eyes were bloodshot and there were tight lines around his mouth.

“Indeed. But this is just how the world is right now, and that is why we are here to repair it as much as we can.” Skuggi stated.

“I never want to use my powers in such a way ever again. . .” Angelique was sullen.

“Nor do I, but I will if the Father ever requires it of me.” Vlam declared.

“Well, obviously we all would. But it doesn’t change the sad fact that these people are being lost completely to the darkness. And it makes facing Helel

all the more difficult.” Genesis ran her hands down her face. “I don’t think I can do it to him. . .” She sounded to be on the brink of tears.

“We can save him.” Angelique strode to the Earth Guardian and hugged her. “And if not. . . I’ll be right there with you.”

“As will I.” Skuggi assured.

None of the others uttered a word, but all nodded in agreement.

I turned my eyes to the sky. The dragons were in position to take off, and soon the heavens were falling towards me. My brain joggled in my head, but I felt too distant to realize it. It wouldn’t be long until I saw my old friend again, but this time on opposite sides of the battlefield. *What does he look like now? Does he think of us at all? Will he come back? Or. . . do we have to. . . kill him?* My mind ran through these questions as though it were reciting for a speech. However, the answers were clear deep in my heart. . . I just didn’t want to accept them.

“YEAH!” I raised my mug of ale. The foam sloshed over the rim and I chugged it bottoms-up. The banquet was in full swing now; the main course was a gigantic roasted boar which had been marinated in honey and marinara sauce. Fruits and vegetables were stacked high, but the meats were what went quickest. The meat pies were on the table for about only three minutes

before they ran out. I made sure to grab a thick slice of ham before the pig was completely devoured. I refilled my mug and downed it, making my head fuzzy. Once my eyesight began blurring was when I decided to quit drinking; alcoholism was looked down upon in the Book of Law, so I couldn't fall into those patterns as the king of a Holy nation.

“King Alvin.” A hand grasped me by the shoulder. I turned to see Ellis standing behind me. He had a gash on his left temple, but was otherwise unscathed from the battle.

“What is it?”

“Would you spare me a moment of your time?” He asked.

I agreed and followed him upstairs onto the first floor. The cool air was all it took to sober up enough to have a conversation. He leaned over the railing and gazed out at the floating clouds, illuminated by moonlight. The stars were clear and bright, one would wonder if they were diamonds pasted onto a black canvas, but they were much greater than that. *‘The sky’s gems’* was what my mother loved to call them.

“Thank you.” Ellis said.

I looked at him, “For what?”

“Being a good king.”

“I think it’s far too early to determine whether I’m a good king or not.” I scoffed.

“No, it isn’t. You show more loyalty and bravery than a king who has been ruling for decades. Your wisdom surpasses any other leader I have ever laid eyes on or even heard about. I’ll be honest. . . when I decided to follow you from the town, it was only because Valerie had convinced me to. I had thought you were crazy at the time,” he chuckled, “but then it was attacked, and I saw my home go up in flames. You had a lot of guts then, and you have even more now. If someone had told me that Alvin, a refugee just like me, would be leading the charge against a seasoned army of an age-old kingdom as my king, I would’ve told them they might as well jump off a cliff because there’s no way they’re regaining their wits. But now look at us.”

I didn’t respond. There wasn’t any need to. We both knew how the other was feeling, and wanted to cherish it without any interruption.

“LAND HO!” I heard the bellowing shout of Vlam from far below as I hid away in the crow’s nest. I breathed in sharply; this only meant one thing: we were close to Helel. It had taken four weeks to reach this far off land on the other side of the world. The sky was filled with dense clouds, and the moisture clung to my clothes and skin.

I didn’t want to climb down. I didn’t want to see him. But everything within me knew that it was something that *had* to happen. Already, the crawling



feeling of evil was seeping into my body. It irked me to even be near this place. I could only imagine how the Guardians must've felt.

“Alvin.”

I turned my chin up; Angelique was standing on the edge of the crow's nest, her helmet glittering with raindrops. “Yeah?”

“It is almost time. Come down when you're ready.”

“All right.” I sighed. The crow's nest had become sort of a refuge for me when things got too overwhelming. Whenever a slight discrepancy arose among the ranks, obviously the first to be notified was the king. At times I just wanted to tell them to deal with their own problems and leave me alone, but it wasn't something I was in a position to do. The life I had before, where little responsibility was placed upon my shoulders, had been completely turned around to where it now felt like I had to hold even the sky.

Angelique's normally hard gaze softened, “You need to find a balance, my friend.”

“And *how* do I do that?” I groaned.

“Surely you should know by now. Give your problems to Him.” She smiled and dissolved into the sky as though she had only been an illusion.

“Right. . .” I sighed; it wasn't like I hadn't tried that. “Lord, why am I so adamant in holding onto these things? I know that I don't need to. . . but I can't help

it.” I closed my eyes and soaked in the cool air. My ears were pounding from the wind.

*If you put your trust in Me, your burdens will disappear.*

“Then. . . by all means, I hand them over to You, my King. Please, take this heaviness; free me from this weight.” Every word came directly from the heart. I couldn’t handle the feeling of my feet constantly dragging due to the shackles of unwarranted responsibility. This wasn’t something that my fingers could cling on to; it had to be given to Him. Instantly, my entire body felt lighter.

I breathed in deeply and sighed with relief. The air finally felt fresh and freeing, rather than the suppressing, thick air which was always trying to suffocate me. Okay—I’m ready. I stood and began climbing down the ladder, careful of the slick handles.

As soon as my feet touched the ground, people swarmed me. There was an onslaught of voices speaking either complaints, praises, worries, or promises. “Okay.” I stopped and held my hands out, “Please understand that I am not the Creator. I cannot hear all things at once; so if you wish for your words to be heard, then speak to me in a setting where I can give you my undivided attention. Thank you for your patience.” I announced before escaping to the steering wheel where Vlam stood.

“How much longer?” I crossed my arms.

“We won’t be landing right away. So, not until either tonight or tomorrow morning.”

I nodded; this was something we had discussed before. The situation was entirely different from when we fought Ikraam. Helel was sure to be expecting us. It would be best to locate him from above first and land when we find a decent opportunity. Who knows what he has up his sleeves, being a turned Guardian and all.

My body felt refreshed after handing off all of my burdens to the Father. It was itching to move; to test its limits now that it’s been relinquished of all shackles. However, I didn’t want to fight. One battle was enough to realize that warfare was not what I craved, it was *peace*. My days of scheming as though I would one day become a military genius now seemed like a waste of time. Those moments could’ve been spent experiencing all the things life has to offer. They could’ve been spent with my mother, helping her with chores and generally enjoying her company. But they were also useful in my current situation. *Strategizing was also something I had enjoyed, so maybe it wasn’t entirely a waste of time.*

I sighed, remembering my mother’s smile and voice. *What is she up to now? Does she even know I’m alive? I will go to her once all of this is done and take her to Migdal. She’ll enjoy the oceanside far more than the bare hills.*

Time passed by slowly as we drifted over the clouds. Night fell and Neró disappeared. I searched every crook and cranny of the ship, seeking for so much as a trace of the Water Guardian. It was when I was in the corner of Rene's stable that I clucked my tongue, "Where did he go?"

"To Helel." Angelique appeared behind me.

At this point I had become so desensitized to the Guardians' random appearances that I didn't even flinch, "Why?"

She smiled softly; a sad, hurt, and conflicted smile, "We can't just give up on him."

I immediately understood. This was his last chance, and they were trying to hand it to him on a silver platter. Whatever he had done would not have mattered as long as he returned. He would be accepted all the same.

"I just hope he doesn't shy away in fear of the consequences for his actions." Her eyes dropped to the floor.

"How long until Neró returns?"

She was about to reply but something caught her attention; her eyes flicked up to the right corner and she promised, "I will be back soon." And disappeared with a fleeting breeze.

I climbed to the top floor where I saw a familiar silhouette. I smiled and approached him; Genesis was

already tackling him in an embrace and spouting sweet words.

“Welcome back.” I chuckled, placing my hand upon his broad shoulder.

Rene whined and pawed his hoof.

“How did you even get up here? We’re leagues up in the air.”

“It would amaze you to know the things he can do.” Genesis mused, stroking the unicorn’s mane. She donned golden armor on her chest and head, and held a beautiful silver sword. It reached out an arm’s length and curved into a wicked blade. It only made things more real to see her dressed for battle. She didn’t wear so much as a helmet when facing Ikraam, but now even her feet were protected.

“Angelique left not long ago, do you know where she went?”

“Yes, I do. . .” Genesis turned to the platform above us, where Neró was leaning into Valgus’ embrace. I couldn’t see his face from where I stood, but by the trembling of his shoulders it was evident that he was crying. My heart dropped. It was one thing to witness a person mourn, but for Neró to be so blue was another.

Not even a minute passed by when Angelique appeared beside Genesis, her eyes red and lip trembling. She shook her head and buried her face in Genesis’ shoulder, bawling. “I couldn’t convince him. . . Gennie,

he's so broken! He doesn't think he can ever return, he gave up. . .”

“We can still do it,” Genesis said confidently, “We can still convince him!”

“I don't know Gennie. . .” Angelique said quietly, “he seems so lost and confused.”

Each Guardian came and went, leaving enthusiastically and brimming with confidence only to come back distraught and teeming with sorrow. Skuggi recounted his entire experience with me while we waited for Valgus to return. From what he recalled, Helel had been so crazed by fear that he couldn't even fathom the idea of returning. “It's really over.” He said, his eyes focused on a point on the floor and water swimming in his sight.

I pressed my lips together, reluctant to agree. I didn't want to nod my head and say ‘yeah, he's done for.’ So badly did I want to disagree with that statement, but I couldn't bring myself to do either. My emotions were at a stand-still and there was no telling who was winning, my confidence in the Helel I once knew, or acceptance for the loss of a friend. There was only one way to make peace within myself and that was to give it all to the One Above. So, I didn't make a decision on which to choose, as He was the one to decide.

Valgus returned just as emotionally drained as the four before him. Genesis was the only one left who had yet to see Helel, but she shook her head with her jaw

clenched, “I am his last chance. If he makes the decision to turn his back on the mercy of the Father, then we will fight. Let us lower the ship.”

The sky was brightening, but shadows were enveloping us again. I leaned over the railing to watch as the bottom of the ship broke through the barrier of gray. The dragons’ wings pushed the clouds aside as they slowly made their way to deliver the ship to the earth. The land was dark and colorless. It teemed with an unpleasant energy, making my skin crawl. There had undoubtedly been bloodshed here, but it felt like the ones who had been slain were still there. . . watching us from every angle.

I turned to address Genesis, but she was nowhere to be seen. I hurried back to the railing and strained my eyes in order to see better. There he was: Rene’s coat shimmered even in the absence of the sun, and upon his back was Genesis. My focus followed where she was facing, and I noticed something of which I initially thought was a trick of the mind, but soon realized was real. The land across the field was *moving*.

My eardrums were blown out as Angelique came to stand next to me and put a shofar to her lips, proceeding to blow. The sound resounded throughout the entire sky, being carried by her winds. The rest of the Guardians then appeared beside us, and Skuggi handed me my own shofar. They lifted the instruments and blew; the ethereal sounds made my entire body

break out in goosebumps. I followed their actions and lifted my own shofar, taking a deep breath and blowing out slowly. The sounds carried and rose, creating a crescendo which could make even the heavens open up. It was to my own surprise when the clouds did indeed part, and flying creatures lowered themselves from above the dome of gray.

They were a hybrid of eagle and lion, with wings which expanded twice the length of their bodies. Awe gripped me as they surrounded the ship on all sides, protecting us from invisible enemies as we made our descent. They slashed and nipped at the air with their sharp beaks, confirming my suspicions that something was indeed there.

The ship groaned as it finally made contact with the land, and the ramp was lowered. I strapped on my helmet and hoisted my axe before turning to face my troops once more. The sense of *déjà vu* struck me, but no matter how similar it seemed, this was an entirely different fight. I breathed in slowly and tried to release my breath without it shaking. “I am honored to have you all behind me. This may not be a battle for our country, but this is a battle for our Lord. We will fight with all of our might for the glory of the Father!” I held my axe up and the warriors cheered. I turned back to the field, determination rippling through my veins. “The Lord is with us.” I muttered before bellowing, “CHARGE!”



We ran down the ramp into the damp grass. Ahead of us was Genesis, clashing her sword with a black scythe. Holding that deadly weapon was none other than the one I had dreaded seeing: Helel. However, he didn't look at all like he once had. From what was visible to my eyes, he had become a mangled mess of whirling emotions. He couldn't control himself, nor could he control his element. Surrounding him were several whirling black portals into his realm, whispering words of temptation, urging whoever could hear to enter into the abyss.

I turned my attention from Helel to my own opponents. My eyes went wide when an ostrich with a pig's head snapped at me. I lifted my axe and swung it cleanly through its neck. The head fell to my side and I skirted around the collapsing body. The next abomination in my path was a moose with a llama's face and scorpion's tail. I cut off the stinger as it lunged at me and brought the blade down into its shoulder. It crumpled on the spot, dead.

My ears were ringing as I swung left and right, bringing my axe around in arches. An arrow found its way into my left arm; thankfully I'm right handed. I yanked it out and kept pushing, ignoring the spilling blood. The Holy Spirit was propelling me, making all physical wounds seem unimportant. It wasn't until I was in the middle of flailing bodies and hideous mutants that I realized something was strange.

My feet stopped and my hand fell; my axe hit the ground. All around me were swords clashing, arrows flying, mutants fighting, and no one attacking. The mutants were biting each other's limbs off and the enemy soldiers were turning on each other, swinging their weapons blindly. They were felling their own allies. It was then that I noticed: *none of my warriors are beside me*. I turned around to see through the carnage of Helel's troops; my own fighters were standing dumbfounded, watching as these people ripped their peers apart.

I spotted Ellis at the forefront and caught his attention. We held contact and exchanged wordless messages: *I don't know what's going on*. Slowly, I backed away from the fighting, dodging wickedly sharp objects coming from all directions, until I reached Ellis. We didn't exchange words, we simply stood and watched as chaos unfolded. It was within minutes that the very last man staggered, a dagger in his throat, and crashed to his knees, never to rise again.

It was difficult to pull my attention away from the massacre. The blood flowed all the way to my feet, turning the soil a dark crimson. The sentiments in my mind upon gazing at the self-destruction ensued by their side were ones of appalling feelings. My eyebrow twitched when I thought about how dismayed the Father must have been when these people turned from Him, and how much they must've angered Him to incur His

absolute wrath. The sound of low, skull-rattling thunder grasped me. The sky had turned an even darker gray, edging on the dark of black. Behind us, Genesis was trading blows with Helel while the other Guardians were incapacitating giant, deadly animals. It wasn't much of a battle, however, as the beasts were backing away, shrinking in fear despite their massive size. With only a few more blows, they eventually disappeared into a vortex leading into oblivion.

I so desperately wished to fight alongside them, but knew for the better that this fight was to be left to the Guardians and the heavenly beings. The fact that something far bigger than the physical dimension was happening could be felt in the marrow of my bones. Angelique whipped out a shofar and lifted it to her lips. We made eye contact for a brief second and she blew the horn once, twice, then thrice. Helel faltered, then appeared to realize the reality of things: the battle was his loss. They had several exchanges of words and the other Guardians joined them, putting in their own comments. I started running towards them, hoping that Helel had maybe decided to switch sides again and return to us, but my steps halted when Genesis' heavy words touched my ears ever so slightly, "Then, this is your execution."

I was about to shout out at them to stop, but Helel had jumped back into his Space before they could grab him. My breaths shook from the anxiety ripping at my

insides. He didn't have to die, right? If he just let go of the evil holding him hostage, he could come back. . . right?

The eye of a dead fish head with the body of a hippopotamus stared blankly up at me. My heart sank. This wasn't something he could simply move on from and forget it ever happened. . . in order to receive forgiveness, he would have to repent. . . just like I did in the wilderness after realizing the extent of my wrongdoings just because I took the position of a bystander. If Helel was unwilling to shed his rotted skin, his name would never be in the Book of Life. And he knew that all too well.

I strode to the Guardians, who were huddled in a circle, silent. Their eyes were closed and no one stirred. It was like they were waiting for something, a cue to move. The air was so thick that not even a knife could slice through it. If there was anyone who dared to interrupt them, that person was not present. A minute passed by, then two, and then a third. . . and then something happened.

Right before my eyes, on the other side of the Guardians' circle, a gap appeared. My eyes widened as I stared straight inside at a shackled Helel surrounded by the color of crimson blood, who was in the motion of lunging out of his realm, but had somehow been frozen in his tracks. His eyes were wide with terror and a crazed madness. I clenched my fist until the knuckles

turned white, and my jaw clamped shut. The Guardians solemnly moved, like statues who had come to life, towards the portal.

The swirling gap between realms closed behind them, obscuring my vision of what was about to transpire. However, any desire to watch the outcome had dissipated. It was clear what was to happen, and in no way did it call for my yearning eyes. The rolling thunderheads bellowed and sheets of rain drenched the grounds. It was as though the heavens were crying in sorrow for the lost Guardian, one who was esteemed enough to hold dominion over an element. The grounds groaned as the battle waged in the other realm, their pains carrying between dimensions.

I dropped my axe and fell to my rump, ignoring the plastered hair around my face. My chin turned up to the sky and my eyes seemed to close on their own. Many thoughts went through my mind then, none of which I hadn't thought before. All of the questions were being answered here, today. The knowledge of that bothered me slightly, but also brought peace to my mind. It was the feeling one would have after completing a test, finding tranquility through acceptance as he waited for the results. The rain didn't let up its relentless torrent until the gap reopened.

Above, the clouds broke and the sun blessed the land with its presence. Drizzles still kissed my face, and the crystals of the sky reflected the light, making the

blue above even more brilliant. It was only then that I noticed the dragons and griffins were descending from above the clouds. I hadn't even realized their disappearance in the midst of the battle. *I am sure they were assisting their masters from the other side.* I thought. For some reason, it felt as though their physical bodies were not only in this realm.

"It is done." Genesis nearly whispered as she stepped through the portal behind me.

I turned and peered into the gap. Inside were giant beings of whom I could barely look at as they emanated the purest of light. In one of their hands was a limp Helel, whose eyes I remembered vividly were closed, never to open again. The cleverness that had once been sensed in the darkness of his irises, and the humor which sparkled every now and then, would never be seen again.

I pressed my lips together, trying to keep them from trembling. Though it might've worked for my lips, it didn't stop the rest of my body from tensing and proceeding to shake like a small kitten drenched from a spring shower. My gaze was glued to the friend I once had, being taken away by the heavenly being. It was so until the gap spiraled close, erasing any remnant that such a place existed.

We remained silent, the absence of Helel even greater than when he had initially left. Genesis' hand was shaking, but her grip didn't loosen on the hilt of her

blade, which was stained from the blackened blood of the slain Space Guardian. They all had red eyes and gray complexions. No one looked away from the ground.

Suddenly, Genesis collapsed to her knees, sobbing. She covered her mouth with her spare hand in an effort to muffle the wails. But her emotions overtook us one by one, bringing out our innermost sentiments; not an eye was left dry as we recognized the sorrow clinging to our hearts. It was a victorious, yet sad day.

## 15. KING ALVIN

“By the power vested in me by the One Who Sits Above, I now proclaim you King Alvin, ruler over the Lord’s kingdom.” Genesis rose the crown high above and then delicately lowered it onto my stooped head. She then drew her sword and raised it high into the air, while the other Guardians proceeded to lift various pieces of armor up above their heads.

Angelique lifted her helmet, Neró had a pair of silver, sapphire encrusted boots, Vlam raised a breastplate which remained undented despite the battles it’s been through. Skuggi lifted a golden belt with an amethyst for a buckle, and Valgus raised his circular shield with the emblem of a sun spiraling out from the center. Behind me, voices rose as the audience cheered for my appointment to the throne.

There was still no castle to my name, merely a pavilion with an ocean-front view. But the people’s spirits were not diminished in any form or way. They accepted me as their king, and trusted me to rule over them in the ways the Heavenly One decrees.

I turned to admire the smiling faces of my people. A particular feeling overcame me right then. . . it was something I had felt before but not in such abundance. It was. . . *love*. Overflowing, overwhelming



love for my Creator, my friends, my family, and my people. The most tender sentiment of all touched me to the very core, upbringing a well of joyful tears. It wasn't the most noble stance a king could take on his coronation day, but it was the most precious.

The feelings that had been felt after the battle of Helel, those of sorrow, grief, relief, and exhaustion, were but a small particle of insignificant dust when compared to the amazing emotions of love, joy, and peace. My closest friends stood by my side when the crown was placed upon my head, my mother watched with the most beautiful, joyful expression, my people sang with voices like ringing bells, and my Holy Father stood behind me with his hand placed upon my back, telling me to take this step forward into the path He has paved for me.

“Congratulations, Alvin.” Genesis whispered in my ear.

I grinned, “This place will be the best kingdom in history.”

“I look forward to that day. We will be with you for as long as the Lord entails.”

“I'll make sure to live up to being His anointed king. Just watch.”

Valerie approached me and took my arm, smiling sweetly. I returned the gaze, unfazed by her actions. When we had returned victorious, she was yet again the one to catch my eye first. I trusted her more than any of my other retainers, so much so that I had left the

kingdom up to her. Our mutual trust and friendship gradually grew into something of deeper understanding and love. I couldn't imagine a better queen, though our marriage was still a long way off from then. Upon my arrival, I noticed the progress that had been made in the construction, order, and wealth. The territory had grown to include Ikraam, where King Leander had led a conquest while the king was away from home. He gifted the conquered country to me as a coronation gift, and we signed a treaty of everlasting peace. I smiled knowing that my favor had come in good use.

I also signed a trade treaty with King Lemuel of Magen. He had greatly assisted me in the construction of the ship and the conquest of Ikraam and Helel. I held him in high regards, knowing he reciprocated the feelings. After the coronation, he would return back home with his troops via the dragon-ship-transportation. This meant that Vlam would not return for several weeks, but it was the least we could do to return them safely and comfortably for the amount of help we had received.

I broke away from the celebrating crowd who was heading down to the ship for the banquet so that I could overlook the rolling hills, thriving fields, and deep blue sea; "Lord—" I breathed in the salty air and smiled, "Thank you."





*As you can see, Alvin was finally able to overcome himself. His trials were certainly not trivial, and his heavy guilt was one to be reckoned with. As the last living citizen of Mai, it felt like the weight of the world was on his back, and that he was the one who put it there. His stance as a bystander led tens of thousands to their demise, and they would never have another second chance. It took a lot of victories over smaller battles until he was finally ready to recognize his wrongs, and once he did, nothing could stop him from striving to write over them with rights. This is not an action limited to only Alvin. Anyone who has faced the tribulations of being stuck in a loop of transgression can find their salvation, but it takes a willing heart to do so.*