

The Book of Genesis

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This book is dedicated to those who are grieving.

PROLOGUE

Guardians. . . powerful beings who held the world in their hands. At least, that was the legacy that was left behind. Once the first Guardians disappeared, all that was remembered of them were the feats they had accomplished, and the footprints they had left behind. Their journeys were documented by those who remembered them, and throughout history these narratives were exaggerated.

In time, the Guardians were revered as supreme beings, far above that of humankind. Their powers were made out to be the power of gods, and statues and monuments were built dedicated to the Guardians. As the stories differed from culture to culture and were gradually changed to fit the standards of different societies, many fundamental aspects of the Guardians were forgotten. . . lost with the countless translations of the same accounts. Their names were changed and used to describe preeminent beings, those who could do no wrong and had the ultimate authority over all living and nonliving things.

Thankfully, the Guardians were no longer around to hear about these exemplified versions of themselves, because no one on earth knew better than them of how very flawed they could become. The Guardians were not so untouchable that they could become gods. No, they served directly under the One Supreme Being, the One True God, and to be told that they instead had taken the throne in the eyes of the people would very much rip their hearts to shreds and offend them to such an extreme that no one could beg them for forgiveness.

Not like they could to the One Almighty. His forgiveness knew no bounds, however the Guardians were not quite as generous. They would be able to forgive, but despite their closeness to the Lord, would never truly forget.

1. Grief Given and Gone

Simplicity was all I asked for, but was never what was given. Slaying Helel did not halt the spread of evil; in fact, demon attacks became all the more frequent. The fault rested with the humans summoning such cursed beings through rituals, both intentional and unintentional. It was also a difficult time for me personally, as it was my first time experiencing a grief so great that all other matters seemed insignificant.

“Genesis, you need to eat something. It’s been days.” I heard Skuggi’s voice from the outside of my cocoon. We were on the ship heading back to Migdal, where Alvin’s coronation ceremony would commence. It was a time for celebration. . . the evil Guardian was gone! But my heart cried out for him. I took to hiding underneath my blankets in the corner of my shared room with Angelique.

I groaned in refusal, *How do they not grieve as I do? We all knew him the same, and loved him the same, so how do they not feel this pain?* It was like a knife being shoved into my chest; however, the one who had been pierced by a blade was not I, but Helel. . . and that blade had been my own.

“We’ll be waiting for you in the banquet hall. I hope to see you here.” I could detect the downheartedness in his voice. It had been enough to lose one Guardian, it must’ve been painful to watch another fall into such despair. I could understand as much, but it didn’t quell the suffocation of my sorrow.

The door shut and silence ensued. The faint sounds of the ship creaking and groaning as we traversed the sky reached my ears. A strong gale was battering the outside, making the bulk tremble as it strained itself to hold together. It wouldn't fall apart with only this much, but being so high up added to the fear that it would.

Time trickled like a leaking wine barrel, slowly yet noticeably. My stomach gurgled but I had no appetite. My eyes were swollen from the neverending river of tears. Everything was *miserable*. I hadn't spoken to the Holy One in days, having been so caught up in my own head. I couldn't understand why He had allowed this to happen. It was shameful, especially as a Guardian, to doubt Him, but the flurry of emotions dampened my senses.

My body humored my emotions, as it had no desire to move, or stretch out its limbs. The only thing that had any motivation to resist a stagnant state was my mind. The thoughts it pushed behind my eyes were of various types: wonderings, memories, doubts, but no hopes. None were to be found. It was the most miserable prison that I had ever been trapped in.

After what could have been minutes, hours, or even days, I couldn't care which, a hollow knock rapped on my door. I heard the hinges creak as it was pushed open and an unfamiliar voice spoke, "My apologies for interrupting you. I was asked to bring something for you to eat." It was the voice of a man of which I did not recognize, but I had no curiosity to find out who it was. I didn't respond, so after a few long moments he cleared his throat and said, "If I may—"

His footsteps went from the door to the corner of the room

where I knew a tweed chair sat. The sound of shuffles as he moved the chair filled the room. The seat creaked as he sat and said, “I understand your grief.”

“How could you know how I feel?” I spat, not so much asking him but more spouting an accusation.

He replied, “I cannot claim that I’ve gone through the same as you have, but I have empathy when it comes to losing someone you care about. I walked over the bodies of my close comrades but a few weeks ago. They died protecting us, knowing full well that there was little chance they’d walk away alive. I will forever hold them in high regard within my heart, but I won’t allow the feelings of sorrow and mourning to halt my steps. Yes, I wonder if it should’ve been me in their place, but it wasn’t. So it haunts me, but will not stop me from fighting.”

I fought the urge to turn around and face the man pouring his heart out to me. I understood to an extent the amount of suffering he had undergone, but this man was sitting here trying to comfort a Guardian while I curled into a ball underneath my bed sheets. I felt weak and pathetic. “There’s a depth in the bond of the Guardians that cannot be expressed in words; he was another piece of my heart. Yet, I failed him. And in the end, I,” my voice broke as a fresh wave of hot tears surfaced, “I killed him.”

“Miss Genesis.” He said shortly and solemnly, “You saved us.”

“Please, leave.” I whispered. I didn’t even bother to ask for his name.

The chair creaked and the floor groaned as he stood and replied, “As you wish.”

“Lord, I don’t wish to live if all I feel is this pain.” I croaked, wallowing in my despair. “I should’ve paid more attention. I should’ve listened to him. I could’ve done something to prevent this. I failed him. Lord, I failed him. I don’t deserve the life I’m living, not when he no longer can.” Silence was all that ensued.

“And yet you continue to ignore me. Where are *you* Lord, now that I need you? Why did this happen to *him*, and why was *I* the one who had to do it?” My head pounded from the lack of hydration and the intervals of sobbing. “He suffered so much, and now he’s gone.” I buried my face in my pillow and released a scream that had been pent up for days. The action exhausted me. Everything blurred and swam as I tried to focus on my surroundings, unable to do so in the end. I gave up and closed my eyes, hoping that I would fall asleep and escape the grief I felt.

Sleep was not what overcame me. I fell into a stagnant trance, where everything around me moved and yet I did not. My mind and body were trapped in a bubble of nothingness; of hollow feelings and a void of desolation. I remained in such a state for what felt like eons, though I knew better. No one came to visit me. I didn’t blame them since I would probably kick them out as well. I was left to my own lament and thoughts, a dangerous trap for one who is mourning.

It eventually got to the point where I could no longer stand the company of my lonesome. I sat up and scooted to the edge of my bed, hanging my feet over the side. Coldness immediately gripped them, and I brought them back up to cover with a blanket. My head spun as I looked around, squinting to try and focus on any one object. It was when I

closed my eyes to steady myself did someone knock on the door.

I croaked, "Who is it?"

"It's Alvin." Announced the voice from the other side of the door.

"What do you want?" I asked, less kindly than I had intended.

"I want to see you." He said. Not 'to talk' or 'to say sorry', but to see me.

"Very well. You may enter."

The door creaked open, yawning at its first rousing in days. Alvin inched inside, peeking around the corner as though he were entering a forbidden room. His face was more gaunt than it had been and bags were weighing down his eyes. A wry smile spread across his face as he stepped inside, making his way to sit beside me.

He didn't ask any questions, nor offer any condolences. His spirit wasn't as heavy as mine, but not as light as it would normally be. A few awkward minutes of silence passed between us, and my body grew restless. It twitched with discomfort as I thought of something to say. Thankfully, it wasn't me who had to speak the first words.

"It's been rough, huh." Alvin stated, staring at his interlocked fingers.

I nodded but did not respond. My throat ached and cracked from being as dry as a several day old biscuit. Words also did not come easily.

"I've been thinking a lot, up in the crow's nest. Do you want to come up with me? It helps to clear your head." I considered it. Heights were the bane of my courage, but my

fire had long been put to rest. “Very well,” I croaked, “I will come.”

I was in a daze the whole way to the nest. Any person who I passed thanked me for my heroics, but I felt nothing. They were no more to me as would be a portrait of a stranger hung on the wall. Their faces blended in with the background, fading away as I trudged through halls, up steps, and finally to a ladder. My fellow Guardians did not reach out to me, all for the better. If anything, their extended hand would cause the Spirit of Rebellion to drag me away from my destination: the crow’s nest.

I looked up at the daunting ladder, reaching high beyond the clouds. Time would not allow me to think or reconsider, as it would only change the course of my determination. I took the first hold and began to climb, one hand and foot after the others. The wind pushed against me as though it wanted to give me an embrace despite being reckless and dangerous. The climb went by in the blink of an eye and before I knew it, I was pushing open the trapdoor to the nest.

The wind ripped at my hair and sent it into a flurry. I knelt on the floor of the nest, scared to witness the view over the edge of the walls which came up only to my waist. The trapdoor opened again and Alvin appeared. He stood over me and held out his hand. I could read several emotions in his eyes: a heart wrenching grief, a bittersweet relief, and love for a dear friend. I placed my palm in his and allowed my body to follow his movements. My legs raised me up as I held his eyes, scared to look away for fear of being swept away in the vastness of the sky and that below me.

Alvin blinked, then turned his head to face that very void. My gaze reluctantly followed his, and my worries were immediately blinked away as though they were simply something of the distant past. I was met with a breath snatching, eye-opening view. The clouds swirled around as though they were dancers caught in time, spinning with the freest of feelings. The sky opened up into a violet as the blue transitioned into purple. Pink, orange, gray, and gold painted the windswept, towering clouds as the sun dipped into the western sky.

My mind was blank as I absorbed everything beheld by my vision. I realized that in this world, despite my standing as a Guardian and my position to preserve the Good in a world tainted by Evil, I was still so small. The sheer joy, fear, and reservation I felt at that realization was a comfort amid my sorrows.

“It’s beautiful. . .” I said, my eyes still trained on the stretch of colorful clarity. *If only Helel had seen it too.* I smiled sadly, my eyes burning with the familiar sensation of rising tears. My heart panged as I remembered his smile, his eyes, his voice. . . it was no particular memory that happened in a certain, determined time. It was just him.

Alvin remained silent throughout the duration of our time in the crow’s nest. We didn’t exchange words, but there was no need to. The somber ambience that surrounded us spoke volumes more than our tongues ever could express.

We remained there until the sun made its departure to the other side of the world, leaving the sky an endless sea of the brightest jewels and silver spirals. Alvin left first, leaving me to linger for just a few more moments, relishing in the tranquility of having no fears or concerns.

“My Master, my Lord, my Rock, my Fortress, I have been distant.” I closed my eyes, feeling the Holy Spirit brush against my consciousness. He was always there, waiting for me to open my doors. “I invite you inside. Please forgive me.”

Your tears are my tears, and your sorrows are my sorrows. When you weep, I weep, for your suffering is Mine as well. I cherish you, child, and love you beyond comparison. You are forgiven for distancing yourself from Me, though it hurt watching you slip away. Now you have returned, and My voice can finally reach you.

I nodded, allowing His words to process. I wanted to ask of Helel, of how his spirit was faring, if anything of him was even left. However, the thought of what the answer could be struck me with dread.

“My dear Father, how do I overcome this grief? This pain of wallowing in my self-pity? How can I return to who I once was? Before this all happened. . . how can I be happy again?”

You overcome grief as you lean unto Me. Lay down your worries and come into My embrace. I will be your comfort, I will be your joy, leave behind your sadness and come into My Light.

I collapsed to my knees, doubling over in sobs. My fingers still gripped the wall of the crow’s nest, keeping my body from crumpling to the ground. The bands around my chest tightened as the memories of Helel flashed behind my eyelids, and whispers of undeservingness and guilt filled my ears. “Lord, I need You. I give myself to You. This pain is too much for me to bear, I can’t stand it. I give my sorrow to You, and I ask for Your embrace.”

The whispers ceased, but my tears continued. I felt the warm presence of the Holy One wrap itself around me, rocking me back and forth as though I were but a baby being cradled by its mother. I bawled without caring who far below on deck might hear me. I forced my eyes to open and stared into the abyss above, “Goodbye, Helel. . .”

As soon as we landed, plans for the coronation were in immediate procession. After a week, a date was set, and the day for the crowning had come. I was asked to crown the king, which I accepted only after declining a few times. It didn't feel right after having killed the person he likely would've asked otherwise. Alvin had been closest with Helel after all. However, as the Guardian with the Voice of Authority, given to me by the Creator after Helel had gone off the rails, it was only proper that I be the one to commence the ceremony.

I never utilized this gift. It was one which gave me a higher position over the other Guardians, who had their own Voices bestowed upon their lips, and it was only given to me after a drawing of sticks. None of us could decide who should hold this burdensome gift, so we took it upon ourselves that whoever pulled the shortest stick would be the one to bear the weight.

After giving our results to the Holy One, He blessed my tongue to hold Authority over all things, that whoever hears my command will feel drawn to heed it so long as it remains within the Father's Will. It is an ability in which I need to be cautious when it is used. I didn't use it on Helel, as he had already made his decision. If he did heed my words,

then his return would only be superficial; the genuinity of our relationship had already been long lost.

I stared at my reflection in the polished shield grimly as Angelique helped me with my robe. It was a beautiful creation of wool dyed in the rich colors of purple and crimson and lined with golden trim. My sash was blinding white, contrasting to the dark hues of the garb. It had leaves and vines embroidered in golden thread edging the material.

Alma rested in the corner. I glanced over and ran my eyes over the curve of the blade. It was sheathed in a decorated leather scabbard, etched with the saying “You are responsible.” It was a choice that I had made, as it would always be a reminder to own up for my actions and remain vigilant in my conduct. The swirling letters branded that saying in my mind, and goosebumps crawled their ways up my arms. I remembered the savage glare in Helel’s once calming eyes. They stared at me with contempt, resistance, and fear of what was to come. I couldn’t forget, no matter how much time separated me from that moment.

“Are you ready?” Angelique asked, smiling into the shield as my eyes returned to it.

“I’m more ready than before.” I returned her smile with a weaker gaze. My spirits were still low, but my body was on the mend. After spending time in the crow’s nest, I went to the banquet hall and partook in the meal, eating half a serving. Nausea was what made me halt at just that measly amount, as it had been days since any food had entered my body. Since then I’d been building my appetite and spending more time in the sun. It was a long and slow recovery, but every day was a new one and I was doing my best at each rising. “I only hope that I won’t soil the day.”

“I have faith that you will do more than adequate.” She assured, rubbing my shoulders. It was nice having one of my fellows comforting me. Their presence healed my heart in the time spent with them. However, the blueness never fails to return in my lonesome.

Once Angelique dressed in her robes of sky blue and pearl white, we made our way to the pavilion where the ceremony would commence. My sword hung at my side, and Angelique’s helm was a band around her forehead. We met with Vlam, Skuggi, Valgus, and Neró at the pavilion, where a stand had been built for us. We stepped up and waited side by side. I could sense that we all felt the same nerves at what was to occur. We had never been a part of such a diplomatic show before, and only hoped to not stumble in our roles.

We waited for upwards of half an hour, anticipating the moment Alvin would come up to the pavilion. My ears buzzed and my heart pounded as the minutes wore on, every one more nerve wracking than the last. Finally, a shofar announced the arrival of the king. The sound echoed throughout the pavilion, where the bustling crowd quieted down and turned their focus to the far end. On the other side of the building’s stretch, a stallion of the richest umber color strode onto the concrete, and Alvin dismounted. Behind him on a tawny mare was Valerie, who dismounted all the same. They came together to where the path separated both crowds, linked arms, and walked with dignity down the carpet to their future of rulership.

I focused my eyes on Alvin, who was once but a boy of small stature who swung around a stick which he called a sword. In the time I had spent away from him, he had grown tremendously. Not just physically, but mentally, emotionally,

and spiritually. My guilts and regrets towards Helel were washed away in that moment, replaced with the overwhelming feelings of admiration, friendship, vicarious triumph, and for the first time in what felt to be forever, *joy*. Tears welled in my eyes; these were not those which stung and burned, itching my fingers to scratch my eyes out. These tears felt pleasant. It was the sensation of having no reason to be sad. A sentiment of which I had forgotten existed.

Valerie parted from Alvin and left to sit next to his mother in the first row. Alvin then stepped up to the stand, peering up at me. I smiled, allowing myself a tear to spill. I then took my gaze away from him and directed it to his subjects. “Good people,” I began, “Before I begin, may I tell you a little about my good friend, and your king?”

There was a resounding affirmation from the audience.

“When I first met Alvin, he was but a country boy trying to live in a big city. It was a place of dirty, filthy doings, of which tried to taint this boy. But he resisted, and left behind the temptors. From there, I watched as he grew into a young man who was coming to accept his position, and now he stands before us today. A fully grown man confident in who he is, and who the Lord asks him to be. I am honored to be here, about to crown this strong and faithful man as a king under the Lord. I have absolute faith that he will be an amazing steward over these lands, and a ruler to be looked upon with favor by all. But not only is he a ruler. . . he is a servant to the Lord, his people, and his family, and he is a fellow to all. You saw this in him, did you not?” I asked.

The sound of feet stomping filled the pavilion as they confirmed.

I smiled, “Then,” I gestured to Sir Leon who stood aside with the crown upon a cushion. He rushed over to me and presented it with great caution; it was a creation of my own. Despite my fatigue, I would not allow the king’s crown to be made of any hands but my own. The materials had been imported, and I shaped it as though it were clay. I pooled my Voice of Authority into my throat and said, “By the power vested in me by the One Who Sits Above, I now proclaim you King Alvin, ruler over the Lord’s kingdom.” I raised the crown to kiss the heavens before lowering it to place on the king’s head.

There was a pause of silence where the entirety of those present held their breaths as my words took effect. It was finally broken by an ear-shattering roar of cheers. People were tossing up their cloaks and thundering their feet. The pavilion shook from the excitement. Then they broke out in song, praising the Lord who governs their lives for blessing them with a worthy king. I approached Alvin and leaned closer so that only he could hear my voice, “Congratulations, Alvin.”

2. Gift from a Guardian

Now that Alvin was crowned, I had to think of what to give him as a coronation gift. I sat alone in my room; one of six in a townhouse that was reserved for us Guardians. I wracked my mind for any ideas, searching for a solution to my dilemma. He'd already been given the entirety of Ikraam, so I had to think of what could best that. Not much could, to be honest.

Then, an epiphany struck. I remembered, before we left for our conquests against Ikraam and Helel, I had promised Alvin something: to help him build a palace when all was said and done. That's it! A palace. . . a gift befitting a king. All that was left to do was draw up a layout and then make the actual castle.

There were countless materials that could be used. . . but the question was which to pick. I listed out everything that came to mind, including the prospect of pulling up a mountain to mold. It didn't satisfy my creative sense, however. I crossed out just wood and stone, and there was already a marble castle which existed.

"But. . ." I said, a smile playing on my lips, "there isn't a *living* castle yet" I knew exactly what to do.

Once I finished placing every seed in their respective place, I sat in the center of the layout. It would be atop the determined hill that Alvin had picked for his castle, overlooking the town, fields, and ocean. I breathed in deeply, mentally preparing myself for what I was about to create.

Before I could begin, Alvin came running up the hill with Skuggi and Valgus, “Genesis, what are you doing?” He called.

I smiled, “Alvin, this is my gift to you.” And I released all of my energy through the palms of my hands and into the earth; it stretched out to tap into each seed, accelerating their growth. As the seeds took root and shot upwards, I spoke commands using my Authority; I shaped them into the sturdiest castle with the tallest towers. I could feel my energy hastily being sapped away; it got to the point where I had to ask the Creator to supply me with the energy needed to accomplish this feat.

The black behind my eyelids grew darker as the trees overlapped above, twisting to create the countless rooms and floors of the palace. Hallways were fashioned with trunks and interlocking branches and doors were grown. Nothing would be left undone when I finished; this castle would be the most special and unique castle ever to exist. I spoke that this palace would be loyal to the royal family and its retainers, protecting them from all attacks of evil and maliciousness. No spies would be allowed past the front door as vines would grab them and toss them right back out. No matter what, as long as the nation remained faithful to our Master, this palace would protect the king and his family, extending to his aids and hires.

My blood burnt as though it were instead magma running through my veins as I extended my each and every last drop of energy. I laid the foundations and made protective measures; I made sure that the palace would recognize the difference between its owners and enemies. I also ensured that it would remain structured as a castle until

the day the nation turned away from the Creator, only changing in order to build upon itself as needed.

When I was finally satisfied with what was pictured in my mind's eye, I allowed myself to finally behold what was now a fully distinguished palace. Everything was completely dark. The only spots of light that could be seen were from the windows high up on the walls. I turned to face the huge doors which opened up into the central chamber, where I was located. Across from the doors was a staircase which led up to the many rooms of the castle and even more flights of stairs. I smiled, feeling accomplished. But then any energy that I had thought was left disappeared, and I found the small spots of light from the windows also becoming dark, and the next thing I knew there were vivid visions fleeting behind my eyelids as I fell unconscious.

“Urgh. . .” I groaned as my eyes opened to allow in the unwelcome blinding rays shining in through the sky light. After adjusting, my eyes scanned the surroundings. The room I was in had a circular shape with a cone ceiling leading up to the sky light. The walls were a rich colored brown, and branches reached out to form shelves.

Alma was resting on one of these shelves, sheathed in its scabbard. I stared at it unconsciously, unaware of the mixed emotions flooding me. I broke out of my trance and turned my head to see a nightstand with a small golden bell resting atop. I grabbed the bell and rang it; its sound was a pleasant chime. Not even five minutes later, a young lady dressed in a navy blue dress knocked at my door. I invited her inside and asked for my friends, who she then left to collect.

It took thirty minutes for everyone to gather in my room. They all eyed me with concern, but I was sure to choose my next words carefully in order to not give them any reason for worry. “How is the palace?” I asked Alvin.

He beamed, “It’s wonderful! Everything is far better than I could’ve ever imagined.”

“I’m relieved.” I smiled, “Consider this your coronation gift.”

“It is more than I deserve.” He remarked, bowing his head. Atop it rested nothing but his crown of brown hair.

“Where is your crown?”

“It is safe within the treasury; I am nervous to adorn it. Perhaps one day I can muster up the necessary courage and confidence to wear such a grand object, but I prefer to know that it rests securely.”

“I understand.” I had felt the same way when first presented with Alma. It was a heavy thing to carry due to my lack of confidence in my worth. However, now I know that it could be given to none other, for I didn’t wish upon any of my fellow Guardians the same results as mine. The most painful thing I had ever done, and possibly ever will do, was point that blade towards someone close to my heart.

“How are you feeling?” Vlam asked, his eyes examining me.

“I feel fine. It was only an overexertion; nothing rest couldn’t fix.” I assured.

“I’m not so sure about that.” Skuggi retorted.

“What do you mean?” I frowned.

“You started eating everything up.” He said.

“What he means,” Valgus interjected, “was that when you passed out, your body immediately began trying to

restore its energy using the life of the plants, animals, and people in the area. Angelique was only able to keep you from destroying the palace by moving you with her wind and taking you to a faraway, empty field.”

I ran my hand down my face, embarrassed. “I didn’t know that would happen, my apologies.”

“It wasn’t something that could be predicted, but please do be more careful in the future. If your energy has dwindled so low that your body needs to rely on other life forms, then it truly is a terrifying situation. Don’t do it again, I beg of you.” Angelique kneeled next to my bed and took up my hand, imploring me with her gray and blue eyes.

“I understand. I will walk more cautiously in the future.” I promised, stroking her head with my free hand.

3. Future Thoughts

The town was bustling and the horizon was filled with the stoic imagery of ships sailing in to dock. Migdal had become the buzzing center of commerce in the years following Alvin's coronation. His palace stood handsomely atop the hill overlooking the entire city; I had grown it from trees imported from the north; the castle was one of which would never perish to fire, weather, or even age.

I spoke over the trees using my Authority that they would hold fast and strong so long as this kingdom served the Holy One. They were designed to keep the appearance of a castle, and protect the royalty and workers from any attacks of evil. It was a palace like no other, and I was completely satisfied with it. It took weeks of recovery to restore the energy used during this massive project. I had still been weak, and slightly reckless, from the emotional drainage after losing Helel. But it was all worth it.

I inhaled the salty air blowing in from the pier. It burned my nostrils and gave my head a sensation of clarity. A pair of fluttering butterflies danced passed as I waited beside the road for Rene. Alvin had called the Guardians in for a meeting, requesting our presence. Though he was a king and we resided in his land, we Guardians were not under his rule, and our loyalty did not rest in his leadership, though it did in his friendship. Our service was only directed to whoever and wherever the Lord directed.

While I watched the butterflies, Rene appeared out of a cloud of dust. His speed was still incredible to me, despite having experienced it countless times. *What's up, Boss Lady?*

He stomped his hoof and nickered.

“How many times must I plead that you drop that name?” I groaned as I mounted his pearly white back.

Then what would you prefer? Master? Queenie? Head Honcho? Numero Uno? There’s a long list. Though, I do personally enjoy watching as your smile completely drops when I call you Boss Lady.

“Just Genesis is fine,” I sighed.

A-OK, Gennie it is.

I rolled my eyes knowing full well that Gennie was actually not what it would be. We’d been down this same road hundreds of times already, and only returned back at the beginning every meeting. “To the palace.” I directed. Rene reared up and came down at full speed, thundering up the main road to the front gate.

The trip took mere seconds. We crossed under the gates and Rene trotted up into the courtyard. I dismounted and started my sprint to the council chamber. It was a winding path through numerous hallways and up several flights of stairs. The knights standing guard at the door to the antechamber quickly opened them upon my arrival, and I entered into the dimly lit room. There was another pair of guards at the doors to the main chamber, which were already standing open. I entered the even darker room where Alvin was already present. He stood up to greet me and then retook his seat.

Skuggi was already in attendance, but other than the three of us, the rest had yet to arrive. I took the seat nearest to the door at the opposite end of the table from the other two.

“So, enlighten me, Alvin. Why have you called us?” I asked. “I have a big announcement, but I’d like to have everyone here before saying anything.” He said, seeming almost giddy.

“I asked too, but he wouldn’t budge.” Skuggi looked at Alvin with a pleading expression.

“Just wait a few moments, I’m sure they’ll be here soon.” He smiled apologetically.

We waited another ten minutes; the other Guardians all filed in one after the other, with Neró pulling up in the rear. “Aw man, I was really hoping I wouldn’t be last this time.” He groaned when he saw everyone already seated.

“Pigs will fly before that ever happens.” Angelique scoffed.

“You already do fly.” He responded.

Angelique gasped, shooting a gust of wind at Neró’s face.

“Okay, okay, that’s enough. Both of you.” I rubbed my temples then turned to Alvin, “So, everyone’s here. What was it you wanted to announce?”

“Well—,” he smiled brightly, “Migdal has officially signed a trading contract with the most notable importing company in the south. They reach three different lands, including this one, and have the most advanced shipping technology.”

“That’s great news, Alvin!” Angelique exclaimed, putting her hands together joyously.

“Indeed.” Alvin settled down in his chair, a content expression on his face, “They are willing to use our port as well to import and export items directly from here, even though they have the most renowned port.”

“And you’re comfortable with this endeavor?” Vlam asked.

“Absolutely. It was something I had been hoping would happen for a long time now.” Alvin confirmed.

“Wonderful, I look forward to seeing the new steps of Migdal.” Valgus congratulated.

“Thank you all. I was hoping you would have some suggestions on any new products we can trade. Crops and sea minerals have been our main source of revenue, but there are endless options and opportunities on how we can utilize this land that has been given to us by the Father. Have you any ideas?” Alvin inquired.

The meeting was another hour or so of proposals and rejections as we searched our minds for creative ideas. The influence of Migdal had already spread so far and is also a part of the greatest peace treaty of the time. It was important to uphold the prestige of a renowned country led by a king who served the Creator.

After exhausting all of our imagination, the meeting was adjourned. We stood from our chairs, preparing to leave. Then, Alvin asked, “Genesis, would you mind staying behind? I have a favor to ask.”

“Very well.” I sat back in the chair, waiting for everyone to leave.

Once the door shut behind the last Guardian other than myself, Alvin rushed over to sit in the chair next to me. He seemed to be antsy over something, but appeared to have trouble converting his anticipation into words.

“What is it you need, dear friend?” I asked, tilting my head and studying his face. In the past several years since I’d met him, his growth had become so much that he barely

resembled the wiry, small boy that had once been brought under the wings of the Guardians. His hair was now nearly to his shoulders and a strong beard decorated his chin. The curious gaze which held wonders had grown stern, but kind all the same. He was a fine man.

“Valerie has been feeling ill lately, and I was wondering if you could examine her. We trust you more than any other.”

“Of course, I’d be happy to help our dear queen. Where is she now?” It’d been a year already since I had officiated the wedding between King Alvin and the now Queen Valerie. It had been an honor to bring the two together in matrimony after watching them overcome countless obstacles and trials.

Valerie was resting in the King and Queen’s bedchambers, the curtains drawn around the bed. The chambers were luxurious, but also simple, as if to keep a sense of humility. They didn’t surround themselves with extravagant items, but rather kept their belongings neat and clean. As stewards, they were well endowed; and I didn’t think any other could truly appreciate everything as they did.

“How are you feeling, Valerie?” I asked, pulling the curtain and sitting at the edge of the mattress. She gazed at me from where she lay, a film of perspiration glistening on her forehead.

“Cold.” She answered, a shiver accompanying her speech.

“May I?” I held up my hand. She nodded and I placed my palm on her cheek. Her temperature was warmer than normal, but not something to fret about. I closed my

eyes and released my power over her, searching her body for what might be ailing her. I frowned upon coming across a strange formation in her abdomen. I transferred my power from Valerie's body into the small form, which squirmed from the foreign touch. A wide grin alighted my face as realization struck.

"What is it?" I heard Alvin ask, though his voice was faint as though a large distance stood between us.

I retracted my power and stared at Valerie, reaching up to stroke her auburn hair. "It's beautiful." I whispered, a great emotion overwhelming me.

Valerie's face lit up as she deciphered the meaning to my words, "Really?" She brought her hands up to her mouth, tears welling in her eyes.

"Congratulations, my dear. You are pregnant."

The news spread like wildfire engulfing a forest of dead trees. A royal heir! The first of hopefully what will become many, many generations of the Migdal royal family. Alvin became an overprotective, sometimes oppressive husband towards Valerie as he would not allow her out of his sight. His intentions were pure, but the results were aggravating for the new mother-to-be. She often came to me in order to complain about how she was now treated as though she were only a two-year-old toddler who would break something the moment she set her sights on it. Of course, in this case Alvin was more worried about Valerie breaking herself. I understood his concerns, but also Valerie's need for privacy and peace. The palace was in a tornado of excitement preparing for the future addition.

“Do you know what it will be?” Valerie asked as we sat in her room sipping herbal tea. “A boy or girl?”

“I cannot detect that, sadly. I can only feel the tugging of its life force.” I said. Before tea, I examined the baby just to be sure it was healthy.

“Well, no matter. I will be joyous no matter the gender.” She leaned back with a content expression, her eyes closed and the tea raised to her lips. It was a picture of absolute tranquility; the sun shone through the window and kissed her face, and a breeze drifted in from the outside.

“How does it feel?” I ventured, “To know that within you is someone who will soon be able to walk, talk, and think just like us? How do you feel knowing that you will be a mother?”

She set down her teacup, “It is intimidating when I consider it, but it’s a blessing I will never be ungrateful for. “This” she placed a hand upon her stomach, “is my child. Someone who will steal my heart— who already has stolen it, rather of whom I shall raise precious. The amount of love I already hold for this little one is incomparable.” She smiled, her eyes shining.

My heart twanged when imagining how one would feel when discovering their motherhood. I leaned my head back in the chair and stared up at the ceiling mural. It depicted the creation of the world: a void filled with nothingness was but a canvas for our Creator, who spoke firstly the heavens and the earth into existence. He then commanded the light to exist, and deemed it day, while the darkness remained night. He separated the waters and the heavens, calling the space in between the sky, and then morning and evening came to be. The Lord gathered the

waters into one place in order to let the dry ground appear, calling them land and seas respectively. Then the lands were covered in lush greens and vegetation.

Then, just by His words, the stars were formed to differentiate the night from day and to mark sacred times, as well as days and years. He made two greater celestial bodies to govern the night and day, calling them the moon and the sun. Then the lands, seas, and skies were filled with living creatures of various designs. Some had fins, some had legs, others had wings, and there were a few with all three. And finally, He spoke to life the first breaths of mankind; the first man and then the first woman.

I pondered the origins of my own birth, having been wrought from the element of Earth itself. I was the living, breathing earth, who domineered the lands and lived off of life. What supplied me was the constant flow of energy of which I was surrounded; it was not enough to harm anyone, as long as my body was not completely depleted of it.

“Have you ever considered having a family?” Valerie asked.

The question caught me off-guard, “Well̄, I haven’t. I already have a family.”

“Yes, of course. I acknowledge the deepness of the Guardians’ bond, but have you ever thought about getting married, or having children?” She pressed further.

I pursed my lips, reflecting on my entire past to try and find a moment where maybe the idea crossed my mind. But as a Guardian, the notion of that sort of family had never occurred to me. “I don’t even know if I can.” I admitted, a faint drop in my stomach.

“Have children?” She tilted her head.

“Get married.” I said.

Valerie frowned, “Surely you can get married, right?”

“I’m a Guardian. Marriage was not what I was sent here for; it isn’t a part of my Mission.”

Valerie scowled, “But your Mission is over, isn’t it? You’ve eradicated Evil in the form of Helel, and you’re still here. Wouldn’t that be the Father telling you to find joy here before going back Home?”

“I don’t know. . .” I thought about it for a few minutes. Maybe us Guardians were supposed to get married and have offspring, but what would that entail? What would our descendents even be? A Guardian was not the same as a human, we were not born from the womb, nor had we ever experienced childhood. I didn’t want my children to be scorned as hybrids, as those in myths often would be. “I need to ask the Holy One about it. . . but I’m not concerned about having any sort of romantic relationship. There are still many things that I must do before settling down anywhere.”

“I understand. I don’t mean to pressure you into anything, I was merely curious.” She smiled.

I returned the gesture, knowing full well that Valerie meant no harm. She was a girl who craved information. “Then, I must take my leave. It was pleasant to chat with you, Valerie, and it pains me that I must end our meeting so shortly.”

“I appreciate your company and greatly value the time you’ve set aside for me. Truly, I am thankful for all you have done for myself, my husband, this kingdom, and this world.” She made a move to stand, but I hurried over to her chair and placed my hand upon her shoulder.

“Please, continue to relax in the beautiful sun and fresh air. You mustn’t need stand to bid me farewell, for I will come to you. Good day, my friend.” I leaned down and embraced Valerie before straightening and then departing from the room.

My eyes were glued to the ground as I approached the castle’s gates. To explain why my feet were dragging and I looked like I had just lost my job, I was simply deep in thought. The topics I had discussed with Valerie were no less than confusing; I had no answers to any of her questions. My ponderings were interrupted, however, when I collided with what felt like a brick wall.

“Ow — ” I rubbed the bump forming on the top of my head after having smashed it into the solidarity which now loomed over me.

“Oh my goodness, are you okay?” He sounded panicked and reached down to offer a hand.

“Yes, yes, I’m fine.” I muttered, taking the hand and standing, not yet looking away from the man’s feet which were covered in sturdy leather boots.

As I was saying my thanks and preparing to walk away, he asked, “Miss Genesis?”

I stopped and looked up at him, “Yes?”

The man stepped back and scratched the back of his neck, avoiding eye contact, “Oh, uh — it’s good to see you again.” He said.

I frowned, “Have we met?”

His expression dropped as he asked, “You don’t remember me?”

My head tilted as I wracked my brain for any trace of this man. He was tall in stature, strongly built, and wore a ranking knight's uniform. I wasn't too familiar with the knights' ranks, so I wasn't sure where exactly he was on the ladder. His eyes were a startling blue and his hair was the same color as a raven's feathers. "I don't. Where did we meet?"

He smiled awkwardly, "I don't think it would be right of me to say, since it may be unpleasant for you to remember."

"Nonsense, what is your name, Sir?"

"Zedekiah. . . my name is Zedekiah." He answered, his voice soft.

Chills raced up my arms as his voice resonated within my memories, but I didn't know where they came from. It was on the tip of my tongue, but the placement failed me. "Then, although we have crossed paths before, it is a pleasure to meet you, Sir Zedekiah. I am Genesis, Guardian of the Earth" I stuck out my hand and he grasped it firmly, shaking it.

"Yes." His lips curved into a small, short smile which showed such a strong adoration for the person he was gazing at.

He must be an admirer of the Guardians. I concluded.

Several days had passed since my initial meeting with Zedekiah, someone who I had never before noticed. But after our abrupt introduction, I began to see him all over the castle doing various things. The first time I recognized him, he was helping the maids carry several boxes of dishware to the kitchens. I then passed him as he was leaving the conference room, having been in a meeting with Alvin. He greeted me

with a smile then continued on his way. My gaze followed as his back disappeared down the hall. It confused me; why was I seeing him so often? I didn't even see the Guardians as much as this man. They were all so busy, running around the world in order to spread the Book of Law. I sometimes went on excursions as well, but normally centralized in Migdal.

I sat alone in my bedroom, staring out the window at the sun setting in the west. It was lowering behind a line of trees and painting the sky a vibrant pink. My bed was a swinging hammock made of vines; I preferred it over a mattress. It gently rocked me as I marinated in my thoughts, wondering what it was about Zedekiah that made my eye unconsciously search for him. Sure, he was handsome, but I'd never been concerned over appearances.

"Father," I enunciated cautiously, closing my eyes, "why does this confuse me?"

I didn't hear a clear answer, however a reassuring warmth settled around my heart. He was telling me that it was okay to be confused, for He would always be with me.

"Truly, You are the only sure thing in my life." I chuckled.

The days passed quickly, and I continued running into Zedekiah. After weeks of simply greeting each other in passing, he stopped me and asked, "Can I treat you to a meal sometime?"

I raised my brows, "A meal?"

"If you're willing, there's a new restaurant in the shopping district that I would like to show you." His words fell from his mouth as though they were sand in an hourglass

and he was running out of time. A red flush reached all the way up to the tips of his ears as he stared at me intently.

“I am. . . interested in this restaurant you speak of.” I averted my eyes, staring at the floor, “So, I would be happy to go with you.” I snuck a peek upwards.

Zedekiah was beaming, “You won’t regret it! How about tomorrow night, at dusk?”

“Dusk sounds perfect.”

“Wonderful,” he smiled, then turned around and skipped down the rest of the corridor. I smiled, confused as to what was happening, but excited nonetheless. Something within my stomach stirred, making me feel queasy but also on the verge of bursting out into a giggle fit.

But before I could allow myself to cave in to those flutterings, someone called out to me, “Genesis?”

I turned. Vlam was standing at the end of the hallway, a satchel over his shoulder and a map in hand. “Vlam, you’re back!” I ran over and embraced him, “How was it?”

He smiled, releasing me, “Fruitful. Migdal now has a new trading partner. An envoy from the Gehola Empire is set to arrive within the next week for discussions with Alvin. I was just on my way to let him know.”

“I’ll go with you.” I said, offering to take the bag from his shoulders as he was returning from a long and rigorous trip. It is invigorating to visit a country who knows not of the Lord and to see people return to him one by one. . . but by the end of the journey, when one was returning to the quietness of his home, the weariness settles. Vlam obliged and handed me his supplies, which I shouldered.

As we made our way to Alvin, he explained all that had happened in the Gehola Empire. He had been given the opportunity to stand before the court and make his case for the Lord, telling them that though Evil has been slain, trouble could still arise at any time. It was something which always haunted the edge of the Guardians' consciousnesses, so we wanted to make as many preparations as possible before anything of the sort occurred. He informed them that if they continued to turn away from the protection of the Creator, their Empire would not be safe, no matter how much they prided themselves on their military strength. The attack wouldn't necessarily be something that came solely from the outside, but something that would strike from the inside as well.

4. Feelings are Confusing

It had been a month since my meeting with Zedekiah. Since then, he'd grown into a good friend of whom I knew I could rely on. It was out of character for me, a Guardian, to even consider leaning on someone outside of the Guardians or the Creator, but he took that position in my mind and heart.

“Allow me.” Zedekiah strode around the table to pull out a chair, offering his hand as I took my seat. If it had been anyone else, I would've felt as though I was being coddled, but it took little time for me to realize that it was simply in his nature to be thoughtful.

I enjoyed the moments spent with him more than any others. Somehow, he had weaseled himself into every one of my thoughts; time was spent wondering about how he was, or what he was doing. On days that we were scheduled to meet, I spent the entire morning preparing myself for what would be only an hour or so in his presence. Without fail, we made sure to set aside time for our meetings, since our schedules were packed full with things required of our positions. I, being a Guardian, and Zedekiah, being Commander over the First Knight Squadron, were pulled in many directions.

“Thank you.” I said, trying to suppress the dizzying whirlwind of my nerves. I was comfortable, but everything within me was excited when around him.

The night passed by in a blur. We ate barbeque until our stomachs were about ready to burst, took a stroll through the town, windowshopped, then rode our steeds down to the cliffs in order to watch the blissful view of dolphins catching rays of moonlight as they frolicked in the waves.

We sat side by side in the soft grass, simply enjoying each other's company. The stars smiled down at us, seeming as though we were the most pleasing sight to them. Everything felt right. My heart yearned to accept this, but my Guardian's mind did not understand it. *What am I doing?* I wondered. It was the one thing that would always interrupt my time with Zedekiah: doubt. *He's just a friend.* I resolved, shoving those wondering words deep down into the pits of my conscience.

After another hour of listening to the squeals of the dolphins and crashing of the waves, I stood and decided, "We should return."

Zedekiah's expression was difficult to discern with my shadow blocking the moonlight from his face. But he responded, "If that is what you wish." And stood, his figure growing to tower over mine. A soft, melancholic smile lifted the corners of his lips. "After you." He extended his hand, which I took, and we walked up the hill to where Rene and his horse, Sanjay, were waiting.

"So what's going on between you two?" Angelique asked, eyeing Zedekiah.

I frowned, "What do you mean?" Angelique had just returned from a two-month expedition in the White Mountains, far on the other side of the world. She had spent time there visiting all of the mountain villages and studying their ways of life; how they lived, what they ate, and how they operated.

"You're always together now. I can't get a moment alone with you, Gennie. Everytime I see you, he's hovering over your shoulder!"

“He and I are friends, Angelique.” I smiled, trying to comfort her.

“Yeah. . . friends.” Zedekiah confirmed, a hint of bitterness in his voice.

“Well of course you are just friends. What else could you be? We’re Guardians.” Angelique grabbed an apple from the basket. We were having a picnic in the courtyard, underneath a large oak tree.

“Right.” I said, my eyes dropping. Those words were difficult to stomach, but she was right. A Guardian having such worldly emotions of romantics? As if. But even as I internally agreed with her, resentment could be felt bubbling even further within. “Anyways, Angelique. How was your expedition?” I asked, desperate to change the conversation in order to avoid the expanding bitterness in my stomach.

“It was great! The people there are all so friendly and open to hearing the Father’s Word. It makes me feel such tremendous joy when there are those willing to listen, rather than just shut me down at the very mention of His name.” She leaned back, a somber expression. There had been countless times where a person would shove us Guardians away in order to keep themselves from hearing of the Lord’s Works. Each time it happened was like a needle stabbing into the pincushion which is the heart. It was hard to watch. Only pity could be held for those who turned from a path of light and salvation. Truly, it left me feeling shattered, knowing that those faces would not be seen in Paradise.

I rolled back and rested my head in the soft grass, gazing up at the shaking leaves of the oak tree. They reminded me of myself: fragile. Leaves break away with the slightest gust of wind.

But they also hold true in the strongest of storms. The Lord reminded me.

The corners of my lips lifted. The strength that those delicate things held was incredible, despite their weakness. My eyes drifted higher in the tree, where I spotted a nest made of branches and brambles, where three chicks revealed themselves as they cried for food. *How meek.* I thought. Those chicks relied solely on their mother's return in order to survive. Is that how all life begins? I knew and understood, yet I didn't. I've watched it end many times, but the beginning seemed to be such a precious moment.

"Angelique." I said.

"What is it?"

"Have you ever thought of what it would be like. . . to have a family?" I asked. Zedekiah began choking on his bread and quickly gulped down several large sips of water.

"*You* are my family. The Guardians and the Father are my family, so what more do I need?" She replied.

"I don't know. . . it's just been on my mind these days." I pursed my lips.

Zedekiah hesitated, "Any particular reason?"

"I'm not sure." I sighed.

In the past few months, Zedekiah had grown to become someone who could easily consume my every waking thought. At the mere mention of his name my ears would perk and my focus would be honed. Why? I asked myself that too.

We spent all of our free time with each other. When together, even the most mundane of tasks seemed thrilling. It eventually got to the point where I could no longer deny my

feelings towards him. He'd become too important to me, and Zedekiah realized this as well.

One day, when we were lounging on the palace's balcony, he asked, "Genesis, what do you think of marriage?" "I think it's beautiful." I answered.

"But. . . what about to me?"

I sat up, frowning, "What are you trying to ask?"

"I'm not proposing right now. I'm still preparing everything I need to give you a wonderful life of marriage, but I would like to know what you think of it. Would you want to marry me, in the future?" His eyes averted mine and his ears were piping red.

I was stunned. Marriage? Me? "But, Zedekiah I'm a Guardian." Was all I could think to say.

"I know, but you can still get married, right? There's nothing in the Book of Law which forbids it."

"I — I don't know." My chest felt compressed, and my breathing grew shallow.

"I know it's a lot to think about, but please know that I have every intention of proposing once everything comes together." Zedekiah sounded adamant. I slowly lifted my eyes to his which were imploring me. His irises shone with a clear clarity that the one they were beholding was that which they would keep by their side no matter what the world had to say against it. He knew my feelings for him, and I knew his for me, but I was the only one scared of the risk. . . of the consequences.

"I need to think." I said, putting two of my fingers on a temple. My head hurt from the stress being brought in by my thoughts. "This is too severe a matter to simply run off of a whim for." I said sternly.

“This isn’t a whim, Genesis. This is something that I have been considering for a very, very long time. I understand your position, but please also think of mine.”

“Then I’ll consider it. But there’s something I should do before giving you any answer.”

“And what would that be?” He asked.

“To inquire the One who empowers me.” My eyes drifted over the terrace, gazing at the line of trees on the horizon.

It would’ve been a long journey if traveled by regular means, but as I had an unrealistically fast unicorn, it took only a few days to reach the northernmost part of the continent. I dismounted Rene and nearly collapsed due to the soreness in my thighs. I could raise mountains and destroy civilizations, but riding for four days straight was difficult even for me.

“Ugh,” I groaned, “walking’s going to be a pain.” I stumbled to a tree and slid down the trunk. A breeze picked up and lifted the hairs that had escaped from my braid; they tickled my face as they danced around my head. I breathed in deeply and slowly exhaled, soaking in the pure energy radiating throughout this place of beauty, still untouched by Man’s Hand, reserved only for the Guardians. I gazed tenderly at the place which still felt like my home on Earth, a place of willows and lakes. The birthplace of the Guardians.

The tree which I leaned against was the one of which I woke up next to, that very first day. It had been years since I stepped foot in my homeland. The last time was right after Helel had abandoned the Guardians. It would be a lie if I said it didn’t sting every time I thought of him. That type of pain wasn’t one that healed with the body, nor did it heal with the

mind. It was one that would forever haunt me until I could find the strength to release it. I always wondered why I felt the need to cling to this torment. . . maybe because it strengthened my memory of him, or maybe to justify the bitterness I held toward that man. Either way, neither was a reason to dangle myself over the pit of despair, but I used them as such nonetheless.

“I’m back.” I breathed, closing my eyes and feeling the sun rays which pierced through the dripping hood of the willow. The atmosphere greeted me in kind, kissing both of my cheeks and ruffling my hair. The willow reached down to pat my shoulder and the grass played with my ankles. Birds sang of my return and bees danced with merriment. I smiled listening to the sounds of nature rejoicing at my presence. It was humbling to know that forever this place would recognize me, no matter how long time was stretched between us.

The gentle breeze picked up into a strong wind, circling around the meadow. I stood and ran out to where my view of the sky was undisturbed by the blockage of tree limbs. The clouds were being swirled together to form a ring of which the sun shone through. Rain poured from the ring of clouds and lightning shot across the center. And then the noise was drowned out. *Welcome back, My child.*

His voice boomed, echoing throughout the meadow. I smiled upon hearing His powerful yet mellow call. He felt so close that I swore I could’ve touched Him, despite seeing no physical body.

“I am here, Master. Your servant has returned to her place of birth, where You formed me from earth’s very element itself.” I announced, spreading my arms to feel the ripping of the gusts as they embraced me. It felt exhilarating

to simply be in His presence. . . no other people or responsibilities to distract me. Just me and Him.

I am overjoyed that you finally feel My presence. Oh how I have been calling you, my dear.

“You have been calling me, Lord?” My heart simultaneously sank and rose. He was reaching out to me, calling me, and yet I had been too deaf to hear Him.

Always. My arms never close when reaching for my children.

“I am sorry, my King. I have been negligent towards You, how dare I? To ignore the Almighty! I am most ashamed, Father.” I fell to my knees and released my hair from its braid, letting it be taken up by the Lord’s wind. I reached around and tore the cloak which rested on my shoulders, then pressed my forehead to the ground. “I beg for Your forgiveness, my Master.”

I am not upset with you, only saddened by your distance. I forgive you, child, for you have returned to Me. Now tell me, what has been bothering you to such an extent that you needed to come to this sacred place in order to reach me?

He was already aware of the concerns which plagued me, He knew everything, but it was comforting to know that I could speak of all that weighed on my mind with no fear of rebuke.

“Lord, I am a Guardian who has fallen in love with a human. Is there something wrong with me?” I choked, tears brimming in my eyes.

Of course not, child. The Guardians were not created to be emotionless husks. You walk this earth like a human, and were made in My image, like a human.

“But I am not a human.”

No, no you are not. But you aren't entirely different from a human either. The difference is that the Guardians were molded from the core elements, which gives you mandate over them. Otherwise, you feel love, anger, and pain just as any human would.

“I was not born from a womb.” I said, trying so desperately to find something that would forbid me from loving a man.

Nor was the first man, nor the first woman. One was brought up from the dust and the other brought out from a rib. You are not as different as you believe, Genesis.

I dropped my face, staring at the ground. It was my way of avoiding eye contact in shame, though He could see my face clearly, no matter where I looked. “Then. . . am I allowed to marry, Father?”

I created marriage to be the sacred union between a man and a woman. If you have met someone who has grasped your faith so strongly that you wish to remain by his side as his other part, then of course you may marry.

“What about. . .” I hesitated, “a child? If I had a child with a man, then what would he be? A Guardian? Human? I loathe the idea of him being treated as a hybrid, becoming an outcast. Can I even bear children?”

You are able. As a human woman can carry a baby, so you will too. This child will not be a Guardian, for the element will not mold him as it does you. He will grow in the womb and be brought into the world as any other man would. He will be a human.

I sighed in relief, and the corners of my lips climbed. It felt like the weight of the world had been lifted off of my

shoulders, and a brand new door was opened. *A family*. . . I realized, overjoyed at the revelation. For so long I had only been concerned with correcting the world that the thought of settling down seemed impossible. I squealed and jumped with delight, *A family!*

5. Zedekiah

The next year felt like a blur. I returned to Migdal and reunited with Zedekiah, who was overjoyed with my declaration that if he were to propose, I would accept. He then left on a three month expedition, only to return in a month proclaiming victory over the tyrants in the west. The kingdom grew three times its size then, as people from all around decided to pack up and follow the valiant knight of whom had set them free. I also realized that even after purging the west of its tyrants several years ago, the Evil will almost always return, rearing to bring down whatever Good has built. It was disheartening, but it also inspired me to become more than I already was. Someone who could snuff evil out for all time. It seemed like an impossible task, but as long as I trusted the One who created me, everything became possible.

Zedekiah got a promotion after his return and was given the title of Marquess. He also was bestowed a last name along with his title: Wolfram. I was, of course, excited for Zedekiah, but also slightly hesitant for him to accept the title. I didn't want my services to be tied to Migdal through marriage. It was imperative that the Guardians remain available to all countries willing to serve the Creator, not just one we helped build. I had expressed my concerns to Alvin, who assured me that they were misplaced. He didn't wish to tie me to his throne via my relationship with one of his subjects. He simply hoped to give us more leeway through a title of nobility.

“If you ever wish to leave, then I will not attempt to hold you back. Your purpose is far greater than mine and I won’t be the reason the world falls. And besides, I highly doubt it’s even possible to keep you restrained. If anyone tried putting a leash on you, you would uproot them from their very spot and drag them along instead.” He laughed.

“Obviously.” I laughed, relieved that Alvin possessed a greater understanding.

A few months later, the royal heir was finally born. I was the one to deliver him and the first whose arms held the boy. Alvin was right beside me, sweating buckets as though he were the one who had just delivered a child.

The baby had dark brown hair, surely to lighten with years, and his face seemed like it had been squished. I stared at him thoughtfully, *So this is what a baby looks like*. His cries pierced the ears, but strangely the noise was welcoming. *This is life*. I smiled, then handed him to Valerie who was drowning in her own tears. She tenderly took the child and stroked his face, endearment and bliss replacing the strain and agony that had been on her face only moments before.

For every day following the birth of Prince Kaius I found myself pondering what it would be like to have a family of my own. I often mentioned it to Zedekiah, who shared my wonders. I spent the days with my fellow Guardians, who were all now in acceptance of my future marriage. At first, they had seemed skeptical of the notion, but after I sought my answer from the Father, then all immediately came to support my decision. They now welcomed Zedekiah with open arms, calling him their brother and constructing a bond with him which was stronger than I ever could have hoped.

None of the others seemed to have any interest in marriage or relationships. I understood their stances perfectly, as I had been in that exact position not even two years ago. However, I did often hope that they would come to know the joys of love. It was something that not even our bond could provide.

Then finally, on a day where the sun reigned the sky and the clouds passed quickly by, I was taken to the edge of a cliff, hidden by trees, which overlooked the pristine blue sea. I sat beside Zedekiah, leaning against his shoulder. The horizon escaped my eyes as the world curved over the edge. Beyond me leaped laughing dolphins, and deep below surely was the home of countless creatures. The grass beneath my fingers sparkled as though it were jewels, and the wind caught my hair.

Zedekiah interlaced his fingers with mine and said, “Genesis.”

“Mmm?” I replied, feeling drowsy from the sun’s pleasant shine.

“I have a confession.” He said.

“And what would that be?” I asked, my eyes half closed. My eyelashes cast shadows across my vision.

“I’ve been in love with you for far longer than you’ve known me.” He admitted.

I frowned, “Have you now?”

“Yes. You see, we met long before our introduction, when I was barely a knight and you were a Guardian who had saved the world.”

“Do enlighten me, Zedekiah. When was this?” I asked, unsure of how I felt. It wasn’t like I was upset or anything of the sort, but it also made me feel strange that there

was a time where I didn't know the man beside me. We rarely spoke of our pasts, though they're clearly important. It just never came up in conversation, which I now realized was strange.

"I never wanted to bring it up, because I didn't want to remind you of," he paused, "bad times."

Does it have to do with Helel?" I asked.

"Well, somewhat." He sighed, "Let me start from the beginning— " He began with his origins: a son with loving parents and four brothers living in a land of green grass, hills, and lochs. They lived in a cottage several miles away from a small town where goods were traded and sold. His father was a shepherd, and Zedekiah would often have to go out with the herd in order to keep watch. The times were blissful.

When the seasons nestled between the warm and the cold, a plague overturned the town. Zedekiah was still unsure of how it had been brought in, as there wasn't much contact with other civilizations, but it ended up killing the larger portion of the townspeople. His family had been left untouched from the plague, but it was difficult to obtain a wide variety of food, which they normally would have traded for.

The flock was keeping the family fed, but they still had hope in finding business elsewhere. Zedekiah and his brothers were tasked with taking the sheep to other towns for trade. They would select a few ewes and a ram each, and set out in separate directions in hopes of finding an oasis of commerce.

He packed a loaf of bread and a waterskin then rounded up his five sheep and wandered towards the nearest

western town. It was a three day journey on horse, but on foot it took two weeks. The journey was rough as there were numerous encounters with wolves. Thankfully, Zedekiah was knowledgeable in handling wolves and was able to prevent his sheep from becoming dog chow. By the time he reached the town, his head was foggy from dehydration and his stomach was caving in on itself; it took everything within his willpower to not slay one of the ewes right then and there for food.

However, what he saw upon reaching the town was absolute devastation. It was like a wasteland. The town had basically been deserted, with a few corpses littering the roads. Zedekiah threw up at the sight of a dead body. He hadn't eaten anything in days, yet his stomach still found something to hurl. There was nothing left for his family there, so he had to either move on to the next town or return home. He decided to keep going; there was no way he would go back empty-handed.

He chose the smallest ewe of the bunch and butchered it. The sheep was gutted then grilled over a campfire far away from the town. He didn't want to even be in the near vicinity of the deceased settlement. It made him nauseous just thinking of the corpses left to rot.

He walked for another week, his feet aching from the repetitive motion of moving one foot over the other. The next town was the same as the last, except this time there were far more bodies. It was a massacre from an invisible enemy. The fact that it had consumed not just one town he had visited, but both of them along with the town near his home concerned Zedekiah. He finally made the decision to return, despite the

emptiness of his bag and the four remaining sheep still under his care.

It was another two weeks before he reached home. He ran up the hill to the cottage despite his exhaustion and pounded on the heavy wooden door. “Mom, Dad!” He called, “Unlock the door, I’m back. It’s Zed!” There was no response. “Mom? Dad?” He rounded the corner to peer through the window, but the shutters were closed. “Jack? Kierston?” He tried calling for his brothers, “Emel? Luke?” He knocked on the shutters. Panic gripped him. “No, no, no.” He refused. Zedekiah ran back to the door and slammed his body into it, “Open the door!” He demanded. It wouldn’t budge. His shoulder throbbed from the impact. The pain eventually forced him to fall into the door and slide to sit at the foot of it, tears streaming down his cheeks. He brought his hands up to bury his face, “There’s no way.” His voice broke.

The day slowly transitioned into night, and he hadn’t moved from his spot. The reality of what was at hand wouldn’t settle. He couldn’t accept it. His entire family, his whole life, was gone.

“Zed?” He heard a familiar voice. He earnestly looked up, trying to focus on the figure approaching him through the blurriness in his eyes.

“Kierston?” He asked.

His brother dropped the logs he was carrying and ran up to greet him, grabbing his face and examining for any sign of injury.

“You look fatigued, brother. Let’s go inside and I’ll get you some water.”

“But—” he hesitated, “where is everyone else?”

Kierston paused and smiled solemnly, “They’ve gone to find a new home. After hearing of the severity of the disease, and with how long you were gone, they believed you to be dead. Gone to the gallows. But thank the Heavenly Father you’ve by some miracle returned in full health!” He rejoiced, his smile brighter than the rising moon.

“Yes. . . it’s a blessing. But— are they safe? I’ve been to two towns and neither of them had a single living soul.

What if something happens to them?”

“Then something happens.” Kierston had a bittersweet expression. “There isn’t any stopping them, whether it be a disease or the end of the world. The only way they’d remain still is if the Creator instructed them to.”

“Should we go after them?” Zedekiah asked.

“Eventually, maybe. But for now we need to get you back on your feet.”

After a few arduous months of trying to live off of what they had left, Kierston and Zedekiah made the tough decision to leave their childhood home. They heard from passersby that there was a huge demand for manual labor in one of the more populous towns bordering the capital city of the Geban kingdom. However, once they’d reached the city, they came upon complete chaos. The capital city, the palace, it was all gone! Not even a speck of dust from the original buildings remained, it was as though the earth had been wiped clean.

The brothers found themselves at a loss. What were they to do now? They had essentially nothing to their names. Kierston had the idea of moving on to the next kingdom over,

to look for work. They did just that, and found that it had also been destroyed. The entire countryside was in confusion as to what was happening.

They managed to catch a ride going west with a farmer who was packing all of his belongings and leaving to find a new place. The man was perplexed as to what was going on. “I was out in the fields when it happened, but the ground shook beneath my feet so bad and scared the horses. They took off with the till and pulled up a good number of crops. Let me tell you, the noise from whatever was happening got so loud that it nearly blew out my eardrums! There ain’t no way I’m staying in these parts. It’s gotta be God’s wrath. Can’t convince me otherwise.”

The boys listened with intrigue and terror. If so many of these kingdoms were being uprooted, then it only plagued their young minds with questions as to what incurred the Lord’s wrath.

After three weeks of traveling in the back of a rickety wagon and pulling out thousands of splinters, they reached a small town separated from all other civilizations. And by “town” it was more of a composition of randomly placed shacks around a community well. There was a mayor, but he didn’t do much good. He really only sat in his office and complained about the residents. Either way, it was the first shred of hope for Zedekiah and Kierston at finding a place to stay.

The farmer continued his journey, saying that this was still far too close to the ruins of his old home. Zedekiah and Kierston remained behind, working on their appeals to the mayor; they had to do something in order to prove that they deserved to stay. They made acquaintances with some of the

people living there and were surprised to find out that many of them had been rescued from a human trafficking ring. They had been kept locked up in a fortress, forced to remain in darkness for what they had feared to be the rest of their lives.

“The Guardians, huh?” Kierston scoffed. What the residents had described sounded so far-fetched that they found it difficult to believe.

“It really does remind you of a tall tale, doesn’t it?” Zedekiah connected. It was something out of a children’s book.

“It makes some sense when you consider how long they were locked away. It must’ve been something their brains made up in order to explain some catastrophic event that blew away the fortress.”

Zedekiah didn’t respond. He undressed himself and pulled on a set of fresh clothes then rolled into his cot. They were staying in some nice old lady’s attic, accompanied by mice and cockroaches. Mold clung to the crevices of the room, upsetting his sinuses. It was dark and dingy, but they were thankful for the roof over their heads, especially so when thunder began to shake the house and drops from the storm soaked through the roof.

“Then, after a few months, King Alvin arrived and we met him. I didn’t know much about him, just that he had helped everyone escape from the fortress. And honestly, I thought he was slightly off his rocker when he started talking about how we were marked for pillage. We decided to go with him anyway since most of everyone else was, and then we ended up here.” Zedekiah shrugged. “Then you guys came down on the backs of dragons and took the king away.

That was the first time I saw you.” He smiled, “My heart felt like it would combust, I was without a doubt infatuated. You were so stoic that all of the stories I had failed to believe in began to make sense. I decided right then and there that I’d make your acquaintance somehow. I was still young, and I realized I was also too immature. You inspired me to set myself on the path to grow and become a better man. So I joined the knights and began my climb up that ladder. It got to the point where I outclassed my peers and was chosen to be a part of the knights that left with Sir Leon to meet with an envoy from Ikraam. Little did we know that half of us would perish.” His expression darkened.

“They ambushed us, but thankfully we had skilled soldiers watching our surroundings. We were able to find protection from a cave, where we guarded the only opening with fervor. It was painful stepping over the bodies of my comrades. But I had to. It was the only way for anyone to survive. And it was like that for a number of days; I can’t even remember the amount, everything felt like a blur. My sword was slick with blood and my boots were soaked. It felt like my sense of humanity was dulled; nothing felt real. It was like a dream when we saw the shadow of that huge ship.” He nodded in the direction of the pier.

“When we managed to regroup with King Alvin, we were scarce in numbers and each knight was haggard from lack of food and sleep. We were allowed to stay in our own rooms for however long we needed. I probably passed out for days.” He chuckled dryly. “When I could finally force myself out of bed to explore the ship, I saw you. You were with Rene at the head of the ship, gazing out at sea. Your hair shone like refined gold. No, really, it nearly blinded me.” He

laughed when he saw my incredulous expression. “I wanted to talk to you, but you were swarmed with a group of people, and then you disappeared. I never knew where you went.” He shook his head, his hair bouncing from the movement.

“When the time came to fight, I dreaded it. I didn’t want to do it. That was, until the shofars sounded. It was eerie yet invigorating at the same time. But my spirits weren’t lifted until I saw you, a valiant figure charging straight towards the battlefield on your noble steed. Then I realized, I *have* to fight. It wasn’t something driven by love or bloodthirst; it was an underlying sentiment that burst forth.”

“And once that was over, and you’d slain Helel, I wanted to reach out to you then more than ever. But you were bedridden from grief, and it felt like a place I shouldn’t intrude. Finally, I mustered up the courage and asked Skuggi if I could speak with you, to maybe help you face your sorrows. I remember his words exactly: ‘Fine, but if you do anything to worsen her grief then I will throw you off of this ship myself. Take a food tray with you.’”

I thought long and hard on who had all entered my room during my hours of despair. There was only one person of whom I had not previously met, “I never ate it.” I admitted, remembering the conversation I had with a man who tried comforting me.

He smiled, “So you do remember me.”

“Yes, I remember.” I leaned against his shoulder.

“I do have a point to all of this.” He said, pulling away so that I had no choice but to sit upright.

“And that is?”

“First, to tell you that my feelings are far deeper than you might’ve imagined. Second, to confess that my heart has

belonged to you for longer than yours to me. And third, to bear my heart for you and ask you a question I've been longing to hear an answer for."

"Do ask." I said, grinning.

"Genesis," he twisted so that he faced me, then pulled a box out of his pocket, "will you marry me?"

I took the box and opened it. Inside rested a simple gold band with a natural white pearl surrounded by embellished diamonds encrusted at the top. I then closed the box and stared into the deep blue eyes of the man before me, reading into each layer they beheld.

"I will."

6. I Do

“You look breathtaking.” Angelique smiled endearingly as she set the crown weaved of Trailing Arbutus and White Ambrosia flowers upon my head. I looked longingly into the mirror, savoring this appearance of mine. A wedding dress of deep green velvet rimmed with gold embroidery, a trailing, shimmering golden veil, and the flowers I brought forth myself before their natural time.

The season was cold yet dew rested on the ground in the mornings. Over a year had passed since the engagement between me and Zedekiah, and the wedding would be taking place in but a few hours. I spent the days leading up to my wedding with my fellow Guardians, the ones who were by my side at the beginning and the ones who will be with me as I take this new path. They all still followed the footsteps of eradicating the traces of evil, often disappearing for months on end as they completely wiped forces of attacking demons.

“Thank you, my dear.” I smiled, admiring my reflection. It was as though I were staring at a completely different person. She was someone who was about to marry the love of her life, about to build a home and a family. It was something I had before never expected myself to desire, but was now all I could hope for. My days of fighting the remnants of Helel were far from over, but they would now be touched with joy.

“Will you still fight with us?” Angelique asked, pulling my stray hairs back behind my shoulders.

“Of course I will. Just because I’m getting married doesn’t mean I’ll abandon our Mission.” My smile faded and

a ferocious flame lit in my irises, “Helel’s forces are in their death throes; it is now, more than ever, that we need to push them back into the depths of their realm.”

Angelique sighed, “But it’s nearly impossible to keep all of those clueless people who are obsessed with the notion of power from summoning those evil beings. They call the practice of selling their souls to the devil and using his power as witchcraft. And get this,” she scoffed, “they think they can use the elements for their own agendas! As if!”

I turned to face her, “It’s aggravating, yes, but the matter can be a concern of another time.” My expression softened, “I don’t want to think of such things on my wedding day.”

“I understand, I’ll leave it be for now then.” She conceded gracefully.

We finished my preparations and then I helped Angelique get ready. She wore a dress of baby blue silk. That along with her pale skin and fair hair made it look as though she were nearly transparent. I draped a fur shawl over her shoulders and braided her hair. She placed the Helm of Salvation upon her head, it took the shape of a silver ring which encircled her forehead. By the time we finished, the sun had reached its peak in the sky. The time remaining until my wedding was now down to three hours. Angelique attached a long cape matching my dress to my shoulders and I buckled my new sheath holding Alma around my hips. The belt was made of black leather and was embedded with gold designs.

We called for the other Guardians, who arrived promptly. They all fussed over me, *the dress is a centimeter too short, and your hair is sticking up here.* The smallest,

most minute details seemed to be the most important to them. I eventually had them all hold their tongues when it came to worries, and only accepted praises for the remainder of our time together. Normally, any criticism was welcomed, however on this particular day, it would only make my nerves run rampant. I straightened my sleeves so many times that I'd lost count. The curls that had been in my hair were becoming loose. The flowers were starting to make my head itch. And my stomach was unsettled.

I broke out in a cold sweat as we approached the door leading out to the indoor gardens, where I had taken weeks meticulously growing each and every single plant inside. From the towering trees to the number of petals on each flower, all was designed by me. In my frenzy preparing for the wedding, I exhausted myself trying to make sure every little thing was perfect. It had to be a picture of the absolute most wondrous beauty. That's what I wanted.

However, when the doors were swung open and the reception revealed, everything had fallen to ruins. Flowers were wilting, tree limbs were reaching all over the place; there were puddles in the middle of the carpet which had been laid out for the bride. Vines had begun growing up the walls and birds were uprooting the geraniums.

I peeked over my procession's shoulders in panic. Nothing was right, perfection had been lost, everything was ruined. The first bridesmaid, Angelique, walked out with Neró, their arms interlocked. They were the only duo in the lineup, and all of the other Guardians followed them. Skuggi, Valgus, and Vlam. As soon as they disappeared out the doorway, I stepped around the corner to face my audience. My eyes jumped from person to person, scanning their faces,

searching for a single sign of disappointment in what they were witnessing. Sir Leon's eyebrow twitched, which made my heart miss a beat; was he upset with anything? *Is it because the trees are untrimmed? No, it has to be because of the geraniums!* I worried. The music began playing and I took my first step, my eyes dropping to watch as my feet moved on their own accord. I felt numb; everything was already a disaster.

My eyes trailed back up, finally landing on the one thing in the room that went right: my groom. Zedekiah was just across the way, his eyes glistening with beautiful tears, and a grin that showcased his feelings reaching from one of his cheeks to the other. At that moment, nothing else mattered. No disaster could ruin this moment. The sureality settled as my feet continued to carry me forward. My joy abounded, and the flowers to my either side blossomed. Their petals spread open and they gazed at me with love. The trees' branches lifted high as they praised the Lord for this blessed day, and the geraniums sprouted from their seeds and grew into big, wonderful flowers.

Bees buzzed around my head, sniffing the flowers which crowned me. I giggled as the sounds of their wings tickled my ears. The birds rested on branches, the backs of chairs, and on my shoulders as I was guided by my eyes down the carpet. Not even the puddles hindered my steps. And finally, just as the last note sounded in the song, I reached my groom.

Instantly, my hand reached for his, and our fingers interlaced. Time felt so slow yet so fast all at the same time, it was as though nothing could intrude on this moment. The only thing I heard during the entirety of our vows were the

words of “I do”, which we both promised to each other. Until death do us part. And finally, when all was said and done, Zedekiah swept me in and leaned down for the kiss, sealing our matrimony.

The bells chimed and the audience erupted in cheers for the newly married couple. Zedekiah picked me up off of my feet and ran with me down the aisle, big, goofy grins lighting up both of our faces. Our observers followed enthusiastically as we made our ways to the banquet hall, where the biggest feast in the kingdom’s young history was to be held. Not even the king and queen had held a party this grand for their own marriage. We ate until our stomachs nearly burst, cried on each others’ shoulders as we reminisced about times past, and danced to our hearts’ content.

The next several years were peaceful. The demon attacks had lessened due to the Guardians’ effect, as we had made several expeditions across the globe in order to purge the lands of evil. The memories of those expeditions were not great, but there were some good ones mixed in. Aside from the bloodied warzones, we explored undiscovered areas, made connections with different types of people, made friends, destroyed enemies, and expanded our horizons. Compared to those times, my first years of marriage with Zedekiah were absolute bliss and tranquility. We settled further away from the city, which still continued to expand. Our house was not big despite Zedekiah’s position as a marquess, but it was homely and comfortable with a magnificent view of the sea and countryside. Just as we wanted.

In the second year of our marriage, I was blessed with the greatest gift anyone could ever dream of. Within me grew

the legacy of a Guardian. My excitement grew each day as I watched my stomach grow to hold the gift. Zedekiah was overjoyed and began writing a list of names the moment he was told.

When I was six months along, an urgent knock sounded at the door. Zedekiah responded, speaking with whoever was outside. I was in the living room, knitting socks for my child. He came in, his face pale.

“What is it?” I frowned, setting down the knitting needles.

““There’s an attack on Caerwyn. They’re requesting the Guardians and reinforcements.” “A demon attack?” I asked.

“No, it’s a war.” He heaved a sigh and sunk into the sofa, his hand hiding his eyes.

“Who’s attacking?”

“They said it was from a rising rebellion group. They’re calling themselves the Anti-Guardian Association. . . AGA.”

I nearly laughed at the acronym sounding like a baby’s babble. These days, my mind was focused solely on babies. Any connection it could make to one, it would.

“Then, we need to go?”

“I don’t know. If it’s a rebellion group, I don’t know how they’d be able to stand up against Leander’s troops. Unless they’ve found a provider, they shouldn’t even have the resources to fight. I don’t know what gave them the courage to challenge one of the biggest kingdoms on the face of the planet.” He muttered.

“Well, they have to have something up their sleeve. People may be irrational at times, but very few of them are

stupid. There's no way they don't have a plan." I tapped my belly with my fingers, hearing the thrum made me smile.

"News that you're pregnant is widespread, despite our best efforts to keep it quiet. . ."

"You're the one who went blabbing your mouth to the first person you encountered." I chuckled.

He scrunched his face, "I can't deny that. . . But either way, there must be a reason they named their organization the Anti-Guardian Association. They might be scared that our child will have powers. So they're making a desperate attempt to draw you out before you give birth, in order to prevent it from happening." He seethed.

"There's no need to get mad at them for something we're unsure of." I lightly touched his arm.

"You're right. . . I just don't like thinking about it." He groaned, running his hands down his face.

We decided to join the fight, despite the many protestations from surrounding friends. Zedekiah was also hesitant to let me participate, but I managed to convince him. There was no way I would let Zedekiah fight alone now that we were married. Our battles were to be faced together.

We made haste to assist Caerwyn. A march would've taken several weeks at the least, so we instead made use of the battleship, hoisted by Vlam's dragons. I stood beside my fellow Guardians, conversing with them about the upcoming confrontations. We would first try negotiating with the rebellion, and at least try to discover the meaning behind their actions. If there was something the Guardians were doing to disrupt the general public, then it would be in our best interests to hear them out. However, if it was just a mindless

need for more bloodshed, then we could only leave it to the Creator to decide what should be done with them. *He is Just, Fair, and Merciful, but that does not mean His punishments lack severity when the crimes go unrepented of.*

“Are you sure you should be fighting?” Valgus asked. “It could be unhealthy for the baby.” He reached out and stroked my protruding stomach.

“The child will be fine, as will I. Nothing will touch it as long as I’m still breathing.” I declared.

“I don’t agree with you being on the battlefield,” Angelique commented, “but as long as I’m there, nothing will be allowed near you.” She proclaimed. “Nothing.”

“The same stands for us.” Skuggi announced. “Expect to not need to lift a single finger, Genesis.”

“I hope we needn’t lift anything.” I huffed, “Let’s just focus on negotiations for now. I don’t want to see any more spilt blood. . . it hurts my heart.” My eyes dropped. I still got shivers every time I remembered piercing Helel with my sword. His blood ran down the blade, and when I slid it out from his body, the dripping crimson ran down the edge and poured onto my feet. It got on my hands, my face, my clothes, my surroundings. It was everywhere; the reminder that my friend’s life was taken by my hands was never going to release me from that nightmare.

The feelings I had when seeing a life being taken, whether it be from my own hands or those of another, is wrenching. My emotions mix with those of the Father, who created us all. He feels the pain of each individual, and when He sees those crying out in grief, He cries alongside them. The purging of evil included only people completely consumed by it. To the point of there being no help for them.

Their hearts were hardened to the Lord, so the only option left was for them to be demolished. To realize that one of those people could be you. . . really makes you think twice about your denial towards the Lord. Even a Guardian has fallen due to their blasphemous actions. The fact that so many cities. . . entire civilizations, were smote by the Lord, just goes to show how dark the world had become. I hoped inherently that the future would be even just a bit brighter. Us Guardians were on a mission to completely cover the earth with the knowledge of the glory of the Lord, as it is written that it will cover the earth as the waters cover the sea.

We sailed the winds for five days exactly, leaving right at dawn and arriving just as the sun broke over the horizon. The swirling white palace seemed dull and gray despite the morning rays painting the towers pink. When I had first laid eyes upon it, long ago, it mesmerized me with its dazzling white marble and golden bell. It was obvious that the atmosphere had turned grim with the exhausting attacks.

The ship was lowered in a field behind the castle, where there was enough room for the entirety to fit. We were greeted by the palace guards, who escorted Alvin and the Guardians to the council chambers, where Leander would meet us. They led the rest of the entourage to the knight barracks, where they would be staying.

Contrary to his usual cool, laid-back appearance, the king of Caerwyn had a stern, gruff expression when we met him. He motioned that we take our seats, which we obliged. No proper greetings were needed.

After waiting for Leander's advisors and generals to join us, we began the meeting. Leander nodded towards us, "I am grateful beyond words that you were able to assist us on

such short notice. Our people are working their best to resist the rebellion, but are quickly being exhausted. It's funny," he scoffed, "you would think that for such a big territory, we'd be able to squander a little rebellion group, yet they've managed to elude us for a week. We've sent the best scouts and hounds to search for the organization leaders, but have only come up empty-handed."

"Are they inside the city or out?" Skuggi asked, stroking his growing goatee.

"From what we've gathered, their base of operations is outside, but they have plenty of people here." Leander ran his hand down his face, blinking slowly.

"We can take over the search for now." I said, "You go and try to get a few winks of sleep. Grogginess often clouds judgment, and we don't want a half-awake king at the threshold."

He was about to argue, but everyone around the table spoke in agreement. His eyes searched for a single look of discontent, but found none. "Very well, I will do as you say Guardian. I pass the baton over to King Alvin, to make calls in my stead."

"A wise decision." Valgus nodded in approval.

7. Secret Mission

Alvin was quick to act. As soon as King Leander excused himself, the young king took the seat at the head of the table, overlooking all others. Several minutes of silence ensued as he examined the map displayed in the center of the table. Once he seemed satisfied with his examination, he thrust his finger at a point on the map. I leaned forward to see the destination.

“The most likely place for them to be close enough to lead a rebellion, but far enough to avoid search parties, would be the ravine between these two mountains.” He slid his finger along the line depicting the location of the Kelly Green Ravine.

“We thought the same, but there was no trace of anyone when we searched there. The hounds only ran in circles, but came up with nothing.” A general of Leander’s spoke. If my memory served me correctly, the man’s name was Olsten Millie.

Alvin leaned back, his brows furrowed. I could almost hear the gears turning as he fell deep into thought. As someone who’s watched Alvin grow into the man he’s become, I knew very well how his brain functioned. He was considering every single option. “Maybe. . . they aren’t in the ravine.” A spark lit in his eyes as they raised to meet those of General Millie. “Maybe they’re under it.”

I nearly broke into a smile as Alvin revealed his geniusness yet again. “I can help with that.”

“Perfect, we’ll have Genesis on the case then.” He snapped his fingers as the puzzle of our solution fell together within his mind.

“Wait—” Neró protested, his voice startling as he’d remained silent throughout the entire meeting, “she’s pregnant. I don’t think it’d be the safest idea to send her right into the heat of things.”

“I’ll be just fine, Neró.” I promised.

Vlam cut in, “No, he’s right. Genesis, right now it wouldn’t be just you going into the belly of the beast. It would be you *and* your child. If anything happened to you, who knows what would happen to the child? You were there during the entirety of Queen Valerie’s pregnancy, did she do anything so reckless?”

“No. . .” I admitted, but unwilling to back down, I said, “But I’m a Guardian. I’m in a far better position to be doing such things.”

Skuggi interjected, “I can go in your place. Just as you can find them using the earth, I can find them with my shadow.”

“But it’ll be quicker if I go.” I insisted.

Skuggi groaned, “We’re more concerned for your safety than efficiency, Gennie. Please, just this once, concede.”

“But—” I searched the faces of my fellow Guardians, but found no inclination of them allowing me to go, “fine.” I sulked, “I won’t go.”

The five of them deflated into their seats out of relief. It’s not that I didn’t understand their concerns. All I wanted was the safety of my child, that was my biggest priority aside from my connection to the Creator. However, if there was a

rebellion group running around simply because this child is to be born, then the world would not be safe for it until they are crushed. I didn't want my legacy to be brought into an unstable world, where danger awaited it at every corner.

"Then it's settled." Alvin placed his palm on the table directly before him, "Skuggi will go with the scouting teams to the Kelly Green ravine." He subtly exchanged a glance with me, "I'll entrust the expedition to General Millie, I hope you'll serve the position well."

I cocked an eyebrow. I wasn't sure what Alvin was trying to signal to me, but there must've been something amiss. Sometimes, I wished I had the ability to read that man's mind. He thought of things many wouldn't dare to consider. Hence, after the meeting was adjourned, I pulled Alvin aside. "What's the matter?"

"It's only a hunch, but I fear there's a rat in Leander's top ranks." He let out a sharp breath when watching the backs of Caerwyn's generals exit the chamber.

I frowned, "Who?"

"It has to be one among the scouts." He shifted his stance, crossing his arms. His battleaxe which was strapped across his back caught the reflection of an oil lamp. "I don't dare garner the thought of it being the general, but it isn't something that we can necessarily dismiss either. I'm expecting it to be one who answers directly to him. His right hand man, his aide: Merrick Krane."

"And you're certain?"

"No, not yet. That's where you come in." He met my eyes, "I know you aren't planning on sitting idly, despite your promises. You were planning to find a way to go without breaking your oath, weren't you?"

“The thought crossed my mind. . .” I cracked my knuckles, “What is it you will have me do?”

He rushed to the opposite side of the room and stuck his head out to search the antechambers. After dismissing the guards and closing both doors to the antechamber and council chamber, he made his way to the table and pointed to a point on the map. I stooped over to observe the movements of his finger.

“You’re going to go in the midst of night to scope out this mountain. I need you to create a passage from this point,” he directed my gaze to the place which depicted the base of the mountain, “to here.” His finger moved across the mountain into the depths of the ravine. “While you’re there, try and locate exactly where their base is hidden. It can’t be too deep, otherwise they’d die from suffocation, and they aren’t aware of the extent of your control over the earth element.”

My eyes graced over the preconceived path multiple times before I nodded, “It can be done.”

He straightened, “Brilliant. Do you have a cloak to use, or should I lend you one?”

“Worry not, I have many cloaks to wear. A cloak of cotton and the blanket of night. Fear no more, King, I shan’t be seen by the barest of eyes if it so depends on my life.” I decreed, straightening myself. I gave him a smile of confidence, sure of myself that nothing will hinder this mission.

I ran into the first problem right at my bedroom door. The hinges were flawless, not a sound came from them as I opened the door, so that was the only reason why I didn’t alert

the Guardian standing right outside. I froze when I nearly walked into Skuggi, who was leaning against the wall, nodding off. *Of course they'd put him up to this.* I thought bitterly, clenching my jaw. I gently shut the door and tip-toed across the room to where the window stared out at the city lights. My room was above a far drop-off, where below was an ice-cold, fast-flowing river that would tear me from limb to limb if I were to fall in. But there was no other choice.

I pushed open the shutters and stuck my head out. The harsh wind tore at my hair and nearly sucked me out of the room. I placed my hand over my belly bump, praying to the Father that the baby wouldn't be endangered by the ridiculous stunt I had laid out in my head.

"Where do you think you're going?" Someone asked. It was a voice I knew all too well.

I whipped my head around, but nobody was in the room. I gritted my teeth and forced a smile, "Angelique! What brings you here?" Right outside of my window stood a floating Angelique. She wore a stern expression and had her arms crossed with a hip thrust out.

"I asked you a question first. Answer me, then I'll tell you." She demanded.

My eyes flicked around, "I uh—" as a Guardian, it was imperative that we did not speak lies. They were blasphemous and marked our records with black. Of course, the Father was already perfectly willing to forgive us so long as we repented, but that didn't give us any excuses to lie. A sin was a sin, forgiven or not, and consequences were in order no matter what. "I was examining the river." I said. It was no lie; I had to make sure it wouldn't kill me if I jumped. It

had already been determined, however, that it would whisk my life away if I did such a thing.

She cocked an eyebrow, “Uh-huh. Sure. Do you really expect me to believe that’s the full truth? Gennie, you made a promise. Are you intending to break it?” She sounded genuinely hurt.

“Of course not!” I exclaimed. “I promised that I would sit out of tomorrow’s expedition. Never did I say that I wouldn’t have my own.” I shrugged, “Besides, this isn’t a head-on confrontation like Skuggi’s will be. I have my own agenda.”

She didn’t look convinced, “And what might that be?” I sighed, “Come in.”

Angelique flew in, sending scattered papers flying across the room. I lit an oil lamp and hushedly pulled out the map I had stashed in a cloth bag. It slightly crinkled as it was rolled out on the ground. “So, hear me out.” I said, pointing at the place where the mountain’s base was located. “Alvin wants me to make a path from here,” I slid my finger across the ravine, “to here. He wants the element of surprise, so entering the ravine from a side which would normally be impossible to reach would bewilder anyone.”

“Is he even sure that they’re in there?” Angelique asked.

“You know him. He wouldn’t ask me to do this if he wasn’t ninety-nine percent positive that his assumptions were correct.”

Another voice interrupted, “You’re right. He wouldn’t.”

I startled, spinning around to see the source of the voice. Skuggi was standing over me, his violet eyes

glowering at me in the shadows of his bangs. “Oh. . . hey.” I laughed nervously.

“What do you think you’re doing?” He asked.

I inflated, “Well apparently you heard. Would you please knock next time?”

He shrugged, “I was going to when I saw the light from underneath the door, but then I heard Angelique so I assumed it was an open invitation.”

I groaned then declared, “Neither of you will stop me, no matter what you say. The times aren’t as peaceful as before, and I don’t want them to get any worse. The cause of this rebellion will be found and assessed. It needs to be. If it’s because of a fault in the Guardians, or if it’s because they’ve handed their souls to the devil, we need to know.” I watched as the darkness around Skuggi’s face lifted.

He nodded, “Yes, I understand your point. We all do, and we want the same thing. But this is not just a matter of keeping the peace, it’s also about keeping you and your child *safe*. We’re well aware that you can take care of yourself, but overdoing it can harm the baby.”

“And I know that! But I can’t sit idly while there’s a war raging in the world this child is to be brought into. My mission has expanded, Skuggi. As a mother-to-be, this is not the place I want my child to be born. And I have the power to do something about it.”

Neither of them said anything for a few moments. We sat in the heaviness of my words for what felt like an eternity. I grew anxious thinking of the slipping night, and how my mission had to be accomplished before dawn. I had hoped to finish the path before the expedition. Even though Skuggi

would see it later on and figure out my contribution, he wouldn't be able to prevent it from happening.

“Whoa, it's a party in here. Where was my invite?” Neró came through the door with Vlam and Valgus in pursuit.

Skuggi turned, “It was an open invitation.”

“No, it wasn't!” I snapped, hunching my shoulders and glaring at the Shadow Guardian who had a smug look on his face. I fought the urge to tell them to go away. Now leaving would be all the more difficult. I held my forehead with the palm of my hand, “Sorry for yelling. It's the pregnancy hormones.”

Vlam was looking at me suspiciously, “What's the map for?” He asked, disregarding my outburst.

I pressed my lips together. It was to the point that I might as well begin persuading them. I began by laying out my detailed plan. It involved getting out of the palace undetected, making it to the mountain base, and forming a trail around to the other side.

“And what about all of the in-betweens?” Valgus asked. “How did you plan on getting from here to there undetected? It's a day's walk away! And besides, you've been caught.”

“I was going to ride Rene.” I pouted.

Valgus argued, “Genesis, you have got to think things through. You're normally more considerate of these things, what's with the sudden rush?”

I snapped back, “I know! I know. You're right, I shouldn't be rushing. It's just this building feeling within that's so oppressive I want to do everything I can to get rid of it. I'm anxious, Valgus, Vlam. I have three months until this baby is born. That is so little time compared to the amount it

takes to cleanse the lands. What will I do once it's born? I won't be able to leave it alone at home, or leave it with Zedekiah, he's a general! I won't leave it with a total stranger, and I can't just have Valerie take care of it. She already has a toddler that keeps her on her feet. I'm trying to think ahead."

Neró kneeled beside me. "Gennie, you know what the Father says. Leave the worries of tomorrow for tomorrow, and focus on today. Yes, we are in our positions in order to clean up this place, but He's got the reins. We can trust Him. You know that so well, but you aren't acting upon it."

I breathed out a long, drawn-out sigh, relieving my chest of the built-up tension. "You're right. I haven't been a very good Guardian lately, and I need to reestablish my relationship with the Father again. But I won't back down from this mission. I've already told Alvin that it will be done by the time he opens his eyes in the morning. I'm going to do it, no matter the opposition unless the Lord Almighty Himself orders me against it."

The tension grew so thick that it could be cut with a knife. The silence was so foreboding that not even a cricket would've dared to chirp. After several minutes of feeling pressured by the gazes of my peers, Neró cleared his throat. He said, "If you're absolutely refusing to give this up, then we have no choice but to help you."

Skuggi almost raised a voice of opposition but was cut off by Neró, "I'd rather go with you than have you sneak out the window and fall to your death just because you can't count on us to have your back. For better or for worse, we're here for you. And we won't shy away from a challenge. I speak for all of us, because surely by now everyone has

recognized this.” He looked at the four others who tried to avoid his eyes.

“He’s right.” Vlam conceded, “If it’s impossible to restrain you from throwing yourself into danger, then we might as well go as a unit. We are one, whether we disagree with it or not. I’ll go with you, Genesis.”

They all eventually agreed that going together would be better than leaving me to go alone. It didn’t quell their anger towards me, but it made the atmosphere more bearable. I made sure to stick closer to Neró while we strode through the hallways and into the courtyard. We left the inner courtyard and made our way around the side of the castle until we reached the fields behind it. Vlam called one of the dragons over, and the Guardians began mounting it one by one. I was last on the ground, but I remained glued to my spot.

“There is absolutely no way you could possibly expect me to get on *that*.” I sneered.

Skuggi retorted, “And you can’t possibly expect us to leave you out of our sight. Last time we did that, you nearly jumped out of your window.”

I shook my head, “No. Nope. It isn’t happening. Rene!” I called, and within ten seconds a cloud of dust concealed my sight. Once it all settled we could see the glimmering coat of my unicorn.

Hey there Lassie, you called?

I didn’t respond to him and instead turned to the Guardians, who looked majorly offended, “Listen, if you’re so adamant on keeping close tabs on me, then one of you come and ride behind me.”

I didn’t consent to this. Rene stomped.

“I don’t care.” I snapped back.

Geez, sensitive much? This is my back you’re getting on. He grumbled.

Valgus started, “Genesis, you’re really taking this—”

But was cut off by Neró, “You know what? I’ll go with her. The more we argue, the less time we’ll have. Let’s just get this over with and return before morning comes.” He dismounted the dragon and jogged over to me. I gave him a look of appreciation and raised the earth to form a stepping stool up to Rene’s back. Once I settled myself, Neró sat behind me.

“Thank you.” I whispered.

After releasing a giant yawn, he grunted, “Let’s just get a move on. I want to go back to bed.”

8. Fork in the Road

Silently hollowing out a mountain was more strenuous than one would expect. Making a tunnel was easy enough, but doing it without making a single sound was another story. It was especially difficult to keep the earth from trembling.

Sweat poured down my face and arms, soaking my dress. I used the end of my cloak to pat myself dry, but it didn't help much as the perspiration only returned. I placed my palms against the next portion of stone, imagining exactly how everything was to be moved. If I did it this way, bit by bit, then it would prevent excessive noise and movement. Hopefully with this method, it would keep the ones hiding underground in the unawares of our presence.

It took nearly six hours to complete the tunnel, and by the end of it, the sun was already peeking up from over the horizon. I wiped the trails of sweat with my sleeve, heaving in the fresh morning air. A strong gust of wind rushed past me and into the tunnel, whistling as it ran through. My cloak whipped back, trying to follow the air.

From my place, I could see the entire stretch of the ravine. The green foliage blocked any curious eyes from seeing all the way to the floor, but with my senses I could tell exactly how many critters were moving around on the ground.

The sky turned into a harsh pink then softened into a blush. The color reminded me of Zedekiah's cheeks whenever I smiled at him. It made me yearn to see his face, even if just for a second from afar. It had been days since we'd last had contact, which was longer than I cared to stay

away from him. My heart ached for the man who had stolen it.

“Once this is all over, I will return to his arms.” I told myself, adamant on abolishing the rebellion group and regaining the peace we had long sought after.

Remember it is Mine you must remain in. The wind carried the Lord’s voice through my ears and into my mind.

I smiled, my heart light after hearing His voice. “Of course, that goes without saying. You are the One who holds me.”

After fully appreciating the view, I turned to head back into the tunnel. When I had first presented the idea of hollowing out a path to the Guardians, they all voiced concerns that it would be too strenuous to use such a vast amount of power. However, I knew well enough that this much would not be enough to exhaust me. I was reminded of my greatest display of power: when there was no display at all.

It was during my fight against Helel. When two forces of nature fight each other, you would normally imagine an extreme amount of destruction. If I hadn’t been aware of the earth’s state during our fight, I wouldn’t have been surprised if the planet itself caved in. It took every ounce of my concentration to keep the grounds compact during our show-down. I could feel how Creation itself wanted to split apart with every collision of my blade and Helel’s scythe.

Everyone thought that the palace’s creation was the extent of my power, but it was really just draining whatever I had restored within those few weeks. Compared to that, this was nothing. I reappeared on the other side of the tunnel, where the other Guardians were standing guard.

Angelique immediately swooped upon me the moment I stepped foot outside. She brushed my stray strands of hair out of my face and wiped away dust particles, “How are you feeling?” She asked.

I smiled, “Just fine, love. It’s been a while since I stretched my limbs like this.” I reached my hands and pushed my arms to the sky. My belly bump pushed Angelique two steps back. I laughed, “Forgive me, I always forget that my physique is not what it used to be.”

We returned with great haste, as the sun was already peeking over the eastern hills. Alvin was waiting for us at the gates with the scout team lined up behind him. The scouts consisted of thirty highly trained knights. They had bloodhounds rearing at their leashes, anxious to begin the chase.

Alvin turned away from his conversation with General Millie, beaming when he saw us. “So it’s done?” He asked, walking over.

“It is.” I pulled out my map and pointed at the mountain base, “You can find the tunnel entrance at this exact point. It wraps around the back of the ravine, where a trail has been put in place for an easy descent.”

“Excellent! As soon as General Millie is briefed on the details, the scouts will be heading out.”

Behind me, Skuggi deflated with a heavy sigh. “Not a moment’s rest.” He groaned, dejected.

“Hey, I could’ve gone, but you chose to take my place.” I shrugged.

He shot me a glare, “I would argue with you, but you’re too right for that.”

I gave him a hug, smiling, “Thank you, Skuggi. I know you’re doing it because you care about me.”

“Yeah, yeah. . .” He grumbled, patting my back.

After they lined up before Alvin as he gave a quick word, they mounted their steeds and moved out. I turned to Valgus; one of his mythical creatures was circling his head, then disappeared into a ray of sun.

“Where are you sending her?” I asked.

“She’s to follow the scouts with a few others. If there is a traitor among us, this is likely where he bares his fangs, as the prey ventures closer to his den. Marianne will send another to report back to me on who the backstabber is.” He smirked. This was one of the reasons why Valgus’ chosen creatures were kept more or less a secret. They were miniscule and could travel at the speed of light so long as there was a light channel to go through.

“A brilliant idea.” I nodded with approval. In all honesty, I had been planning on following them to do my own detective work.

“Yep, and now you can come and sit with us while we wait for news.” He grinned, interlocking my elbow with his own. Vlam captured the other and they lifted me off of my feet, carrying me away. Neró and Angelique followed behind after sending off Skuggi.

We sat in the council chambers with Alvin and Leander, who had just woken up. Sitting around and twiddling my thumbs while waiting for feedback was not my style. I looked up anxiously at my fellows, who were staring at me like hawks. They wouldn’t even allow me to look at the door, much less leave the room.

I sighed heavily and sank deeply into my chair.

“Mella?” Valgus perked up. Through the door flew a ball of light, bee-lining straight for him. His brow furrowed as the light buzzed around his ear; a strong look of disapproval took over his features. “The traitor has been unveiled.” He declared, standing so abruptly that his chair flew back. “We need to go, now.” His urgency revealed itself within his words and eyes.

“I’ll call my dragons.” Vlam stood and sprinted out of the room.

“I’m sure the griffins will be of help as well.” Angelique noted, following Vlam.

“I’ll call Rene!” I blurted, about to follow the others in pursuit.

“No.” Valgus demanded. “Not this time, Genesis.”

“Why not?” I pleaded.

“It’s far more dire than we’d imagined. Demons have resurfaced.” He clenched his teeth.

I fell back into my chair, “No way. . . There haven’t been any demon cases since my wedding, why are they showing their mangled faces now?”

“I don’t know, but they’re getting really full of themselves, using people to create a rebel group.” He grumbled, “I have to go. Please, stay here.” He turned to the two kings, who were at the edges of their seats waiting for any sort of notion to take action, “Watch her.”

Alvin nodded, “Very well.” Then slid back into his seat.

Valgus ran out of the room with Mella the fairy following closely behind. I crossed my arms, various worries crossing my mind. Then a stronger, more important thought broke through my barrier of concerns. “I need to pray.” I

muttered, standing and leaving the room despite the calls of opposition from Alvin and Leander.

The halls passed by quickly as I absent-mindedly raced to my room. The only thing driving me forward was the instinctive need to pray. My Father was calling to me, asking me to come before Him.

I swept into the quarters where I was staying, rushing over to the window and throwing it open. The need to speak with the Lord was overwhelming. The sun beat down on my face and illuminated the room. I fell to my knees, leaning against the windowsill, and rested my face in the nook of my elbow.

Child. I heard. The sound of His voice was warming, yet terrifying all the same. As mysterious as He was, and my absolute lack of ability to fully understand Him, I knew very well the force of power behind the calm, kind voice.

“I am here, Father.” I responded, a tremble of excitement going down my spine. “You have called for me?”

Indeed. There are things you must do, child. To ensure the safety of My children.

“I am willing to do anything for You, Lord.”

Travel to the Meadow of Willows, the birthplace of the Guardians, and remain there for the remainder of your pregnancy. Give birth to the child there, and raise him in that place until he can walk and talk, then you may introduce him to the corrupted world.

This instruction was one that could be accepted without hesitation. “I understand, Master. But what should I do right now? For the situation at hand?”

Have faith in Me and your fellows. I will not decide for you whether you partake in this battle or not, but realize

that it is not one that is difficult to win for your fellows. Use your best judgment, child. That is what I recommend for you.

I considered His words for a few minutes before replying, “Then, I will not participate. I will trust in the abilities of the Guardians and watch from a distance. Bearing my child in mind, this is the better decision. Thank you, my benevolent Guide.”

I remained in my room until dusk, deep in thought. I contemplated just about everything: my Creator, my fellows, my child, my Purpose, the people who’ve fallen into darkness and those who remained in the light, and many, many more things. It was during one of those thoughts that the sound of what could’ve been mistaken for a gong being beaten within my ear canals resounded throughout the capital city. My chain of thoughts was broken and I leapt up from my spot on the floor, searching the room frantically.

Footsteps could be heard pounding up and down the hallway right outside of my door. Before I could turn the knob, it was thrust open by a red-faced, heavy-breathing Zedekiah, who grabbed my wrist and ran with me in tow. As much as I wanted to ask what was going on, this wasn’t the time. Something urgent was happening. . . severe enough for the famous golden bell of the Caerwyn Palace to be pulled.

While running, I took notice that Zedekiah was dressed in full armor, with his sword at the hip. My eyes widened and I nearly stopped in my tracks. *Alma!*

“We have to go back!” I shouted over the ringing bell.

“No way, it’s too dangerous!” He responded.

“I need to get Alma!” I explained, hoping he’d allow me to return for my God-given blade.

“Absolutely not! Not until things die down!” He refused.

“I can’t just leave it there!” I stopped running, pulling him back. “I need to retrieve it!”

I could see a series of different emotions on his face. He growled then said, “Fine, we’ll go together!”

I smiled, thankful for such an understanding husband. We sprinted back to my room. Alma was resting next to the spot where I had been sitting; I grabbed it, strapped it to my side, then grabbed Zedekiah’s hand. We were about to run back into the hallway, but gurgled screams had us halt in our steps.

My heart beat against my chest, begging to escape. I stepped in between Zedekiah and the door, pushing him behind me. He squeezed my wrist, telling me not to go. I slowly turned the knob with my free hand, unsure of what monstrosities I might face on the other side. I pulled it open enough for there to be a small crack, peering into the hallway. It was pitch black, which was odd since the sun was still above the hills. There should’ve been at least some sunlight penetrating into the hallway, or some oil lamps already lit, but there was nothing. I squinted, straining my eyes to make out any small detail. Then, my vision went red.

Right through the crack of the door, a large red eye was staring directly at us. I startled, falling into the arms of Zedekiah. He pulled me to his chest and drew his sword, pointing it at the slowly opening door. When the door was only halfway ajar, it was suddenly thrown open. I clenched my jaw, my mind in a frenzy. There was no earth that I could use around me, unless I tore apart the palace. I had Alma, but the opponent was unknown.

In the doorway, the darkness shifted. It was only then did I realize that the shadow was the owner of the red eyes. It was just a giant, black blob. There was no distinctive form to it. Its body began to spill into the room, and a part of its center reached towards us. Zedekiah, however, didn't react.

"What are you doing?" I squealed, drawing Alma and holding it up.

"What do you mean?" He asked, genuine confusion in his voice.

"Kill it!" I shouted.

"Kill what?" He exclaimed. "Is there something there?"

I growled then escaped his grasp, lunging at the blob and thrusting my sword through it. The blackness hissed, and a purple liquid spilled from it, soaking my sandals and burning my feet. I jumped back, nearly knocking over Zedekiah.

"What is that?" He asked, alarmed.

"You didn't see it before?" I kneeled as best as I could with my bulging stomach in order to analyze the liquid.

"No, not until you stabbed it. Before, there was only you and the doorway." He explained.

I nodded thoughtfully, pondering the reason as to why it was so. My wonderings were broken, however, when another scream pierced through the air. It came from down the hallway, where I saw another blob preying upon a horrified guard. I sprinted down the hallway and sliced through the black mass, freeing the man from its clutches.

The guard collapsed, shaking violently and frothing at the mouth. His eyes were rolled into the back of his skull. "Stabilize him." I ordered Zedekiah, who immediately bent

down to assist the seizing man. It was to ensure that he didn't choke on his own saliva. "I'm going to run around and see if there are any more. If you can't see them, then I'm sure no one can." It seemed to be the case, at least. I hoped though, that there would be more who could defeat them.

"I understand, but hey—" he said as I was about to run away, "Be careful."

I leaned over to kiss his forehead, "I will."

9. Fighting the Unknown

The castle was riddled with the black blobs. There were already dozens of people dead from the attacks, and many more suffering from extreme trauma. Tremendous rage whirled within me towards the murderous gelatin, and I smote any that crossed my path. Once I made sure the inner palace had been cleared of the masses, I sought out Alvin, who was ordering a messenger to be sent to the Guardians.

“Don’t bother,” I said. “I’m certain Valgus left one of the fairies here to report if anything happened. They’re also dealing with another situation, so it’ll take time for them to wrap things up and return. In the meantime, I will do whatever my fettle allows me.” I declared. I then turned to the messenger, “Deliver this word to the priests and prophets: Guardian Genesis suggests they go before the Father with prayers of protection. We need as many as we can get right now.” My attention returned to Alvin, “Also, King. Are you or anyone else able to see the creatures which roam about, attacking the citizens?” I inquired.

He shook his head dejectedly, “Not that I am aware of. These creatures you speak of, how do they appear?”

I answered, “Like masses of tar come to life. They have bulging red eyes which glow even when the sun does not reach them. It’s an ominous, familiar feeling.” I admitted. Either my gut clenched or my baby kicked at the thought of it. The ambience that overran that battlefield. . . the presence that had conjoined itself with Helel. It was here. Smaller. Much smaller. But here.

“Do you suspect they’re demons?” Alvin asked.

“It is as you guessed. However, I do not know whether I want these suspicions to be proven true or false. . .” I ran my hands down my arms, shivers climbing their way up to my brain. If they were demons, then that meant the devil was regaining its power. If they weren’t, then there was a monster even I was unaware of running amok.

It was odd. As a Guardian, I should’ve been able to discern such a question. However, there was an aspect of both. . . demonic and physical, emanating from those blobs. “Ah,” I said, realizing that I had stumbled across the exact answer I was looking for. “The demons have possessed the shadows.”

Alvin frowned, “What?”

“We need Skuggi.” I announced. Then I looked to the sky and shouted, “If you’re there and your ears are towards me, then please carry my request! This is my message to Valgus, who is to tell Skuggi that his element is being corrupted! Only he can stop them all at once!” It might’ve been my imagination, but it seemed like a single ray of sunlight shone brighter than the rest for a split second.

Alvin grabbed my elbow, “You mean to tell me that the demons have gotten to the point where they can possess an element?”

I considered his words then nodded, “Exactly that.”

“How did I not know of this before?” He ran a hand through his long, curly hair.

“Believe me, I’m about as surprised as you are. This is a new development, but it’s something we’re currently facing. We can’t gawk at this profound piece of information

while the source slowly eats away at everything we are here to protect.”

“You make a fair point.” He recollected himself then said, “I haven’t heard of any casualties in the city, so I’m curious as to how they infiltrated the palace before raising an alarm elsewhere.”

I pursed my lips, “That is a curious thought. We have to assume that there are multiple traitors within the castle who summoned them. Which means that I need to find the cursed altar of which they performed these demonic rituals upon.”

“Would you like some knights to follow you?” Alvin offered.

“No, I can go alone. No man should be within the vicinity of a demon’s summoning place. It can very much corrupt, if not kill, them.”

“Very well. Then please, make haste to purify this palace of such a stain.” He requested.

I nodded curtly then took off at full sprint, stretching out my senses to cover the entire structure of the palace. A three-dimensional view of the massive castle recreated itself in my mind’s eye. I carefully studied each and every inch of it, eliminating the places which couldn’t possibly have had a demonic altar. It was then that three rooms remained: one at the top of the tallest tower, one in the center of the fifth floor, and one far underground. I bit my cheek nervously; the rooms were too far spread apart. It would take me hours in order to check each one. So, I had to choose wisely as to where I went first.

My mind raced, *In order to figure out which would be the best room, I have to think from the summoner’s point of view. . . the most likely place to conduct this all secretly would*

be underground. . . but the demons began appearing towards our rooms, which are on the third floor. Then again, they could've been wandering around for hours. However, they don't appear to be intelligent, since they attack whoever is in their path. If they did that from the start, then it would've been heard of much sooner. I stopped in my tracks, thinking hard. While I was paused, a shadow lunged out at me. I whirled around and drew Alma, holding it at the ready for the oncoming attack.

“Whoa, whoa, it’s just me.” Skuggi held his hands up in surrender, nervously eyeing the point of my blade.

I dropped the tip of my sword and nearly collapsed, relieved to see my dear friend’s face. “Thank God you’re here.” I released all of my pent up nerves in a long, drawn out breath. “I need your help.” I said, going on to explain all that was occurring in the palace and how we needed to find the summoning altar.

“I can check the underground room first, it sounds like the most likely place to have more shadows.” He offered.

“Then I’ll check the room on the fifth floor.”

“I’ll be off then.” He announced, backing into the shadow.

I waited until he had completely disappeared into the darkness, “Thank you.” I smiled, shaking as my adrenaline drained. I wasn’t on my own anymore. I glanced down at my stomach, protruding past my toes, “Hang in there.”

After climbing five flights of stairs and navigating through a maze of corridors, the foreboding oak door towered over me. From it came an ominous sensation, prickling my skin. The hairs on the back of my neck stood on-end,

notifying me that there was something beyond this hunk of wood.

I gingerly placed my fingers, then my palm, against the wood. My other hand grasped the knob and slowly turned, but it was met with resistance. This door was locked. I pushed against the door, but it didn't budge. The knob was made of pure gold, so I meddled with the lock until it was undone. After I heard the telling *click* of the lock, the door swung open of its own volition.

Within the doorway was simply a black curtain of shadows, obscuring any vision inside. My heart pounded hard yet steadily as my foot slid forward into the veiled room. I drew Alma from its sheath and held it at ready, waiting for something. . . anything to happen. As my eyes adjusted, dusty, rusted coats of armor could be deciphered from the darkness; they surrounded me, occupying every space of the walls.

In the center of the room stood another suit of armor, except instead of it looking like it had been stored away for decades, it shimmered like new. The armor was midnight black, making it nearly invisible to the naked eye. If it hadn't been for the silver outlining of the chainmail, I would have probably walked straight into it.

I took a cautious step, reaching out to touch the armor. The second my fingers brushed the metal, my head was bombarded by noises. It was the screaming of souls, burning for revenge. I stumbled backwards, grimacing and pressing my temples. The screams disappeared along with the touch of cold steel.

There was no doubt. This was the altar. It had a direct connection to the realm of Lost Souls; not long ago this

particular realm had once been called by a different name: the Realm of Space. Helel's realm. However, after his execution, there was no one left to imprison the darkened spirits, so now those who didn't enter directly into Paradise were tortured in there for eternity. This was subsequently the place where demons were locked away. That is, until someone opened the gate for them to enter freely into this world. The demons still had influence on the realm of Physicality, whispering from across the dimensional walls, but they had the ability to take a physical form when brought over.

Now all that was left was to cleanse the altar and free the shadows. I advanced towards it until we were standing toes-to-metal plated boots. Skuggi was needed to purify the shadows, but the altar could be cleansed with my given Authority and the Holy Spirit's help. I took a steady breath, readying myself for what was to happen. Staring directly into the abyss that was within the helmet I said, "Lord, I come before You in order to request Your help in ridding this suit of armor from its connection with the other realm. The realm where all is against You. The realm of our enemies. In Your gracious spirit I ask that you give me the power needed to vanquish this evil and cleanse this stain." Then, feeling the Lord's spirit settle over me, providing me with the needed strength, I continued, "In the name of the Heavenly Father, the One who created this world and all living things, the One who is the epitome of power, wisdom, knowledge, love, mercy, and so much more, I declare that you are freed from the demons which possess you, holding open the door between dimensions. Let this continue for no longer. Return yourself to the service of the Creator. This bondage, I decree, is hereby broken, in the name of my Master, Lord, and Father."

As soon as the last word left my lips, the armor's color shifted. The darkness began melting away from the very top of the helmet until it pooled around the boots, then it dissipated into nothing. The armor was returned to its former glory, made of pristine steel and plated with gold. The obscurity of the room lifted, so though it was still dark, light was now able to enter through the doorway. I breathed out in relief, my body trembling. The power of the Lord was still coursing through me, imploring me to move forward and destroy every single demon walking this earth and to cut off the connection between the realm of Physicality and the realm of Lost Souls. I ran out of the room, spurred on by the Holy Spirit's conviction. I drew Alma, which erupted into blue flames when drawn, and slew every demonic shadow which had the misfortune to cross my path.

“Genesis!” A voice behind me reached out.

I spun, my body pulsing with the need to exterminate evil. It was Skuggi, who had just stepped out of a shadow.

“Is it done?” He asked, taking note of my burning blade.

“It is.” I confirmed, holding up the sword to display the power of the Spirit running through it. Though not a complete representation, if anything it was quite measly compared to the full breadth of His power, it was enough to show the world just an ounce of what He could do.

“Vlam's going to be jealous.” He pointed out, half smiling.

I smiled thinking of the Fire Guardian's reaction to my use of flames, “I'm sure he can do this much himself, no?” Skuggi returned my grin, but it soon vanished when his

eyes focused on something behind me, “Genesis!” He cried out.

I whirled around, my sword flashing, dismembering the shadow before me. I frowned, *Neither of us even sensed it coming. . .*

I voiced my thoughts to Skuggi who agreed saying, “Even though it’s my element, it managed to get so close to you in such little time.” His eyes dropped as he wrestled with his concerns, “Genesis, are you able to locate them, or do they not appear to you since they have no mass?”

I pursed my lips, “They don’t show up for me, but if I use the power the Spirit has graciously bestowed upon me, then perhaps I will be able to see the demons within them.”

Skuggi nodded, “Then try it.”

I closed my eyes and stomped my foot, feeling the tremors bouncing throughout the palace and returning. I then prayed for the Holy Spirit to reveal His enemies, so that I may eliminate them to glorify Him. Within my mind’s picture of the palace, small red dots began to appear in various places. They were more concentrated on the floor below us, where the conference hall was located.

The conference hall was different from the council chambers. It was the place where the nobles of Caerwyn would gather for annual meetings. It was curious to think of the reason as to why the conference room was heavily occupied. From what I was aware of, there were no meetings being held. My eyes glanced around the hall, seeing nothing but abandoned trays and a few corpses. Then it occurred to me: *the evacuees!* I nearly cursed myself for overlooking such an important detail. The people in the conference room were clear as day when I looked in my mind’s image of the palace,

so how did I miss them? I nagged myself about how I could never have such an oversight ever again while I dashed to the stairs, taking the flight four at a time until I reached the lower floor. I bounded through the corridors until I came across the conference hall, where ear-splitting screams could be heard.

I broke down the door using a chunk of the palace's wall and threw myself into the fray of frenzied demons. I slashed too and fro with Alma, flooding the floor with their melted bodies. The people within the room cheered for my appearance, but I was deaf to their voices, focused solely on clearing the room of shadows.

Skuggi also appeared next to me, purifying the demons left and right.

I shouted at him, "Go and purify them all at once! It's your element!"

The next second he had disappeared, likely into a shadow to go into the core of his powers. From there, he could call upon the Creator's divine energy to completely cleanse the shadows of their demons. Therefore defeating all of these monsters at once.

I continued cutting down the demons until all of the ones in the room were puddles on the floor, sinking into nothingness. By the time I was done, the adrenaline pumping through my veins had been diminished, and my arm could no longer keep my sword hoisted. The saved people surrounded me, shouting with joy and thanks. I needed to get out of there, to find somewhere quiet.

A thought crossed my mind, *Zedekiah*. I needed to find him. So badly did I want to just rest in his arms, away from the crowd, the danger, and the noise. My heart yearned to return to our home in the hills, overlooking the prosperous

fields of Migdal. The unfinished beanie I was knitting was still on the sofa, calling for me to complete it.

Once Skuggi returned, I would consider my job finished. It was now evident to me of why I couldn't join my fellows in their rounding up of the rebels. If I had left, no one would have been here to protect the palace. Sometimes, the choices which seem the most disagreeable have the most avid of reasons.

I gracefully excused myself from the evacuees, who I advised they remain in the room until all demons were dispatched. Then I dragged my feet all the way up to my room, falling back onto my bed and allowing my body to relax. An overwhelming exhaustion washed over me, compelling my eyes to close and my consciousness to give way. However, I would not give in until I saw the face of my husband.

An hour passed, and I had yet to succumb to my body's desire. It was right when I was about to lose my fight that a knock came at the door. It was a soft rap, swift yet melodic. I bade the seeker to enter.

The door opened with a swift motion, and King Alvin swept into the room. "How are you?" He asked, his concern obvious.

"Tired." I admitted. "But I dare not close my eyes until I witness the safe face of my husband."

"Shall I send for him?" Alvin offered.

"No, he will come when the time is right. He is a busy man, and I won't interrupt his duties for my own want." I mumbled, my words slurring from the drunkenness of sleep deprivation.

“Are you certain I shouldn’t summon Sir Wolfram? I’m sure he’ll drop anything for you.” Alvin seemed uncertain.

“I am positive.” I affirmed.

“Very well then. Shall I keep you company in his stead?” He smiled. At times like this, his aging face shone with the one of his youth. The face I remembered very well.

“I would be delighted, Sire.” I pushed myself upright, steadying myself as a spell of dizziness whirled throughout my head.

Alvin sat next to me on the bed and we began to chat, reminiscing about what once was, and thinking about what will be. He asked if I had any names chosen for my child. I told him no, and that I would let the Lord name the infant in my stead. We talked until the late hours of the night, which was when my room’s door swung open and Zedekiah rushed in, his cape billowing behind him. He strode until he stood directly before me, then leaned over and embraced his wife. I allowed my face to burrow in his neck, letting his warmth envelope me. Immediately, whatever energy I had restored during my conversation with my friend flowed out, leaving me with only exhaustion and immense relief. And just like that, in the arms of the man I loved, my consciousness slipped away and I fell into a long, deep dream.

10. As Time Comes and Goes

My mind was blank and my vision pure darkness as excruciating pain overwhelmed me. It was like nothing I had ever experienced before. My ears rang so that I could barely hear my own screams or the encouraging voices around me. My breath was hot, and nausea had me in a loop of wits. I couldn't tell what was happening as my head was spinning as though it were a top spun nonstop, with no sight of ending.

I heaved, sweat dripping into my swollen eyes. Tears streamed down my cheeks and my arms shook from the weight of my body. This pain that felt as though it would last for all of eternity persisted for another hour, until finally I heard the piercing screech of a baby's cry.

My eyes peeled open slowly, trying to focus on the ceiling. A blanket was tossed over me and there was a frenzy of ladies moving around the room. The cries died down as they cleaned the baby and swaddled it. I breathed in deeply and released the tension built up in my body, relaxing into the pillows at my back.

"Genesis!" Angelique whispered excitedly in my ear. I looked at her through the corner of my eyes, unable to speak due to the restriction of extreme exhaustion and soreness. "It's a boy!" She exclaimed, a smile wider than a sea was plastered on her face.

I smiled, closing my eyes. I remained as such for a few minutes before reopening them. Beside the bed stood Zedekiah, carrying the bundle in his arms. I rose enough to where my top half was supported by the back of the bed, and I opened my arms. Zedekiah gingerly placed the small child in

my embrace. I looked down at his face, pale and rosy at the same time. His eyes were closed, unwilling to open due to the sun entering through the windows. I moved the hat that was upon his head and saw that his hair was a striking blond, taking after me.

I chuckled, "I wonder if his eyes will be like yours. It would be nice if he took after his father a bit."

"I hope for the opposite. I would much rather he look like his lovely mother." Zedekiah took his place beside me on the bed. All of our company had already left the room, leaving the couple to appreciate the fruit of their love. Those who had been in the room during the delivery were none other than Angelique, Queen Valerie, and a trusted maid to the queen, of whom I had the pleasure of making her acquaintance, Lucille.

I leaned down and pecked my son's forehead, releasing all of my joy in that small kiss. The pain I had felt during childbirth was nothing compared to the overwhelming love and joy that came with holding my child in my arms. After nearly nine months of cooing to him stories of my adventures, telling him of all the world had to offer, and most importantly speaking of all the blessings our Father had given us, it was surreal to see the face that had been resting within my womb.

"What do we name him?" Zedekiah asked.

"I will ask the Father in the Guardians' most sacred place." I replied, my eyes not leaving the precious face of my long-awaited son.

The wind was perfect. The sun's warmth was perfect. The lake was perfect. Everything was perfect in the presence of the Almighty. I was in my birthplace, leaning against a

willow tree with my son in my arms. Zedekiah was with us, sitting beside me with his arm around my shoulders.

I had just received the answer to my long-standing question: what is the name of my son? The Lord had answered me immediately, His love boundless as He bestowed this precious gift upon the first child of a Guardian. My son, who had just begun his journey in this world, was named after the garden of peace, where Man and Woman were born. A garden that was long lost after the sins of mankind were sowed. Eden.

In that place, where the birds sang songs of glory, and the animals feasted upon prosperity, I gave my son the most precious gift a Guardian could give of themselves: the Guardian's Blessing. I imbued a part of my own soul into him, to serve as a shield against the Evil One. It wasn't nearly as flawless as the Almighty's shield, but it made me feel as though I would always be by his side, no matter the distance. This boy was now the first of the Blessed.

This child's steps would bring change wherever they went, completely covering the world with the Lord's Majesty. He would be an advocate of the Almighty, professing His glory to the entire universe, no matter who sneered and jabbed at him. I pulled him closer to my chest, embracing the small child tightly but without smothering him.

His life now depended on me. I would do nothing to harm him, I was determined against it. My child would be raised knowing the Lord, and filled with love and compassion. My ears would always be open to listen to his pleas and concerns, and my words would lovingly guide him. He would be treated delicately yet also like he could overcome the world.

The days flew by. One day my son was born and the next he was uttering his first word, which was Mama, by the way. Zedekiah was quite disheartened by that, but Eden proceeded to call his father shortly after. Then before I knew it, he was taking his first steps, then walking without trouble, then running, jumping, and climbing. He grew so much in just a short span of time, I began to wonder if any had even passed and I was simply imagining his life unfold. Part of me hoped that I would wake from this dream to see him swaddled in a blanket in his crib, but alas that was not my reality.

Neró often stopped by during the warm seasons to teach Eden how to swim. Angelique would come to teach him how to fly a kite. Valgus would read him bedtime stories. Skuggi would cook him his favorite breakfast: bacon and pancakes. Vlam would take him flying on the back of a dragon, setting fire to the clouds. I watched as he grew deep familial bonds with my brothers and sister, calling them as aunt and uncles. Zedekiah and I taught him everything else, and raised him with utmost care. I wanted a second child but found myself unable to conceive one; Eden would be my only legacy, which I found to be somewhat lonely, but also a blessing that I had him at all.

The times were so peaceful that I would give anything to keep life as it was. However, it finally came time to leave the meadow. We packed up our small house, which had been hastily built by Zedekiah and a team of construction workers when we initially moved here. It was where I had given birth to Eden, where he took his first steps, spoke his first words, and basically just grew up. I teared up as I walked down the short hallways, and the first tear fell when I brushed my thumb against the marks on the wall, depicting his growth.

Eden ran up behind me and clutched onto my skirt. I turned and lifted him, staring into his eyes which were a mirror image of mine.

“What’s wrong Mama?” He asked in his sweet angelic voice, wiping away my fallen tear.

My heart squeezed with adoration, “Nothing, my dear. I’m just walking through the past for a little bit.” I smiled, brushing his golden blond hair out of his eyes.

He leaned forward and wrapped his arms around my neck, comforting his mother. “I love you.” He said.

“I love you more,” I replied.

“No you don’t!” He retorted, “I love you *most!*”

“Is that so?” I chuckled.

‘Twas a toddler’s will which never failed to win over mine. He was barely five years old and was able to wrap everyone he met around his tiny finger. He was a brilliant child, aware of his surroundings and of the Lord. Honestly, he was so advanced that people often doubted his young age. Eden could already do math calculations in his mind, read the encyclopedias which I kept in the library, and use the sword as though he had been studying it for a time twice his own. He was only allowed to touch practice swords, which were essentially only sticks. However, these things didn’t change his loving, gentle character.

It was difficult to look at the bare house without feeling a flurry of confused emotions. Of course, I was excited to be near my fellows again, and for Eden to finally be able to make some friends his age, but in the time we’d been living in the meadow, I had grown attached to it. Zedekiah said he felt the same when I had brought it up to him. There was just a peaceful, safe feeling here.

We loaded everything in the wagons that had been sent by Alvin. The men who were manning them seemed weary from their long journey, but made no complaints. I offered them a warm meal, but they declined gracefully. Rene would be drawing our carriage. It was sturdy and cushioned, which would be nice for Eden.

I took my son and sat him down on the seat. He bounced up and down before getting up on his knees to look out the window. Zedekiah finished packing everything into the wagons then came into the carriage, sitting next to me. The carriage had been drawn by a different horse before, but that steed was now being used for one of the wagons. I also preferred it this way, since Rene would listen to directions without the need for a driver.

The wagons pulled past us, beginning the long, exhausting trip from one tip of the continent to the other. Once they were all ahead of us I said to Rene, *Alright. Let's go.*

You got it Queenie! He replied enthusiastically, excited for a change of scenery. When Eden was born, Rene refused to leave a thirty foot radius of him, always following and watching over my child. This made me appreciate my steed all the more.

Eden's energy quickly depleted throughout the day. By the time night fell, he was passed out on one of the seats. I pulled a blanket over him, pressing my lips against his head. Zedekiah and I talked in hushed voices. Mainly about random topics that came to mind. It was chats like these that reminded me why I enjoyed his company so much.

"I'm so happy." I said dreamily, leaning into his shoulder.

“I feel the same.” He said, pecking my head.

“It’s like everything that happened before, the fighting and the losses, were all worth it to get here. The Lord truly treasures His children.” That immense joy that had been with me for the past few years sprung forth again, pushing tears into my eyes. Before, tears of joy had been so difficult to procure, but now they came with just a memory.

“Truly.” Zedekiah agreed, stroking my hair. “I am thankful everyday for you and Eden. I hope that he can meet his uncle when we reach Migdal.”

I remembered Kierston, whom I’d only met a handful of times. He had originally started out as a knight for Migdal, but when the war against Helel had been won, he began his work as a merchant, traveling to and from Migdal in order to trade and sell with other kingdoms. He had been unable to attend our wedding as he had been in the eastern seas at the time, heading to the empire in that region. “I hope so as well. It would be wonderful if Eden’s connections grew.”

Zedekiah nodded, “I think the same.”

11. Trouble with Toxins

It was a long three months before we reached Migdal, and we still got there before our belongings made it. We would've gotten there much sooner if I had let Rene run at full speed, but since the carriage would not have been able to stand against the friction, I ordered him to traverse at the pace of a regular horse. Rene did such, but stopped only for bathroom breaks. We rarely stopped for rest.

Thus, I was able to gain important information from observing the world out of the window. Every town we passed through seemed to be living harmoniously. There were songs being raised each night, and people dancing in the square. *Peace isn't just in the meadow, it's all over the place.* I realized joyously. I met eyes with Zedekiah, whose face mirrored my thoughts.

All of that struggling, the suffering, pain, fighting. . . this is the outcome. It was worth it. I thought. Of course, I did it for the Creator, who desired peace and love between His children, but this just proved to me that all of that wasn't for naught. I looked to Eden, who had at the time been staring out the window with awe, and said to myself, *This is the world I wanted for him. Thank God. . . thank God. . .*

When we returned to our first house in the hills of Migdal, we were welcomed with a mob of people. They cheered as Rene pulled into the yard, which had been freshly trimmed. The door was opened by a guard, who saluted me and Zedekiah.

We returned the gesture, then Zedekiah climbed out in order to escort me. I obliged, placing my palm in his, and

stepped down. My body was sore from long hours of sitting in the same position. Zedekiah reached into the carriage and lifted Eden out. Our son hid his face in the neck of his father, shy from all of the eyes trained on him.

“Genesis!” I heard a familiar, friendly voice.

I spun and grinned, “Alvin! How do you fare?” I embraced the young king, who laughed heartily for the return of his friends.

“I am doing splendidly! And you, my friend? It’s been ages since I last saw you, how was the journey?” He took my hand and patted it.

“Exhausting, if I’m being honest. Eden’s a bit moody right now. He woke up from a nap just a few minutes ago, so he’s still trying to grasp his situation.” I turned to watch as Zedekiah carried our toddler into the house, greeting the welcome party as he passed them.

“Do you think he’ll be able to adjust well?” Alvin asked.

I nodded, “I’m not concerned about that. He’s a bright child who does well in any situation. And either way, I’ll introduce him to everything slowly. It would help if you brought Prince Kaius over, maybe they could grow to be friends. I’d like him to meet someone his age.”

Alvin beamed, “That would be wonderful! I’ll speak with Valerie about setting a play date. Perhaps we could bring Cosia along.” He proposed, referring to his daughter which had been born three years ago.

“Absolutely. I would love to meet her.” I said, my smile never leaving my face.

“Anyways, it’s amazing just how much Eden resembles you. I only saw his face briefly, but it’s uncanny.

He is most definitely your son.” Alvin remarked.

I chuckled, “Yes, indeed. Although it would’ve been nice if he adopted some of Zedekiah’s features, I can’t deny that he’s a beautiful child.” It wasn’t a boast, it was simply a fact. Eden’s appearance radiated with brightness, which his character only amplified.

“Eden!” I yelled out the door after my son who was running down to the stables in order to ride a horse into the capital. He was planning on meeting with Kaius and Cosia, as they did just about every day.

“Yeah, Mom?” He turned, his green eyes catching the sun.

“I love you!” I called, waving at him.

A wide grin spread across his face, “I love you too!” He waved back then turned on his heel and bounded away.

I felt bittersweet watching his back disappear down the hill. It felt like just yesterday we were arriving at this house, and now he was going out on his own. He had turned thirteen just the other day, but was held up by me and Zedekiah in order for him to celebrate with his family. Now it was time to celebrate with his friends.

Zedekiah was out running errands for the day, so I was alone in the house. There were no more household chores to do, everything had been completed by me and Eden. Instead of sitting and knitting, as I usually would, I decided to go to my dresser and open the top compartment, where Alma rested. It shone despite not having been polished in weeks.

I grabbed my polish and sharpener then went to work on my blade’s maintenance. When it was done, I set it to dry for a few hours, then took up the hilt and went out back. The

chickens squawked in surprise when they saw the beast of a blade in my hand. I giggled, “Don’t worry, you won’t be tasting this metal. . . today.” I gave them a side-eye before readying my stance. I hoisted Alma and swung in an up-down motion. I proceeded to do this same movement for several hours, enjoying the aching sensation in my muscles.

Once the sun was setting over the western edge of the horizon, I heard the beating of hooves. I stopped my training there and went inside to stash Alma back in its compartment. I then went into the kitchen and began preparing dinner. Zedekiah and Eden barged into the house, laughing as they chased after one another. I smiled adoringly at my two boys, who filled my life with joy.

“Hey Mom!” Eden skirted the counter to embrace me. It was endearing as his head barely reached my chest, so I still had to stoop down in order to completely wrap him in my arms. I dreaded the day he would overtake me in height, but was also excited to see what kind of man he would grow to be.

“How was your day with Kaius and Cosia?” I asked, stroking his golden hair.

“Brilliant!” He exclaimed. “They took me to the new library! We looked up all sorts of interesting things. There were even stories about you!”

“Me?” My smile wavered. I knew well enough that there were tales about my name and prowess all over the world by now, but I still didn’t want my son to begin worshipping me as a divine being.

My concerns were abated when my son said, “Yeah, it’s incredible how the Creator made you out of the very earth.

You used those powers to protect the world from falling to the power-starved devil.” He squeezed me tighter, “Thank you, Mom,” then buried his face in my clothes.

I raised his chin so his eyes would meet mine, “It was worth it, because I now have you and your dad.” I swiped his nose and straightened, “Now, would you like to help me with supper?”

“Of course I do.” He said energetically. “What needs to be done?”

I gestured towards the back door, “Run out to the garden and grab some red peppers and onions.”

“On it!”

I watched as he dashed across the room and out into the hallway. This was my daily life, filled with adoration. I thanked God every day for the favor He had shown me. The blessings I had been bestowed were far more than I could have ever hoped or dreamed for. Then a foreboding thought crossed my mind for a split second which soured my mood:
When will it end?

There were still people harboring ill intentions all around the globe. For the past several years, my fellows had been dispatched on but a few demon attacks. It was easy to simply hope we’d diminished the rise of evil, but with the outbreak of evil beings at Caerwyn, thirteen years ago, it was obvious that there was much more to be had. That wasn’t the end of their schemings. Skuggi had assured me that the rebels had been apprehended, including the lead perpetrator: General Millie, but that didn’t settle my innate concerns. I had the discernment given to me by the Holy Spirit, I strongly knew that something could happen at any moment, and my everyday’s peace would come to a halt. I trusted in the

Father, but not in Mankind. With the evil one still whispering in wavering people's ears. . . luring them into his traps. . .

I shook my head. It would do me no good to worry endlessly about things that had yet to happen. If something were to occur, then I would drop whatever was in my hands in order to protect the peace for my son, even if it meant giving up my own. I wouldn't allow anything to go near him, much less touch him. He was my treasure, the one thing I absolutely could not fail in protecting. He and my husband meant too much to me to not be vigilant.

While I was deep in thought, there was a knock at the door. I snapped out of my trance and looked to Zedekiah, who understood immediately that he was to answer the beckoning.

From the kitchen I heard Zedekiah ask, "What is it?" It seemed to be someone he knew, possibly one of the knights in his squadron.

The voice which responded to my husband was muffled by the wind blowing in through the door. I strained my ears in order to hear, but was unsuccessful.

"What?" I heard Zedekiah exclaim. "All right, I'll be there in thirty minutes." The door then slammed shut and my husband came into the kitchen paler than a ghost.

I frowned, "Is there something wrong?"

"It certainly isn't right." He sighed, slumping onto a stool at the center counter.

"Enlighten me." I said.

"There's an order from Sir Leon that all officers respond to his summons within the hour. I'm not sure what's going on, but it doesn't seem good." He explained.

“Should I go with you?” I asked, setting my stirring ladle aside for a second.

“No,” he waved his hand through the air as if to dismiss the idea, “I don’t want you to worry about it. You’ve already had a lifetime of worries, so let me deal with this one. If it’s something that involves the Guardians, then I’ll come for you right away.”

“All right then. Would you like to eat something before you leave?”

“Please.” He sighed. His stomach erupted in an upset growl as though it had been waiting for its cue.

I chuckled, cutting two large slices from the loaf of bread I had baked that morning. Then, I spread jam and cream cheese on both slices and handed them to him, who devoured the bread.

“Thanks, honey.” He stood, kissed me on the cheek, then grabbed his cloak and left through the front door into the darkness of impending night. I stood on the front porch in order to watch as he rode away on his red roan gelding, Sanjay.

When they were out of my vision, I went back inside to find Eden managing the stove’s fire and stirring the stew. He turned to me, “Where’s Dad going?”

“Something came up in the capital. I don’t know what it is, but I’m sure he’ll handle it.” I said, stroking his hair and pecking the top of his head.

Despite my attempts to drown it, worry kept rising into my heart. There had been no explanation from the messenger, so there was no way of immediately knowing what was happening. It seemed urgent, but Zedekiah didn’t

appear panicked when he left. All that was left to do was wait.

Dinner was quiet, as both Eden and I were doing backflips in our minds. It was easy to know when my son was deep in thought, because he looked just like me. According to Zedekiah, we made the same face when deeply pondering something. And despite his innocence, his mind was far more intellectual than one of his age. His maturity reached levels even surpassing the polished prince and princess of the kingdom. They were children, of course, so they were allowed to act as such, but Eden rarely humored his childish side. He was helpful, kind, caring, but never immature. He wasn't quick to jump to conclusions, was patient when it was evident that waiting would be involved, and understanding when either myself or Zedekiah were unable to set time aside for him. It broke my heart when those happenstances occurred. There was nothing I wanted to do more in the world than spend time with my family. So, watching as he accepted those times without complaint made me ache with guilt and sadness.

After making sure Eden was settled in bed for the night, I went outside with an oil lamp and sat on the porch swing, wrapped in a shawl in order to offer some comfort despite the night's strong wind. It was completely dark aside from the small circle of light the lamp provided. The only sound was the air rushing through my ears. The evening turned into midnight, and midnight turned into dawn. Yet Zedekiah had yet to return.

When the horizon began to brighten and the flame of the lamp had long since been snuffed out, the door opened and

Eden came out, rubbing his eyes, “I couldn’t find you.” He said. “Have you been out here all night?”

I gave him a thin smile, “I’m all right.”

“No,” he objected, “Please go to bed. I’ll wait for Dad while you rest.” He tugged on my sleeve, insistent on my departure.

“But, what about breakfast?” I asked, standing to follow him.

“I’ll eat some bread and jam, so don’t worry about it.” He demanded, pushing me from behind towards my bedroom.

“All right, all right. I understand.” I chuckled, “God blessed me with such a caring son.” I smiled, climbing under the covers of my bed.

“He certainly did.” Eden grinned, brushing my hair out of my face and pecking my forehead. “I’ll wake you when Dad returns.” He promised.

“Thank you, dear.” I yawned, settling into the goose-down pillows. They invited me into a deep slumber, where I dreamed of reuniting with my beloved. *Surely, he’ll return.*

It wasn’t until that afternoon that I finally heard from my husband. He had sent a messenger to inform me that Zedekiah would be locked in the council chamber for the next few days. I tried asking why, but not even the messenger knew the reason. I finally decided to head over to the palace myself, and hear the reason in person.

I mounted Rene and Eden mounted his mare, Nya. We rode side by side into the courtyard, where we left Nya to some attendants. Rene ran straight back out of the palace, unfond of the stuffy stables, royal or not.

A guard greeted me, which was concerning since normally, it would be a maid or worker who would escort me. “What’s going on?” I asked.

“I am not allowed to disclose it here.” He said, “But I’ll show you to King Alvin’s office. He can give you more information.”

Eden and I exchanged uneasy glances, and we followed the guard. The central palace seemed to be duller than usual, and the servants would dip out of the way when they saw us approaching. *Something happened.* I realized. And this something was far more severe than I had originally assumed. For the workers to behave in such a distant way just further proved my suspicions.

I was absolutely certain that there was a problem within the kingdom when I saw Alvin’s worn-out face. He looked as though he had aged ten years since I had last seen him, which had just been the other week. He was shuffling through documents and casting out orders to several envoys.

The guard announced our arrival and Alvin stood from his desk, rushing over to me. He took me by the elbow then guided me to the sitting area. Eden followed, taking his seat beside me. Alvin ordered the maid standing by the door to bring us some tea, but made careful instructions to send a taster with it as well. I frowned at this detail. Alvin despised using tasters when it came to poison-testing. He felt it was an intrusion on their human rights. He then dismissed everyone else in the room.

“Alvin.” I said, noticing his fidgety behavior. There was a stern expression on his face, giving me all the tell I needed. “What happened?” It was less of a question and more of a demand to disclose the details.

He finally looked me in the eye, and said grimly, “Kaius has been poisoned.”

“What?” I exclaimed, leaning closer and whispering, “When? How?”

He shook his head, “Yesterday evening in his bedroom. His cocoa had been laced with poison, but we are unsure of what type. We summoned the best known doctor in the capital city, but he claims his knowledge does not hold the answer as to the poison used.”

I held my chin between my thumb and forefinger, pondering deeply. “Let me see the prince. I can diagnose him.”

Alvin’s eyes lit up, “You’re certain?”

“Of course. In fact, it confuses me as to why you didn’t call for me initially. I am connected to the earth and all things living in it, meaning plants are my forte.” I shrugged.

Alvin sighed, his tense shoulders deflating. “In the moment, it didn’t even cross my mind. I was only focused on finding someone who could cure him. It was an oversight on my part.” He scrunched his eyebrows with his fingers.

“It doesn’t matter anymore, there’s no time to waste. Lead me to the prince.” I ordered.

We stormed through the hallways, hurrying to Prince Kaius’ room with Alvin in the lead. Eden had to jog in order to keep pace. We burst through the doors to see the curtain drawn around the bed of the poisoned prince. I opened the curtain and pulled up a chair in order to clearly see his face. Sweat beaded his forehead and his jaw was clenched. His eyebrows were furrowed in deep pain. I leaned close in order to hear his breathing; it was shallow. I then placed my hand on his burning forehead and connected my energy to his in

order to explore his body. I used my element in order to pick apart what exactly was causing him such great pain.

“Cicuta.” I said finally, finding the traces of the plant’s toxins in his stomach lining.

“What is that?” Alvin asked anxiously, holding the hand of Valerie who was also in the room, observing.

“Water Hemlock, and a copious amount of it. It’s a wonder that he’s even still breathing.” I decreed.

Their faces sank as though their hearts had fallen to the bottom of their toes. Valerie broke down crying and Alvin said, “But— but that has no cure!”

“No, not a known one at least.” I said casually.

“However, I can detoxify this easily using my element. I just need a few minutes.”

“Then, please! Please do so.” Valerie desperately cried.

I nodded, having received the necessary permission, “Then,” I said, closing my eyes again and searching his body for every hint of the poison. Each toxin that was found was immediately detoxified, responding to my element. I turned it from a poison into a beneficial nutrient, which lended to his body’s recovery.

It was meticulous work, but nothing too difficult. If they had called me sooner, this wouldn’t have dragged on for so long. I thought to myself tiredly. But if I had been in the same situation, and it was instead Eden lying before me, I couldn’t guarantee that I would be in my right mind either.

When I opened my eyes, I examined Prince Kaius’ face, which had been soothed by the lack of pain. He slept peacefully, as though nothing had ever happened. His complexion, which had been so pale it wouldn’t have been a

surprise if he had already become a corpse, regained its color. His dusty brown hair was matted to his head with sweat, but his fever had considerably lowered.

“It’s done.” I confirmed, turning around to a tackle from Queen Valerie, showering my forehead with pecks.

“Thank you, thank you, thank you —!” She cried, tears soaking her cheeks.

“Anytime, my dear.” I smiled, allowing the affection.

She pulled away to swoop over her son, caressing his face. “He looks so much better.” She smiled through her joyful tears.

“Make sure he drinks a lot of water when he wakes up. I checked multiple times to make sure I got rid of all of the toxins, but you can never be too careful.” I ordered.

“We are indebted to you yet again.” Alvin bowed, his head lower than his waist.

“No, it is but by the grace of God that I came here this day. Do not thank me, but instead His timing.” I couldn’t bring myself to tell them that if I had been a second later, their precious child would’ve been taken by the angels to see the face of our Creator. They were already plagued with worries concerning the poisoning of their son. Even if he woke up from this, there was still someone running around having attempted to murder someone from the royal family. I assumed then that the reason my husband was apprehended in the Council Chamber was due to the investigation needing to take place.

“Yes, that is so.” Alvin’s face turned to the ceiling, and a peace which could only be described as feeling the Holy Spirit descend upon you crossed over his features.

“Then, allow us to assist with the investigation. I’m sure you’re having one.” I said, referring to myself and the Guardians.

“No, I shouldn’t involve you all with this. Your bunch has already helped this kingdom so much, and y’all still have many things on y’all’s plates. I can’t accept your help.” He shook his head.

“Stop being so insistent on not needing our help and let us join.” I accused, sick of his needless declinations. “It will go many times faster if you give us access to this investigation. Besides, I miss my husband, and if I help, it’ll be gotten over with that much quicker. Then I can finally spend a moment with him.” I crossed my arms and leaned on one hip, indicating that my word was final.

He hesitated then bowed his head, “As you wish, esteemed Guardian. Then, I humbly request the Guardians’ help with the investigation of my son’s poisoning.”

I curtsied, “And I humbly accept the request.”

12. An Underground Investigation

The investigation lasted for three and a half days. We started by tracing all sources of Water Hemlock within the palace, which was easy considering the entire castle was a conjoined tree that I personally grew. The plant was traced back to a maid's room, where remnants were found in the corner of a chest, likely where it had been stashed. The maid was arrested in the capital city after she was found hiding in an alleyway, and taken to a holding cell for questioning. It was revealed that she had been one of the recent hires, hailing all the way from the northwestern edge of the continent, sent by a feudal lord in the area.

Their reasoning for the poisoning was difficult to grasp. All they wanted to do was incite chaos within the "most well-guarded palace of all time". Which, on usual occasion, would be true. Upon its completion, I had instilled commands that no person wishing to harm the royal family, or any person with evil intentions, would be allowed entry. So, just how that maid had managed to slip through my protections was beyond me at the time, however I planned to investigate it until I found the answer. I did try asking the maid, however she refused to confess.

She was sentenced to death. It was a difficult decision on Alvin's part, as he had a kind heart and had never made the call before, but this wasn't a situation where he could let the woman walk away. And frankly, keeping her locked in a dark and dingy cell without sight of the sun until death slowly encompassed her seemed far more cruel. Of course, this sentence was not decided upon without deep

prayer. Alvin and we the Guardians remained in our respective bedrooms, fallen upon our knees with heads bowed, for three complete days before we received our answers. The Lord, merciful as He is, ultimately decided the sentence of this person.

We all had heavy hearts on the day of the execution, which was taken care of silently and quickly. It wasn't held in public, but it also wasn't kept private. News spread quickly that the first death sentence in Migdal had occurred due to the attempted assassination of the prince. And when the prince awoke, he cried for days knowing that the cause of this person's death was due to their attempt on his life. However, the way he perceived it was that this maid died because of him. And no matter what anyone said, nothing would change his mind from this subjective fact.

Eden remained with Prince Kaius, comforting his friend. I returned home with Zedekiah, who had helped greatly with the investigation. He had been able to extract the known pieces of information, and was thereafter let go from the prosecution. There were now investigators looking into the feudal lord's background; though a name for him was unknown at first, they had managed to pinpoint the man in question. So, all that was left was to allow them to do their job.

I did a lot of pondering for the next several days, thinking about how tightly people's lives intertwined. If Prince Kaius had died that night, then the maid would still be running free. However, because he lived and I was able to trace the source, she had been sent to the gallows. And the reason she was in the palace in the first place, looking to slay the only prince, was because the master she was loyal to had

ordered her to do so. There was no end to it, everything just went around and around in a never ending circle. And most of the fault lied with me, whose creation was found to have a flaw. It had allowed an intruder to enter. Someone with impure intentions. *But how?* I wondered, still having trouble wrapping my mind around it. After the investigation was closed, I had checked on the palace's commands, and all still remained true and strong. So the only reason she would be let inside would be because her intentions weren't impure. But assassinating a child was, by my standards at least, considered far, far from pure.

I groaned and ran a hand through my hair. It was a mystery that had to be cracked. The only way I would know where to start was to go before the All-Knowing One and ask Him. Because *I* certainly didn't hold all of the answers to every question.

Instead of sitting around worrying about it, because simply being concerned never got anything done, I finally made the decision to go outside to where the air was clear and pray. I found a nice spot underneath an oak tree and settled myself in between its roots. The fields were yellow and the air was cool and crisp. Autumn was towards its end, and winter was just around the corner. Before long, it would be spring and the beginning of a new year.

I leaned against the tree trunk and clasped my hands, allowing my awareness of the physical world to drift away as I focused solely on my Lord.

"Heavenly Father," I began, "I come before You as Your faithful servant. I thank You for Your countless blessings, and praise You for Your greatness!" My heart swelled with gratitude. "I humbly ask for Your guidance in

this matter of which is too great for me to solve alone. It involves the palace of Migdal, of which I brought about long ago.”

I know of what you ask, and I have your answer: I heard suddenly. My heart leaped as my Creator’s voice filled my mind to its very depths. The Holy Spirit took over my entire being, leading my mind to the root of the issue. And quite literally, it was the roots.

Far below the earth, where none other than myself would be able to travel, was a small black spot on one of the numerous roots. It pulsed with every time the palace shifted, restricting its movement.

I frowned, “Lord, how could they have managed it? I made sure to place all of the protections available, so how could they have broken through the barrier?”

Your commands may still stand today, and may have the same strength as before, but that doesn’t mean that the enemy’s willfulness cannot grow to the point of being destructive enough to leave a mark on your brilliant creation. He said.

“So,” I figured, “what You’re saying, Lord, is that over the last fifteen or something years, they’ve been making these attempts in order to break through my commands? And . . . eventually succeeded.”

I didn’t hear anything in return, but that was all I needed. I thanked the Lord for His wisdom and closed the prayer. My mind churned, *They were only able to get through because I didn’t renew or strengthen my protections once after the initial commands.* It was all worked out in my mind. It wasn’t because my creation was faulty, but because it had been fighting without assistance for many long years now. I

suddenly became apologetic towards the palace, of which I had neglected. It was my responsibility to continue its maintenance, as it was only able to come about thanks to my creativity.

Since it was about midday, I decided to go to the palace and sort this out straight away. Eden and Zedekiah were already out doing their own things, so there was no one to notify that the house would be left empty. I summoned Rene and had him take me to the base of the central palace, which was where the problem remained.

I'm going to go graze. Call me again when you're finished. He notified me.

“You always graze, Rene.” I pointed out.

Hey, there isn't much else for a majestic creature like me to do. I've gotta make the bland scenery sparkle with beauty. He tossed his mane.

“Sure, go do that.” I scoffed.

As soon as Rene took off, I began descending down underneath the castle. It was easy enough to do since I was simply transporting myself through the soft earth, which had already been loosened by the movement of the roots. The difficult part was navigating through the underground labyrinth, which twisted and intertwined. I stopped for a moment to place my hand on a root and get a clearer image of the palace's root system. It was more difficult now to spot where it had been tampered with than it was while I was praying, but that didn't keep me from searching through every single root and its branch.

I looked through half of the roots before I finally found the splotch of black which was messing with the castle's security. It was on one of the branched roots closer to

the surface. I traveled upwards in a diagonal line until I came across it. It was a job which took great care, so I cleared the infected area of all soil and examined what appeared to be the issue. There was a jab in the root which leaked a purple-black liquid, similar to the color the demonic shadows had melted into.

Placing my palm upon the wound, I tried to extract whatever had been injected, but it resisted my power. This was concerning, considering it was the first substance to successfully reject me. “Does it need to be purified?” I wondered aloud. It was challenging to pinpoint exactly what it was, but there was no way it was not a demonic liquid. There was even the possibility that it was the blood of a physical demon. If that was really the case, then it would truly be a cause for concern, as it wasn’t succumbing to my element.

I scratched my neck then placed my palm upon the hole again, this time speaking with my gift of Authority. “In the name of the Almighty, the One who rules the winds and the seas, the rocks and the stars, and all living things, I command you to separate yourself from this creation of mine. You are not welcome here.” The power welled in my stomach and released itself in one big wave. It resonated throughout the entire palace and returned, pushing out the blackened substance. It spilled out of the root and pooled at my feet, burning the soil.

As I was kneeling to examine it, the liquid evaporated and disappeared, as though it hadn’t even existed. It was almost identical to how the possessed shadows had disappeared, which only further confirmed my suspicions. This was no simple matter. . . they were trying to find a way

inside the palace, and had already succeeded. I renewed and strengthened the commands, piling on even more to the originals. Once finished, I healed the root's wound by accelerating the palace's growth. Once healed, it slowed down again.

"I need to meet with the Guardians." I said aloud, collapsing the earth around me to again cover the roots and push my body up to the surface. Some guards who were patrolling were spooked by my sudden appearance. It must've been surprising, seeing a person emerge from the ground like a daisy.

I nodded to them curtly and jogged to find the other Guardians. Angelique and Neró were next to the big oak tree in the courtyard, discussing the rainfall percentages. I had them seek out the other Guardians to meet me in my house within the hour. In my dashing around, I ran into Zedekiah, who was transporting a stack of papers, likely reports on trades and crop productions.

"Hey, honey." He said, flustered.

I smiled, it was cute how he still found the sudden sight of me overwhelming. "Hi there," I tiptoed to peck his cheek. "I'm going to be meeting with the Guardians at home. It's really important, but I'll have to fill you in later."

His face hardened and he nodded, "I understand. I'll be home around dusk."

"So, you're saying that there are demon attacks going on right underneath our noses?" Neró leaned back in his chair, his legs crossed.

"Precisely." The Guardians had all gathered at my home in the later hours of the afternoon, where I told them of

all I had discovered. We all agreed that this was cause of concern, and that we each had to take more care in overseeing the safety of Migdal. Because it wasn't simply the palace that was under attack, it was just the starting point. If they could breach the most challenging stronghold, then they could conquer anywhere. Once the palace was overtaken, then they would spread to the outer palaces, then into the capital city, and from there the rest of the country, the continent, and eventually the rest of the world.

Vlam had his arms crossed and a fierce look on his face. "What are you thinking about, Vlam?" I asked.

He looked up, broken from his trance, "The dragons can help with security. I can have them guard the city's borders." He suggested.

Angelique stepped in, "The griffins can help too. I don't know where they are right now, but they'll come if I call them. They can patrol the walls."

"Then I'll have the fairies fly overhead to keep an aerial view." Valgus offered.

Skuggi raised his hand, "I don't have any creatures, but I can stay in the palace for a while, just to make sure nothing else happens."

I nodded, "These are all wonderful suggestions, but we need to discuss things with Alvin before making any decisions. As Guardians, we can't meddle with the rulings of a kingdom unless it violates the Father's laws. And though we may be friends of many years with Alvin, that doesn't mean he'll be too keen on allowing us to do as we please, when he is the monarch here."

The others collectively agreed with my statement. I had faith that Alvin wouldn't mind, considering the length of

time we've known each other, and my subjective impression of his character, but we needed to remain vigilant in how we conducted ourselves. The second the Guardians begin to act as they please is the moment our self-control escapes. I wouldn't allow a second Helel to happen. Never again.

"Genesis, you don't need to look at me like that. I don't want to die from the daggers you keep throwing at me." Neró had sunken into his chair and had even gone so far as to pull out his shield, Lafayette. Only then had I realized that in my passionate thoughts, I had been glowering at the Water Guardian, who had been seated across from me.

"Apologies," I laughed awkwardly. This was why I normally preemptively casted my gaze elsewhere while disappearing into the depths of my mind.

After another hour or so of discussion, Zedekiah finally returned home. The Guardians took that as their cue to leave, all itching to convey their thoughts with each other. I did miss being involved in every conversation held between the Guardians, but I had made my choice to build a family. They all greeted Zedekiah, asking the cordial questions such as 'how are you?', 'how's the family?' and the like. They then filed out, walking down the long road through the fields towards the lights of the city.

Zedekiah embraced me then asked, "So, you wanted to tell me something?"

It was endearing how he remembered my every word, even if it was something from a quick, unexpected meeting that was said in passing. I nodded, then sat him down on the sofa and related to him all that had occurred, beginning with my suspicions of the palace being flawed and ending with the conversation which took place moments before he returned.

When he finally had the opportunity to process everything, the door opened. “Mom, Dad, I’m home!” Eden walked into the living room and saw the pale face of his father. He frowned, “Is there something wrong?”

I had a silent debate with myself on whether I should confide all to my son. I had made the resolution to allow my child to be aware of all that happened around him while I was still pregnant, but I had not imagined that I would not want him to face those issues at such a young age. Ultimately, my desire as a mother won out and I smiled, “Nothing you need to worry about right now, dear. It’s just something that I found out earlier. There should still be food on the stove, so help yourself for dinner.” I waved him into the kitchen. Eden looked perplexed, but listened to the words of his mother. He had already been taking the responsibility of consoling his friend, Prince Kaius, and didn’t need to worry about his mother’s problems. I didn’t want to burden him further.

I stood in the doorway and watched as he pulled meat from the turkey I had boiled, and heaped green beans onto his plate. He then went to the dining table and prayed blessings over his meal before taking the first bite.

“Would you like a glass of water?” I asked.

“Yes, please.” He said in between bites. I filled a glass with our pitcher of fresh water and set it before him, watching adoringly as he ate. It might’ve been awkward for him as the one being watched, but one day he would hopefully understand my sincerity.

These were precious days. Ones that I felt could possibly be on the verge of ending. My smile faltered as I contemplated my discovery, and the implications of what it could hold for the future. Eden immediately caught my

change of expression because he asked, “Mom, there really is something wrong, isn’t there?” He was peering up at me with his large gem-like eyes. Purer than any emerald.

“It’s. . . well. . . yes.” I said finally, sitting in the chair across from him. “But it isn’t something you should be concerning yourself with yet. Let Mom handle this, and you take care of Prince Kaius. I know you’ve been worrying about him, and I don’t want you to take on any more burdens.”

He nodded, “I still want to know, but I understand. I won’t pursue it, but please do tell me one day. I don’t want you to bear these burdens either.”

“Ah, but you forget, I’m not alone in this.” I smiled, “My fellows are beside me, as you are beside the prince. As you share worries with your friends, so do I.”

My dear son, the light of my life, the one I loved only second to my Father, smiled brightly at me. He took my words and planted them as though they were seeds within his mind. These lessons that come about in everyday activities were the ones that would blossom within him, greater than any others. I had made it my mission from the day I learned of my pregnancy, that I would fill my son with whatever wisdom the Wise One shared with me. It would better prepare him for what was to come. I knew not of his exact purpose, but it had already been disclosed to me that he would be playing a large role. One that I couldn’t bear to imagine.

13. Blood in the Breeze

The mountains were smoking with thousands of firepits. I could see people working their way around the crags and disappearing into caves alongside the cliff walls. It had been a month since the prince's poisoning, and there were large steps in the investigation. The Guardians decided to inspect the feudal lord who had sent the assassin. If he had access to physical demons, then there was a high chance that he was building an army of them. Demons weren't ones who would normally listen to people, unless they were of course met with the One they feared the most: the Almighty. However, there would be an exception if this person was a part of the devil's ranks. It was basically playing with the hottest fires in the Realm of the Lost, the realm of the tortured. If you get too careless, you're toast. Or rather, disintegrated.

I rode Rene across the country, traversing it in just under three days. I thanked God for the superspeed He had blessed my unicorn with. Vlam had followed with most of the dragons in tow, leaving only one to guard the kingdom. Angelique flew on her own, leaving all of the griffins except for one, whom she had follow behind her. Valgus was zipping through the sun beams, and Skuggi was coursing through shadow channels. Neró was riding on one of the dragons, saving his energy for battle. He could've traveled using his element, but opted for the less laborious method.

We decided to climb the mountain and camp above their grounds. That way we could have a more advantageous point of view. I staked out over the edge of a ridge, observing their movements. I wanted to send a shock wave throughout

the mountain in order to see what they were harboring inside, but that would give away our position immediately. I could, however, feel vibrations under my feet. It was a constant tremble. Neverending. Whatever was down there was either huge, or there were a lot of it.

A kebab of cooked goat meat dangled before my face. Vlam was holding it out to me, his approach having been unheard. I gratefully took the stick and gulped down the meat. Mountain goat was not my favorite thing to eat, it was stringy and tasted like grass, but it was all we could find.

“Genesis,” Neró hissed from his spot on the ground next to Vlam, “Go to sleep. We can’t fight a battle with a grouch who didn’t get enough rest.”

I scoffed, “Fine. But I don’t get grouchy just because of a little sleep-deprivation.”

“Sure, and I can control the earth. Go to sleep.” He demanded, turning his back to me as he inched towards the warmth Vlam radiated.

Everyone else was already fast asleep by the time I settled down. The blanket did little to keep out the cold, so the chill clung to my toes and nose. I shifted the earth to cover me, which helped slightly. Although the ground was still cool, no wind could penetrate it.

As much as sleep appealed to me, it was challenging to fall into the trance. Since I was within the mountain, the tremors only got more distinct. There was a steady beating, which could’ve been whatever was dwelling in the mountain, or my anxious heart. I found myself missing my husband and son, simply hoping they were safe despite my absence. I had gone on expeditions before, but this one felt different.

Eventually, I succumbed to the sweet temptation of rest. There was nothing to fear as Rene stood guard, and the dragons patrolled from the heavens far, far above. They were at such a height that they were practically undetectable to the naked eye, merely specks in the clouds. That night, I dreamt of many strange things. There was a scene where a scroll was handed to me, but it changed into my sword: Alma. Another showed myself and Eden in the Meadow of Willows, where he smiled at me and proceeded to turn into the sun, lighting the entire meadow. And finally, my husband grabbed my hand and led me through multiple doors which appeared in a sequence. Once we went through the last door, my eyes opened to the awakening dawn.

I moved my earth cocoon aside and sat upright, stretching my sore limbs. I yawned deeply, having only gotten a few hours of sleep. Once the grogginess was blinked out of my eyes and my sight adjusted, I noticed that Skuggi was already awake. He stood at the ridge with his arms behind his back, staring down his nose at the procession below.

I walked over to him and asked, “Has anything happened?”

He responded, “Nothing too different from before. However, they haven’t stopped moving at all. I went down to investigate, but couldn’t penetrate through the shadows into the mountain.” His brows knit themselves together, “I couldn’t access my own element. It was like staring at my arm but being unable to move it. I could feel it, but had no control.”

Once everyone was awake, we started setting up a plan. It was our mission to infiltrate the mountain without having our presence revealed. It would've been left to Skuggi, but as he had no access to the inner shadows, that was no longer an option. Angelique could turn into air, but it would be difficult to keep herself together. Especially if there was a current going through the mountain caves; she could end up in a completely random place and wind up getting captured. That was the reason why she only rarely used that ability. Another way would be for me to travel straight into the mountain from the top, but if Skuggi couldn't get in, then there was no guarantee it would be any different for me.

However, that was our only clear path at the moment. We would've waited until nightfall, that way there would be less eyes, but the stream of people going in and out did not cease even for a second. It was like watching ants going in and out of their bed. So, I figured that whether the sun was up or down, it wouldn't make much difference. Besides, Valgus had more strength during the day, and since Skuggi couldn't control his element within the mountain, we had to prioritize the power we did have.

Climbing further up the mountain, to a place where there would be no visibility from below, I placed my palm upon the frozen stone of the mountain and burrowed down, parting the earth as easily as grass. Eventually, I got to a depth of which the sun could barely reach. Around me were the tremors of footprints as I caved next to their tunnels, letting their already-made passageways be my guides. The tremors grew stronger as I neared what I could barely tell to be an absurdly large cavern. It was as though the mountain had mirrored itself underground, except void of the actual

mountain. It was a space of countless layers and bridges, like an underground society.

I finally managed to reach this cavern and carved out a small window in order to peer within. My eyes had already adjusted to the darkness of the depths, but this cavern surpassed even that. There was not a hint of light in the vastness. If I hadn't been able to use my sense in order to detect this cavern, I would've suspected that I was simply staring at another wall. Darkness thrived here, and it wasn't the type of darkness that comes from the absence of light. It was true, raw void. It was Space.

My stomach overturned, *He can't be alive. There's no way. . . I killed him!* I took a shaky breath and tried to evaluate reality. Helel had been slain, and his body wasn't even in the Realm of Physicality. But this place just seemed to be a direct gate into his Space.

I leaned further through the window and stuck my head into the gaping cavern, straining my eyes to see what could've been below. Being so focused on my sight, I completely ignored my hearing. It had been so slight that it had before been unnoticeable. But then my ears picked up on a quiet, almost indistinguishable sound. *Scraaaaape.*

My limbs froze and my concentration immediately went to my ears. *Scraaaaape.*

My hands fumbled for my sword, but my fingers were unable to grasp it before the wall around my window exploded. I was thrown back, the impact rendering me unable to properly breathe. When I opened my eyes, I was greeted by what one would imagine death to look like. I couldn't discern its body from the blackness behind it, but those eyes were chill-inducing. There were twelve glowing red eyes

staring at me hungrily, as though its mouth was watering with the thought of tearing me apart from limb to limb.

I finally managed to draw Alma, and held it ready, but I was still sitting against the wall. I stuck the hilt of the sword in the stone over my shoulder and used the earth to launch it at the creature before me. Alma pierced through the beast's body and the glowing eyes went out one by one. I made a dash to grab Alma before the corpse went crashing into the cavern.

I hoped that this wouldn't be seen as an attack, but rather an unfortunate accident. However, when I reached the surface I found that it had been taken as the exact opposite of my wishes. The Guardians weren't where I had left them, and were instead raining down fire on the enemy, who was scrambling up the mountainside. I watched in horror as people screamed in agony as they fell off the cliff sides, consumed by flames.

I ran to the side of Skuggi, who was standing as the rearguard. "What happened?" I stressed, yelling over the noise of crumbling cliffs and war cries.

"That's what we want to know!" He shouted in response, "We heard something from your tunnel, but before any of us could go down, they started attacking us. They're in coordination with demons!"

"Yeah, I figured that out the hard way! There's a huge dimensional rip down there. I don't know who did it, but it's clear that we're here to seal it!" I briefed.

Skuggi struck a bird that was flying straight towards us. It whirled around as a gust of pure black wind, then disappeared into thin air.

I gritted my teeth as I realized that these evil spirits were strong enough to take on physical forms. It made things far more complicated than if they were simply being possessed. Though, it did mean that we could kill them without feeling regretful.

More birds poured out of the caves, flying above the heads of frenzied people. I pulled up a column of stone and shot disks at the demons, decapitating them one by one. Neró pulled water from the clouds and used that to push away climbers. Angelique was focusing on sending a tornado into the tunnels. Valgus was blinding any who looked up at him, then proceeded to vaporize attacking demons with orbs of light. None of the creatures had been called upon to fight, which meant that they were confident the situation could be handled by their own hands. I elbowed Skuggi and motioned that I would be going back down. Seeing them all fight above made me even more determined to discover what that cavern was harboring. Skuggi shouted that he'd go with me, hoping that his element would work.

I jumped back into my burrow and slid to the bottom, then ran along my small tunnel to the place where I had been attacked. I found Skuggi already at the bottom, leaning over the edge to gaze into the cavern. Despite the lack of light, I could easily discern a look of horror on his face. I grabbed his arm, but his body was stiff.

“Skuggi? What is it?” I asked.

He seemed to choke, a gurgling sound being the only thing coming from his throat. I inched closer, but it was futile. Nothing would reveal itself to my eyes as long as we remained in this darkness. I then made a decision. I drew Alma and thrust it into the roof above our heads. Resonating

with the blade, I split the stone until the entire ceiling was cut in half, beholding the sun directly overhead.

I stumbled back, gasping at what I beheld. Though the sun's light did not reach all the way to the extreme depths of the cavern, it showed enough to reveal that on every visible layer was a horde of physical demons, laying in wait. There were creatures in every shape and form. Birds of prey, kings of the jungle, packs of wolves, even a few scattered humanoids and more. It was an army.

A collective hiss resounded from the void as they recoiled from the light. The demons crawled over each other; it was like watching a giant snake twisting itself into a knot. Skuggi's face was pale, and after an audible gulp he asked, "What should we do?"

I smacked my lips, my throat dry. "I— I don't know. Kill them?" I suggested, my palms clammy. My grip on Alma's hilt was weakening as my entire body began to tremble. My sword clattered to the ground, and I clutched at my chest, crumpling to my knees. "What—" I gasped, "is this?" My mouth foamed at the corners and my head spun. My heart rate was accelerating, and my energy was being sucked away. I wanted to warn Skuggi, since I knew that if I lost all of my energy, he would be the first one my body latched to for replenishment, but my tongue would not obey me. Words failed to come. Breathing was a challenge, and my tongue was trying to choke me.

I couldn't tell what was happening as white spots danced in my eyes, but I could vaguely see Skuggi thrashing on the ground next to me.

Ssssssssooo. . . A quiet, chill-inducing voice whispered to me. *Thissss issss the rival that I did not*

previoussssly have the pleassssure of meeting before. It said, the words filled my ears and pierced directly into my brain. I tried to search for what was speaking to me, but with the darkness of the void and my failing vision, the only thing I could catch sight of was the afterimage of a glowering red eye. *I would abssssolutely love to ssssink my fangsss into your puny body right now. . . but alasss, now isss not the time. We ssshall meet again. . . rival.* And with those lingering annunciations, my body fell victim to the grasping claws of unconsciousness.

“Skuggi,” I croaked just as my vision was darkening, “Run. . .from. . . *me.*”

When I finally awoke, the stars were splattered against the black background of the crevice above. I was on my back, all of my limbs sprawled to the sides. My head throbbed, and my body barely had enough energy to roll itself up and drag me over to the nearest cave wall. Propping myself up, I tried to determine what my surroundings looked like despite the veil drawn over my eyes. It was nearly impossible to tell the cave apart from the night sky, the only difference was that there were thousands of lights in the heavens.

Releasing a long, drawn out breath, I leaned my head back into the stone and closed my eyes, trying to remember the sequence of events which had led me to slumber. It was obvious that my body had been reacting to someone —*something's*—presence. But what?

I shook my head in frustration. It was too difficult to string my thoughts together. “Skuggi?” I reached, unsure of whether I wanted to hear a response or not. If he was able to

answer, it meant that he had been able to withstand my body's hunger for energy. If not, then he was either out of the tunnel, or . . . it pained me to think of it. I had already been responsible for the death of one Guardian. I would not be able to bear another.

A few long minutes agonizingly passed by, leaving my question unanswered. I tried calling his name again, but was left once more with no response. It wasn't until I had decided to try and stand that I heard, "Genesis?"

I frowned. It was Skuggi's voice, but he didn't sound to be anywhere near me. Though, my worries were abated, and my body released its tension. "Where are you?"

"Down here." He responded, "In the cavern."

Leaning out of the now gaping hole in the wall, I peered into the cavern which might as well have been a hole pierced all the way through the planet and into space. The Shadow Guardian was invisible to my eyes, but he was clearly there. "Are you okay?" I asked.

"Well—" he hesitated, "Not perfect, but also not too bad. I have a few cuts and a lot of bruises, but the worst is that I can't get myself to stand." He called back up.

Guilt gripped me. He must've had to jump down in order to avoid my element's search for sustenance. And considering the state he had been in, he was not fit to fall from such a height into a horde of demons.

My mind instantly turned to that subject. "Where are the demons?" The only presence I could sense from below was Skuggi. All of the creatures that had been there before were absent.

My question echoed throughout the chamber, hitting every wall until it disappeared. Skuggi replied, "I'm not sure.

They were gone by the time I woke up.”

An unease gripped my chest. The other Guardians had yet to come and find us, meaning they either thought we were fine, or something had happened to them. I approached the ledge, practically blind, and jumped off, falling into the abyss. Before hitting the ground, I called up the stone in order to catch me, however I had miscalculated the distance to the bottom and ended up spraining my ankle. I bit my tongue, suppressing a cry of pain. “Where are you?” I asked, reaching out my hands and groping the air blindly. Every step was agonizing, but I ignored the pain. Finding my fellow was my priority.

“Hang on, I see you.” He said, his voice drawing nearer. Within seconds, my wrist was wrapped by long, thin fingers, ones of which I recognized to be Skuggi’s.

“You know, that night vision thing is really handy.” I commented.

“For me, yeah. It doesn’t do much for you unless I’m there.” He retorted.

“Hey, I was complimenting you. No need to get all smartsy with me.” I frowned.

He snickered, but his giggles stopped when he asked, “Are you okay?”

“What do you mean?” I asked.

“You look like someone nailed pins into your feet.” He described.

Well, he pretty much hit that nail straight on the head in terms of how my ankle was feeling. It was like someone had taken a hammer and smashed it to a pulp, except it was still whole and somewhat functioning.

I shrugged, "It's bearable." It wasn't as painful as childbirth, at least. "That aside, we need to figure a way out of here. Are you able to use your shadows?"

"No, I've already tried. There's just something about this cavern that renders me powerless." He sounded disappointed.

"Then I'll try to carry us both out." I said, reaching out to the earth. However, it was strange. The ground beneath my feet wouldn't respond. I tried again, only to achieve the same result. "Huh. . ."

"Huh? What 'huh'?" Skuggi asked, concerned.

"I can't use my element either. It worked up there though." I gestured to the hole in the wall, high above our heads.

"Then " he hesitated, "do you think this place actually has something to do with—" "

"He's dead." I snapped. I refused to believe that there was a way for him to have survived. This had to simply be a weird phenomenon. Nothing more, nothing less. I wracked my brain for a solution. I then asked, "Do you see a path of some sort? Those demons had to have gone somewhere. . ."

Skuggi shuffled around, "No, there're only walls and columns." He said.

"Columns?" I cocked an eyebrow.

"Yeah, they shoot straight up from the ground towards the center of the cavern. There are a bunch of them on top of each other. Some are wide, some are slim." He described.

"Can you take me over to one?" I asked. He grabbed my hand and led me to the nearest column. It was wide and low enough for me to grab the top of it if I stretched high enough. I climbed up, feeling my way around. It would've

been so much more convenient if I had control over my element, but for the time being, I was considerably blind.

Skuggi climbed up behind me and asked, “Do you have a plan?”

I scoffed, “If only. Right now, I’m just hoping to run into something that could help.”

I did run into something, but it wouldn’t help. While crawling on all fours, I ran straight into another column. I groaned, holding my head in my hands.

I could hear Skuggi snickering, but ignored him. Leaning against the column, I stood and followed the wall, trailing my hand along it. After walking a few paces I heard Skuggi exclaim, “Wait, Genesis, you’re going to†” My next step was over the edge and I tumbled back to the layer below. I pounded my fist against the ground, frustrated. The entire cavern shook from the impact. I frowned, there was no way that was me. Maybe if I had control over the earth, but at the time I only had just a little more strength than an average human. It certainly was not enough to disrupt the mountain.

“What’s going on?” Skuggi asked, panic in his voice.

“I don’t know!” I shouted, the ground becoming shakier and the noise growing to be deafening. Soon, columns began snapping and rocks rained down, nearly missing us. Stalactites showered the ground, one missing my hand by the breadth of a hair. Shards of stone pelted out to me, leaving cuts along my arms and face. I jumped up from my spot and scaled the column I had previously fallen from, “We have to go!”

Skuggi grabbed my hand and began sprinting with me in tow. The pain in my ankle was screaming at me, begging for relief, but I had to ignore it. My vision, despite being

pitch black, became blurry, and it seemed like figures were dancing in the shadows through my veil of tears.

Skuggi shouted something, but I couldn't hear. Then he exclaimed, "There's a path!" Our trajectory sloped upwards, and before I knew it, there was light revealing the destination. *Light*. I thought dreamily, and my strength rebounded, flowing into my crying legs and struggling lungs. When we reached just the right height, I called the stone to us, reaching my hand out and grabbing my limb's reflection. Skuggi slipped into the shadows and reappeared in front of me, helping the stone hand pull me up.

Just as my feet were pulled into the small pocket, the rest of the cavern caved in, leaving only destruction as its proof of existence. Light could barely filter through the film of dust clinging to the air. Breathing was a struggle as the particles hugged my throat and stuck to my tongue.

"Are you okay?" Skuggi coughed, covering his mouth with his sleeve.

I wanted to take a deep breath, but the dust made me refrain. I nodded and said, "Better than before."

After a few minutes, the dust finally settled. Neither of us had the strength to move. Exhaustion had crept up on me and was whispering in my ears, hoping I would succumb. Instead, I worked to stand, despite the opposing cries from each of my limbs. "We have to make sure everyone's okay."

"Agreed." Skuggi nodded. "I can go up first."

"Do so then, I'll be right behind you." I motioned to him.

Skuggi disappeared, leaving me alone in the small stab in the mountain. High above, the stone parted to reveal the bluest sky. *Have the heavens always been so vibrant?* I

wondered. After being secluded from any sort of sight, the clear sky reminded me of the purest crystals.

I ordered the earth to rise, carrying me to the surface. As the site revealed itself to me, my horror only grew. What laid before me was the worst battle scene I had ever seen. The mountain was stained red with dripping blood, and corpses were as abundant as rocks. My stomach threatened to send whatever was within it back out.

I searched for my fellows, only to realize that they were not present. Skuggi appeared next to me, crawling out from a crag, and said, "It's even worse down there." He nodded towards the edge of the cliff.

"Did you find the others?" I asked frantically. I could see traces of their elements: scorch marks and crisped bodies, flood waters, brutalized trees, and places where the ground had been blown to bits.

He shook his head, "I think they went after the demons. There's no way that huge army simply disappeared; they must've moved somewhere."

I bit my lip, "I want to go after them as well, but the better choice is to tell Alvin. I'll head back to Migdal and make a report; what are you going to do?"

His eyes settled on the horizon, "I'm going to track them down. They can't have gotten far, especially if those four are intent on destroying the army. If I can't find them, or need backup, then I'll beeline straight for you. Guardian's word." He crossed his heart.

"Be safe, Skuggi." I said, gripping his shoulder. "May God be with you."

Skuggi smiled, "He always is." Then he stepped back into the crag and was gone.

In the veil of night, I returned to my small home. No lights shone when I rode up to the porch, as my husband and son were sleeping. The only things my eyes could detect were the outlined steps and the gleam of the doorknob, which absorbed the moon's faint light. In a rush, I slipped off of Rene and dashed up the steps, flying through the front door. As I was speeding down the hallway, my bedroom door opened and Zedekiah stepped out, his hand scratching the nape of his neck.

“Genesis?” He yawned. I threw myself in his arms and kissed him. His face was hidden by shadows, but I could imagine what was running through his mind.

“We might be going to war.” I said, my voice low so as to not disturb my son's rest, who was on the other side of the house.

He frowned, “With who?”

I tried to swallow the large knot that was forming in my throat, “The devil.”

14. A Tough Stone to Swallow

The war council couldn't have gone worse. At the first mention of the demon's army, Sir Leon leapt from his seat and declared, "I will have no part of this."

I leaned over the map, holding his eyes as a ransom, "And why is that?"

He gulped hard, as though trying to swallow the intimidation he felt in my presence, "I have a fiancée now. I can't go off, fighting battles between this world and another. I'll fight against other kingdoms, for my own home, but for the world? Bah!" He swiped his hand through the air as though something smelled rancid, "I'm merely a man, how can I face the demons you speak of when you're more than capable?"

Gill, the right hand aid of King Alvin, then stood and provided his opinion, "I am partial to Sir Leon's stance, though," he turned to the general and spoke directly, "I don't think he worded it correctly." His attention then returned to me, "We fought for you when we had nothing to fear. Now that the kingdom has been established and lives have been built, we are hesitant to leave them behind in order to clean up the Guardians' mess."

I simmered, my mind exploding with opposition to his statements, but I bit my tongue and calmly asked, "And how exactly is this the fault of the Guardians?"

Gill in turn replied, "Well you see, if Helel had properly been dealt with in the first place, then the demons wouldn't have had any access into the world. Therefore, the

fault lies solely on those who had been responsible for executing the fallen Guardian.”

My shoulders quivered with fury. “With all due respect, Sir Gill,” I seethed, “Are you short of mind? Helel is not the only one who can bring demons into this world. It is by the deeds of the wicked, those of *mankind*, that summon the evil spirits. Every ill wish upon another is yet another doorway, allowing entry to evil. *So*,” I jammed my sword into its hilt, snapping the strap attaching it to my belt, “I ask again, how *exactly* is this the fault of the Guardians?”

Alvin decided this was the time for him to step in, “Now, now. I’m sure we can come to an agreement, Gill, Guardian Genesis,” he spread his hands, addressing the both of us individually. “The Guardians are a big part of how we got to where we are today.” He said to Gill, “And it is not right to place blame on the strong when it seems like a situation we cannot handle. And please, Genesis, try and understand their weak hearts in wanting to step away from the fight. We had spent many of our early years fighting, and have tasted the blood of others and watched our people fall. The tell of return to those times is daunting, but,” he then began to address every individual in the room, “this does not mean we should cower behind the shield of the Guardians. The Lord gave us all we have, and if we don’t fight for it, then we don’t deserve to keep it.” His expression was determined, and his words left an impression of absoluteness. “Then, we will leave this meeting for tomorrow. Everyone, please return to your homes and consider my words. We will return come dawn.”

I left the room steaming. I was in disbelief at how they could even *dare* to point fingers at us. *We wouldn’t have*

needed to exist in the first place if mankind had controlled themselves, but no one's going to bring that up, are they? I sputtered in my mind. I ran my hand through my hair frustratingly. Now my actions were beginning to resemble theirs. Blaming others.

Instead of hanging around the palace, which had once felt welcoming, I decided to run home. There at least, the ones who embraced and appreciated me were waiting. There was no need to blow my top here, where they only cowered behind my back when faced with the slightest obstacle. However, this was not a place I would abandon, no matter how ostracized they made me.

My son jumped into my outstretched arms, welcoming his mother with a beaming face. The instant my eyes laid upon him, all of my worries and furies flitted away, as though they had never existed in the first place. This was my greatest blessing in this world, my child.

I set him on his feet and kissed his head, brushing his golden hair out of his forehead and cupping his face. I couldn't contain the smile which came with my bursting joy. Then I wondered, *Is this how the Lord views me?* My heart only grew with adoration towards my Creator and my son. *I'm surrounded by many loving people, and am watched over by a caring God.* I remembered. Taking a deep breath, I calmed the past cares, knowing full well now that I didn't have to burden it alone.

I walked Eden inside and prepared him a glass of lemonade while he waited on the sofa. The scent reminded me of summer, brightening my spirit. Thanks to my powers, it was a simple task to make lemons grow even when snow

covered the ground. Though, in the place we lived, snow was a very rare sight.

It was these simple pleasantries that made me enjoy this life. I watched contentedly as Eden downed his glass, his eyes shining. At that moment, the chaos that was whirling around the earth was out of mind, far from my conscious thoughts. At that moment, I was only spending time with my son, as his mother.

“I’m sorry.” I said suddenly, startling my son. It wasn’t so much my suddenness which surprised him, rather the words I had uttered.

He frowned, “For what?”

I shrugged, a dry smile on my face, “I feel like I haven’t been the best mother for you. I’m away a lot, and I haven’t given you everything I wanted to give you.” My eyes drifted out the window, gazing at the glistening sea which stretched beyond the cliffs. I knew what laid beyond that length of blue, but Eden had never set foot on a ship. “I’d like to take you places, and let you experience everything you can. When life suddenly comes at you, and you’re married with a job and then kids, you won’t be able to enjoy the simplicity of exploration. I want to show you what the other side of the world has to offer. I want to give you the stars in the sky, but they aren’t mine to give.” I chuckled. The sun stamped blind spots in my eyes, obscuring pieces of my view. “You are the greatest blessing the Lord has given me. I know His heart, but by giving me you, He truly showed it.” My eyes returned to the face of my beloved child. The spots in my sight cast a veil over his eyes, rendering them invisible to me.

His smile was sweet, but sorrowful all the same,

“Mom, I don’t want you worrying over those sorts of things. I’m not a father, so I can’t fully comprehend those feelings, but I can understand them. All I want for you and Dad is a life filled with joy and peace.” He placed a hand over where his heart was, “I want to give that to you. I know that ultimately, the Almighty is the One who provides everything, but I want to have a part in it. Giving you that life of rest, that is my ultimate goal.”

I shook my head, tears welling in my eyes at hearing just how much my son, who was not so long ago just a baby swaddled in my arms, had matured. “Eden, I only want you to think about your own future. Dad and I have already given our futures to the Lord, but it makes my heart warm when you tell me of your love for us. Thank you, love.” The sunspots had cleared from my vision and I was now looking at my son eye-to-eye. His face was the mirror image of mine, except with a few features from his father mixed in here and there.

His determination only seemed to grow when hearing my response. I watched as something within his mind clicked. The gears of his thoughts reached their conclusive stance, and he made a decision right then and there. This decision, though unbeknownst to me, would be the most important decision of his life.

The next morning, I entered the meeting chamber with an entirely different mindset. My change of countenance had apparently been obvious, because the gazes directed towards me were no longer of fear or anger, but of reverence. In their eyes it was plain as day: this was the Guardian they were waiting for. The one who would not bring anything but victory.

I took my seat and waited patiently for Alvin to arrive. When he was announced, all at the table stood in greeting. He waved his hand in dismissal and we sat back down, waiting for him to speak the first words of the meeting.

“Before we begin, let us pray.” He said, clasping his hands and bowing his head. This was the usual procedure before every meeting. Yesterday, however, had been the exception. *No wonder it went to the dogs.* I realized.

Alvin spoke words of blessing over the meeting and each individual, inviting the Lord to preside over the matters of the kingdom. We closed the prayer with ‘Amen’ and proceeded with the agenda. The first topic discussed was the one we had left without a conclusion the day before.

“Genesis, have you any words?” Alvin invited me to speak.

I stood, holding my head tall and switching my gaze between those at the table. “Firstly, I must clarify that I don’t need you.” I began, receiving several gasps of astonishment and dirty sneers. “I have no need for cowards who turn their backs on the Lord’s Creation. Not when I have the Lord Himself. I can speak with absolute certainty that these demons can’t even hold a candle compared to the power bestowed upon us Guardians. However, that doesn’t mean we don’t grow weary. We, like you, get tired. The only differences between Guardians and people are from where we come, and our powers. Understand here and now, that I am not omnipotent. This body alone cannot even dare to hope that it can withstand the full force of the Lord’s element. I am merely borrowing the Almighty’s strength; it is not mine. My strength is in the Lord, as should yours.” I declared.

Sir Leon then interjected, “What are you trying to say,

Guardian Genesis? Can you beat the demons or not?"

I shook my head, "No. I alone cannot. Us Guardians cannot. However, the Creator can, and He already has. It may confuse you now, but hopefully one day this statement, this fact, can be understood. As I before explained, this power is not mine. This power is the One Above's, who formed me from the very core of the element. But you see, you as well come from this very soil. The first man was brought up out of the earth and had Life breathed into his lungs. His flesh, the earth. His blood, the water. His heart, the fire. His breath, the air. His mind, the light and shadow. You are also made up of the Lord's elements, and so much more. Must I explain further?"

Leon sunk into his seat, realization creeping upon his face. "But, we are so different."

"Yes," I confirmed, "We are. But do you know why? Because I have laid my full faith before the Lord. My life is in His hands, as it has been from the very moment I opened my eyes to behold this crumbling world. From the beginning, the very beginning, the desire to repair the brokenness that exists here has been imprinted on my heart. I have already chosen to follow the path which leads me closer to the Father. Now, it is your turn to choose. Will you follow your Maker to Paradise, or shake hands with the devil? There is no in between, whether you want to believe it or not. No hopes for a different option will be answered. These are the only two."

Silence ensued at the last note of my words. No one had the courage to argue my declaration. Maybe, deep within them, they realized it was true. I then bowed to Alvin and said, "Then, I must go. My fellows are fighting with their lives on the line, and I must join them. I will be leaving in the

morning to locate them.” I then glanced at those at the table, their faces all turned down in order to avoid my eyes. Then I left, rushing home to spend the next few hours with my family.

15. On the Battlefield Again

It seemed that my words had a greater impact than anticipated. When I stepped out on my front porch at the first breath of morning, there was an army awaiting my commands in my front lawn. I stumbled into Zedekiah, who held me upright and was just as bewildered as I was. Of course, I had recounted every second of the meeting to him, but neither of us had expected guests before dawn.

“Good morning, Guardian Genesis.” Sir Leon stepped forward, bowing.

“Good morning.” I replied, stifling a yawn, “What brings you here?”

He looked back at the thousands of people behind him, then returned his attention to me, “Battle. We are under your command from here on out. Please, use us as you please, but don’t lead us to destruction.”

I smirked, “I had my doubts, but I’m glad to see that you still have a conscience.”

He burst out laughing, “I just needed to be berated and have some sense knocked into me. My life is in the Lord’s hands now, and I’m being called to follow you to wherever demon blood must be shed.”

“Beautiful.” I said, imagining the scene of evil being crushed beneath our feet. “Allow me to bid my farewells and we will leave shortly.”

I grabbed Zedekiah’s hand and pulled him inside. We went into Eden’s bedroom, where he was still sound asleep. It made me nervous to leave him again so soon. I had already spoken to him about it after getting home the day before, and

he handled it with as much maturity as you would expect an adult to have, but this only made me more hesitant. Zedekiah was staying in the kingdom to set up the defense, so he would be taking care of Eden. However, I wanted more than anything just to remain by their sides. It was a lonely feeling.

I brushed my son's head with my fingers and whispered, "*Eden*. Eden, wake up."

His eyes opened at the sound of my voice, and he blinked tiredly at me, "Mom?"

I smiled, "Good morning, love. I wanted to see you before I left."

His lower lip trembled as he asked, "You're leaving already? I wanted to make you breakfast." His voice quivered.

My heart shattered when seeing his sorrows, "I'm sorry, my dear." I scooped him into my arms and his shoulders began to shake, "Will you make me something when I return?"

He nodded, his tears soaking through my shirt and chilling my chest. "When will you come home?" He asked, clinging to my waist.

I didn't know. This was an ordeal that I couldn't predict. I had still heard nothing from Skuggi, which concerned me. It made me believe that they were either still fighting, or their lives had already been lost. "I'll be back before this month ends." I declared. By setting this deadline, it would make me even more determined to win the battle.

"Do you promise?" He asked.

"Eden," I moved to look into his swollen eyes, "Do you not believe in me?"

"That's not it" He objected.

I interjected, "I know," I smiled and brushed his hair out of his eyes, "Don't worry, I will return."

He buried himself into my shoulder and began to sob, progressively gluing my feet to this spot. I couldn't leave him like this, my heart would not be able to take it. As I was beginning to doubt my own decision to chase after my fellows, a familiar warmth covered my back. Zedekiah was embracing both me and our son, holding us close. He hid his face in my other shoulder and squeezed us as though we were something that could slip from his arms at any given moment.

"We will be okay, Gen." He murmured, "We're strong, just like you. Our hearts will always be by your side, no matter how far you go."

My face grew hot and a tear fell down my cheek, "And mine will always be with the both of you."

It was a parting which ripped my heart into pieces, as I left a piece of myself here and took the rest elsewhere. I was already setting out on the back of Rene by the time the first rays of sunshine stretched over the fields, painting white stripes in the dark yellow. As soon as the light reached my hand, a scrap of paper appeared in the middle of my palm. I frowned, wondering how it had come to be within my grasp, and opened the scrap.

Within the crinkles read, *NORTH EAST*. It took little time for me to realize that this was sent by Valgus through his fairies. I now had a general direction, but reaching them was another story, especially with an entire army riding behind me. I chewed on the inside of my cheek, trying to figure out how to get all of us there in a short amount of time. The only solution which came to mind was using the giant sky ship, however there were not enough dragons to carry it.

An ear-splitting roar cut through the air, drawing my eyes to the sky. As though they knew it was the perfect time to show, the remainder of Vlam's dragons soared over our heads, down to where the ship was waiting for its next use.

Overwhelming joy seeped into my smile and I pointed Rene in the direction towards the cliffs. He immediately knew what to do and began running before I could even get a word out to Sir Leon. Hopefully they would follow me on their own. "Praise God!" I shouted as the wind lifted me higher on Rene's back. This was the way! The solution I had desperately needed! The chill of the morning numbed my face, but it held no importance to me. My fellows wouldn't need to fight without me anymore.

It was a quick process to get all of the soldiers onto the ship. I ran to the dragons who were already waiting in their respective positions and asked them, "Please, take us to your master." They shuffled their wings and sprang into the air, knocking me flat onto the deck from the rushing of air. The dragons clearly felt the urgency, as they flew faster than I had ever seen them fly. I placed my hand on Alma, which was strapped around my waist. This blade was to be put into use once again, in battle.

It was a massacre. The damage dealt by the Guardians was immense, having completely dug out an entirely new ravine which was filled with demon corpses. The disaster stretched for hundreds of miles, eventually leading us to the cause of this mess. The fight was still raging, with the ferocity of both sides refusing to give way. The Guardians seemed to have acquired more forces, as there was now another army in the mix, waving colors of blue and

yellow. My fellows were in the center of the fiasco, their elements revealing their positions. There was a hurricane being sent through the demonic forces by Neró and Angélique, the enemies were being vaporized by Valgus' light rays, Skuggi was shrouding them all in darkness, leaving them stumbling like blind mice, and Vlam was burning them from the feet up.

The dragons settled the ship a league's distance from the fight, as to keep it from getting damaged. The horses were released from the stalls below and the knights readied for battle. I shouted, "Whether we win or die, we fight for the Lord!" A resounding cheer followed and I swung myself onto Rene, brandishing Alma and raising it high above my head, the blade catching the light of Vlam's flames, "FOR MIGDAL! FOR THE GUARDIANS! FOR OUR GOD!" Rene spun to face the lowering ramp, "Say your prayers now, because this will probably be the ugliest fight you've ever seen." I said, quickly uttering a prayer myself. "Lord, step onto this field with us, for we need Your protection."

I heard the Father's response within the recesses of my mind, *Fear not, for I am here.*

That was all I needed in order to allow Rene to take the first step, then the next, and before I knew it, we were thundering towards the frenzy.

The chaos was unwelcome towards the new arrivals. It did all it could to push us away, with torrents of wind barricading the outskirts of the fighting. It was simple enough for me to get through, but my knights found it challenging. I threw up a wall of stone to break the wind, allowing them just enough time to stream into the battle's domain.

Rene pushed deep into the core of the clash. I struggled to cut down all of the demons flying at me from all directions. It seemed that no human enemies remained; they had likely either been slain at the mountains or left behind by the forces of evil.

There was so much commotion that it was difficult for my eyes to follow. My body kept sustaining slashes and hits, but I couldn't track the causes. Instead, I slashed Alma in an arch and dismembered several demons, who either dissolved into goo or remained a corpse.

Somehow, through all of the bodies flying everywhere and rubble being tossed around, Valgus spotted me. From his place high above the ground, he sent a beam and vaporized all of the enemies around me, allowing me to catch my breath. I raised my sword to him in thanks, and he gave me a thumbs-up in return. Looking at him, it was easy to tell that he was worn out, but his energy didn't falter.

I pointed Alma at the ground and resonated with the blade. My powers coursed through my veins and into the tip of the sword. The earth responded to my surge, rising at my will. The ground rippled, hindering the enemy forces. They either stumbled in their movements or hunkered down to keep their balance. It made it easier to run through their ranks and decapitate them by the masses.

An explosion further ahead sent earth and demon bodies soaring, filling the air with dust and the burning smell of flesh. My ears rang from the sound, and my head spun. The source of the explosion must've been Vlam, because the overwhelming scent was of incinerated demon carcasses. The enemies halted from the disruption. The

Guardians' simultaneously picked up on this opportunity and leapt on it. We pushed with more ferocity than ever before, completely wiping a quarter of their forces. It didn't take much longer for the demons to regain their vigor and push back.

My body was moving by itself at this point, for my mind had completely left me. I was simply an observer, watching from what felt like another world. My senses had dulled but my blade remained as sharp as ever.

The fighting lasted throughout the rest of the day and persisted through the night. By the next morning, our forces pulled back for a much needed rest, however the Guardians had to continue. If we left the field, then the battle would only follow us. We couldn't allow the demons to attack our people while they were recuperating, so we defended them despite our waning energy.

I dug a trench which Neró filled with whirlpools. Angelique had the wind circling the demons, so they had trouble leaving a certain area. Vlam, Valgus, and Skuggi had gone with the knights as a last form of defense and also to rest for a few moments.

We held our posts for two more days, but then Angelique's wind broke. Her powers had been drained, and her body collapsed. I wanted to take her to a safer place, where neither she could be hurt nor could she hurt others, but as soon as I was within fifty feet of her, my breath was suddenly whisked away. I fell to my knees as my organs began to malfunction. All of the air had been sucked out of me, and the area around Angelique was devoid of it. Neró had to grab my foot and drag me out of Angelique's area.

Thankfully, I had been on the very outskirts, so it was a simple rescue mission.

However, my saving was far from what either of us should've been concerned about. Since Angelique's wind broke, it meant that the demons were free to rampage as they pleased, and since one Guardian was incapacitated and three were not present, it meant they would have the upper hand against both Neró and I. The most I could do in this situation was hope that they were tired from trying to break through the wind barrier and give the fight my all.

The first signs of the demons' advance were the birds. They flew over our heads and cawed as though to mock us of our forthcoming demises. I drew Alma and stabbed it into the ground. A wall of stone lined our side of the trench, stretching even further beyond it. My stomach churned with unease and queasiness. Neró began to build up a column of water which surrounded the both of us. As soon as it reached the clouds, he compressed it and suppressed its desire to expand. The column was broken into half and kept on either side as water orbs, swirling with the crystal clear liquid.

There wasn't much else we could do in order to prepare while also minimizing the amount of power we used. I muttered a quick and deep prayer, asking for the Father's ultimate protection. As soon as I closed my prayer, the black silhouette of a man appeared at the top of my wall, the sun an ironic halo around his figure.

Neró had a wry smile as his thoughts mirrored my own, "When this is over, I want to see Eden." He demanded.

I nearly laughed, "I'll invite you over for dinner, how does that sound?"

“Can you make that squash casserole, like last time?”
He asked.

“I’ll add extra cheese, just for you.” I replied.

He perked up, “Really?”

I nodded.

“Then I definitely can’t die here. Make sure the cheese is a little crispy, that’s how I like it.” He said.

I was about to reply, but a chilling *SCRAAAAAPE* cut off my words. The stone wall began to tremble as more scrapes sounded, and then pounding ensued. A metallic *shing* sounded as Neró’s shield spiraled out of a golden band on his wrist. The band had never been removed ever since he was given the shield; it was usually hidden by a sleeve or leather bracelet.

My eyes trained on the wall. There was no point in reinforcing it as the stone was already crumbling. It was only a matter of time before they broke through. I held Alma at ready, and finally the wall came crashing down. On the other side of the rubble stood a mass of demons. It was a foreboding sight. All fear instantly vanished, and I felt like doubling down in laughter. It was a ridiculous sight; two against thousands.

Sorry, Eden. I thought. Mom might be a bit late.

16. Help from the Heavens

It was a stand-off. Neither party would make the first move. This was confusing to both me and Neró; the demons had thousands at their disposal, and there were only two of us. We were completely on the defense, so why were the demons biding their time?

Have they been exhausted? I wondered. However, that evidently wasn't the case. They still had enough energy to swim straight through whirlpools, which kept churning thanks to Neró. But they would not attack.

“What’s going on?” Neró gritted his teeth.

I flexed my hand which held my sword. It had gotten to the point where I had to rest the blade’s tip on the ground. “I don’t know. . .”

We remained still for what felt like hours, until finally one demon possessed by either bravery or stupidity stepped forward, and was instantly smote by a burning arrow. I frowned, neither Neró nor I had a bow, much less a quiver of fiery arrows. We locked eyes and continued to look over our shoulders. What we beheld was something far more incredible than the word incredible itself.

Angels of all ranks filled the sky behind us, wielding their holy weapons. All I could do was gape with awe, my jaw slack from amazement. They weren’t just big in quantity, but also in size. In fact, they were gigantic; some were taller than even the tallest towers of the Migdal Palace. Their wings stretched far and wide, and they completely rewrote the horizon, making it invisible beyond their bodies.

My question had been answered; this was why the demons didn't dare advance. It was amazing that they even remained where they stood, rather than fleeing. My energy soared, replenishing itself with a spirit of confidence. Neró and I weren't alone. Not in the least of it. In fact, now our numbers far outmatched the demons'.

The veil over your eyes has been lifted. A voice, strong and calm, echoed throughout the battlefield. *I have never been far, you have only been blind.* He said gently. I nearly melted from relief and realization. The army standing behind me wasn't just of men and my fellows, it was far greater and vaster than even my greatest imagination.

I locked eyes with the nearest angel, a seraphim. I bowed my head to the one who served the Lord's hands and feet directly, and the angel regarded me in the same manner. It was an interaction I had only dreamed of; one that couldn't even take place during my great battle in the Realm of the Lost. The Lord sent his closest aides to assist me in this war, it would be the most overwhelming victory one could ever hope to experience.

The angel raised his spear, and the rest of the angels drew their weapons. He then pointed it towards the army of demons, merely a speck of dirt on a clean slate when compared to the plethora of angels, and the rest followed by hurling arrows, spears, swords, axes, and more at the horde. Screeches and shrieks lit up my ears as the enemies melted from the weapons of the Holy Arsenal. They didn't simply turn into goo and disappear, but they completely evaporated away, leaving no trace that they had once existed.

"Wow." Neró gasped, his eyes glued to the massacre.

The angels continued to fire until the very last demon, a rat which squealed in fear as thousands of arrows flew straight towards it, was slain. I turned towards the angels, who were celebrating their victory, and said with my absolute respect, "Thank you."

They raised their wings in response and one-by-one disappeared, leaving behind a won battle and a memory which would remain with me until the last of my days.

Not long after the exit of the angels, the remaining army and rest of the Guardians reunited with us. Valgus explained that they wanted to rush over as soon as they heard the wall fall, but had been stopped by the sight of the angels. Apparently, the men had also borne witness to the sight of the thousands of heavenly servants taking over the skies.

Poor Angelique had been unconscious throughout the entire ordeal. When she finally awoke and was told of what had happened, she cradled her knees in despair. "Oh, how I would live only to see that once!" She cried out.

Since the battle was over and we had claimed victory, we quickly rallied up the troops and returned to Migdal on the flying ship. The troops which had followed the other Guardians were from the kingdom of whom's territory we had fought. The king quickly lent a helping hand when he caught wind of the situation, as he surely wanted to curry favor with Migdal, the rising powerhouse of the south.

We returned in the cover of night. The capital was quiet with only a few people running about. Word of our victory had yet to be delivered to the kingdom, so there was no welcome waiting at the docks. The soldiers filed off of the ship and dragged themselves to the barracks, where they'd

pass out until the sun rose. I invited the Guardians to my home, of which they all obliged.

Zedekiah and Eden woke up to find six adults passed out in the living room, but they were ecstatic nonetheless. I was smothered by both my husband and son, who showered me with their love. “Thank you for coming home.” Eden said with teary eyes.

I brushed his hair out of his face and smiled, my heart filling with jubilation, “Of course.” I said.

The Guardians danced around us, making adoring comments about Eden. Angelique held her forefinger and thumb about an inch apart, “I remember when you were *thiiiiiiiiiiiiis* small! You’ve grown so well. As to be expected of Genesis’ child.” She said with an air of delight.

Vlam placed his giant palm upon the head of my son, “I look forward to the day where we see eye-to-eye. Be sure to eat well until then.” He teased.

“No way, I’m going to be way taller than you!” Eden poked back.

“Ha! It won’t be hard to do that.” Neró, who was about a centimeter taller than Vlam, exclaimed. “Isn’t that right, short stuff?” He raised his elbow to rest on Vlam’s shoulder.

Vlam scoffed, “Sure, just wait until he has to bend down to look at the both of us.”

Skuggi and Valgus only laughed. They both had several inches on both Vlam and Neró, so they watched in amusement rather than making any comments.

That day was filled with merriment and comfort. I was surrounded by the people I loved and held dearest. My

joy knew no bounds. I closed my eyes and silently thanked my Lord for these blessings.

We were summoned to the palace the following day. Alvin held a banquet for the returning knights and pulled us Guardians aside for an impromptu meeting. He wanted to know what exactly had happened and what our predictions for the situation were.

I recounted everything down to the smallest detail. He was mesmerized by the idea of having a visual encounter with a myriad of angels. However, his trance was broken when I told him of what I expected would happen.

“This isn’t the end of them.” I said.

Alvin leaned back in his chair, “Meaning?”

I shook my head, “There will be more battles like this to come. I don’t know who exactly is opening such large gates in this world, but as long as that person remains, it will only continue. The Realm of the Lost has an arsenal of demons at its disposal. We will have to do more scouting missions than ever before.” I sighed. “This isn’t an affair which involves just the Guardians, or just Migdal. It involves the entire world. No individual will be spared from the chaos if we allow it to run rampant.”

Alvin stroked his chin, “Then what do you suggest?”

I leaned forward, “Mobilize the treaty. Ask for assistance from wherever we can get it. Tell them the situation, and set up an efficient communication system. Let’s bring this darkness out into the light.”

He nodded, “I understand. Then, I will do that immediately.” He called in Gill, his aide, and instructed him to write up a letter of utmost importance to send to those involved in the treaty. The other Guardians brought up some

points, such as the locations which needed urgent surveillance, and the places which would need fortified security.

When the meeting was dismissed, I caught Alvin just as he was about to leave. “A word, Your Majesty.”

He turned to me, confused, “What happened to just calling me Alvin?”

“I have a favor to ask of you.” I said gravely.

He picked up on my sincerity and nodded, “Speak, then. What can I do for you?”

“If anything happens to both me and Zedekiah, or we are ever absent at the same time, then please take care of Eden. I know that my husband cannot remain here forever to watch over our son. He is a knight and will likely be called to duty. So, in that instance, please take my child under your wing. He means more than the world to me, and I wouldn’t have him staying alone.”

“I understand.” He said, “It would be my pleasure to watch over Eden, he is already like another son to me and is as good a brother to Kaius and Cosia as any. But please, don’t let this assurance keep you from taking proper care of yourself. Just because he is in my hands does not mean his need for you ceases. Every boy yearns for his mother.”

I smiled despite myself, “I know, but I don’t know when my journey will end. The Lord can call me home at any given moment, so I just want to prepare something. . . even if it never takes fruit and becomes whispers lost in the wind. All I need is the reassurance that he will be kept safe.”

“My home is yours, and that hospitality extends to Eden. Even if this castle were just a shack, and I was not a

king but a peasant, my answer will remain the same. Eden will always have a place in our family, whenever he needs it. As do you, the Guardians, and Sir Zedekiah.” Alvin said graciously.

My heart was at ease, “Thank you. Truly, thank you.”

Time from then on seemed to pass undetectably. Things got worse, then they got better, then they got worse again. It was a constant yo-yo of things looking up and down. The only moments where I found any peace were those when I either spent time with the Lord or with my family and friends. I found my ultimate peace when I was in the presence of all at once.

Zedekiah and I were teaching Eden swordsmanship, as he had pleaded for it. “I can protect you!” He had said, urging that we allow him to lift a blade. We weren’t just going to squander his determination, so on his fourteenth birthday we bought him a sword. However, he wouldn’t be able to use it unless he first mastered the wooden sword. It was an incentive to give it his all, and a reward for when he achieved a certain proficiency.

It was wonderful quality time with my family when we all exercised together, bonding through blood and sweat. These lovely times were on a seesaw with bloody battlefields and days without rest. My body was pushed far past its limits several times, yet the persistence of the demons never ceased. Waves of them continued to break through the barrier between the Realm of Physicality and the Realm of Lost.

At times I fought beside Zedekiah, who had been ordered to take the fields, and other times it was just me. Most of the time, however, I stood beside my fellows. My

brethren. They held me up when I fell down, and I covered their backs when they stooped over. Our coordination was impeccable. Infallible, even. But it was never enough. Our formations would be broken through and we'd see the slaughter of noble knights, who spent their last moments in a place of horror, with fear being their last feeling before they passed.

There was a time where Zedekiah was injured so badly that he had to be urgently ushered back to Migdal, where he would be treated. It took a month for any news of his recovery to reach me. The time in between had been the most hair-pulling, heart-wrenching, anxiety-inducing days of my life. With the last sight of my husband being him covered from head to toe in his own blood and his eyes glazed over, only hope for his strength could pull me through those battles.

When one was won, we would return for rest, only to hear that another explosion of demons was happening on the completely opposite end of the continent. It led us to question whether or not they had a goal. They would appear in the most random of places, so there was no pattern to follow. What was their motive? It would make sense if it were only for destruction, but every group we came across was heading north. But to where?

While we, the Guardians, held our own private meeting to discuss this, we went over several possibilities. One was that their sole reason for being in those areas was because of their thirst for destruction, no matter where they were. Another was that it was because people summoned them there, either on purpose or by accident. And finally, being the most fearful of all if it were to be true. "What if

they're trying to find our birthplace?" Valgus asked, his eyes bright with stricken concern.

Our bodies were seized with an ice-cold grip of dread. It was the only explanation as to why they kept moving north, where our meadow lay.

"But what about their locations? There's no reason for them to appear in those places if they're trying to get to our meadow." Angelique reasoned.

Neró interjected, "Remember, the demons have no way to come into this realm without an opening. If there isn't a door, then they can't enter."

"So you're saying," Vlam started, "that there are people summoning them there."

Neró nodded, "That much is obvious, but what I'm trying to get at is that the summoners have no idea as to what the demons are trying to do. That's why they're just bringing them in at random places."

"That unfortunately makes perfect sense." Skuggi groaned, running his hands down his face. "We need to secure the meadow, then."

"But how?" Valgus asked. "We don't want anybody knowing where it is. The only people outside of the Guardians who have been allowed to enter the meadow are Eden and Zedekiah."

"And the movers." I interrupted.

Angelique then asked, "Well sure they got pretty close, but did they go into the meadow? Your house was just on the outskirts of it."

"No they didn't, but just being on the outskirts is enough to know the location. Thankfully, Alvin had them sign a waiver of silence, so they will not speak of the meadow

whatsoever. They're supposedly trustworthy, but I have my doubts. I only fully trust the Lord." I said.

"Wise words, Genesis, but this *is* a cause of concern." Skuggi laced his fingers. "Clearly, the demons already have an idea of where the meadow is, if they don't already know its exact place. How, though? Well, either someone who summoned them fed the demons knowledge through a gate, or the demons found out through other means. Such as. . ." He cut his words there.

"But he's dead." Neró pointed out. "He isn't alive in either the Realm of Physicality *or* Realm of Lost. He's definitely not in the Heavens."

"But what if that's just what he wants us to believe?" Skuggi ventured.

"But I felt it, Skuggi." I said, placing a fist over my chest, "My blade slid clean through his ribcage, and pierced his heart. He was filled with the power of Judgment, and for his sins was executed. The Space Guardian exists no more." My words were solemn, but my heart beat steadily. There was no lie.

"Yes, the Guardian of Space is gone. But Helel called himself by another name— ah, what was it? Anyways, my point is that at that time, he wasn't simply Helel, or just the Guardian of Space. Something had happened to him." Skuggi explained.

"And you're telling us this now?" Angelique exasperated.

"Well, I didn't think much of it until now. I have also lived believing in the death that we ourselves witnessed, but

with the recent events, I can't leave out any possibilities.” Skuggi said.

“Then. . .” Vlam paused, “what do we do? We can't all be in two places at once, and it's dangerous to split up. There's no telling what'll happen in either Migdal or the meadow.”

Angelique then suggested, “What if we station some fairies up there to keep an eye on things? They can get anywhere in a split second, so it would be the fastest way to pass information.”

Valgus responded, “Yes, but there's an oversight. They can only use light to travel. What if something happens at night? Then the meadow could be wrecked and we wouldn't have the faintest of clues.”

I stroked my chin, “What if I return up north to live in my old house for a while? I could have a few fairies stay with me, and I would have Rene, who is the fastest animal walking this planet. If something happened then I could send him over immediately.”

Angelique argued, “No way. We aren't sending you to a battlefield on your own! What if something happened to you and we couldn't make it on time?”

I shrugged, “I'm confident that I'd be able to fend them off until you all reached me. It's not like I'm defenseless. Of course, I'd much rather have everyone there with me, but I am still worried that something could happen at Migdal.”

Vlam then asked, “But what about Eden and Zedekiah? Are you just going to leave them?”

“Of course not. I’ll discuss everything with them and allow them to make their own decisions. If they would rather stay, then I won’t stop them.”

“And if they follow?” Neró crossed his arms.

I didn’t want to think of that scenario. Taking my family to a place that was a magnet for the demonic forces? As if. However, I answered, “Then it will be so.” As much as I wanted them to remain in safety, I also selfishly didn’t want to be parted from them.

Neró groaned, “If you’re so adamant on going, then I’ll join you. The sword and shield should stick together.” He gave me his little sideways smile as he lifted his wrist with the golden band, which would spiral out into an impenetrable shield at his word.

“I won’t attest to that.” I leaned back, crossing my arms.

Skuggi flicked a stick that he had been fiddling with away, “I’ll patrol then. My Shadows are quite convenient for these sorts of things.”

Angelique perked up, “I’ll do that too. It’ll be easier to see everything from a bird’s eye view.” She pointed up.

Skuggi nodded, “We can start from opposite sides of the land and meet in the middle.”

“I suppose that leaves me and Vlam to watch over the kingdom.” Valgus said, locking eyes with the Fire Guardian. They seemed to have an unspoken agreement and settled on that.

“Then, I guess I have to talk to my family tonight.” I laughed nervously.

17. Eden

The talk had gone better than I had expected. Although the results were not what I had wanted, they were what I had secretly been hoping for. Zedekiah and Eden had immediately demanded that I take them along, which I opposed to at first. That was a mistake. In the end, they managed to convince me that it would be better for them to be with me than left behind. Truthfully, it didn't take much bargaining as I already was not keen on being separated from my family.

As soon as things were settled, I brought this before Alvin, who agreed to our leave. We packed what we deemed would be needed and left the rest behind, packing as lightly as we could. Other things could be bought further up north, when we got closer to the meadow. For now, we mainly had what we needed for the trip.

Rene would be pulling a one-horse carriage, since he was strong and swift enough to do so. All of our belongings could fit in one trunk, which was fastened to the rear of the carriage. The wonderful thing about having a unicorn that understood your thoughts and obeyed your every command was that there was no need for reins nor a driver.

We loaded ourselves into the carriage and left in the dead of night with a small send-off of the royal family and the Guardians, hoping to reach the neighboring kingdom by dawn. The carriage had been reinforced to withstand a lot of Rene's force, but it still hindered my steed's movements.

It took about a month for Rene to reach the northernmost kingdom of the continent, which we briefly

stopped in to buy essentials for our home. The weather was much cooler than it was down south in Migdal, so we purchased some parkas to keep ourselves warm. It took another two days for Rene to make it to our small house on the outskirts of the meadow. We arrived at midnight, so I lit an oil lamp and we made our ways inside. Rene left to find rest in the meadow as soon as he was unhitched from the carriage.

We settled in fairly quickly, as there was barely any unpacking to do. Our old beds were still here, except Eden's was far too small to fit him. He opted to sleep on the couch and Zedekiah offered to build him a new one the next morning.

I kissed Eden's forehead as he nested on the couch and found Zedekiah waiting in the bedroom. I rested Alma against my nightstand and slid underneath the covers. Zedekiah moved closer until we were right next to each other and wrapped his arms around me. In the warmth of my husband's embrace, I fell into a deep sleep.

The days spent in the meadow felt like the calm before the storm. Despite the bliss, there was always an impending feeling of doom leaning over my shoulders. Neró had arrived two weeks after us, since he had to finish up several things before coming. He had claimed that there were no sightings of demons on his way up, but that didn't ease my nerves.

Weeks passed like this, and those weeks turned into months. The wanting to look over my shoulder was always imminent, pressuring me to become a nervous wreck. I steeled myself, however, and instead only trained harder. I

would spar with Neró and Zedekiah at times, and then I would take whatever I had learned and teach it to Eden. My son was quick to pick up on the art of sword fighting, and was finally allowed to use his own sword. He had always been a swift learner, but it was as though he had been born with a blade for an arm. It seemed like second nature to him.

These months passed with no word from any of the other Guardians. It made me uneasy to think of what could be transpiring. I would rather hear from them than not. It would give me a reason to settle myself and actually relax. Neró and Zedekiah shared my sentiment. They were both unsettled by the silence.

It wasn't until a full year of no word that a note suddenly fell into my palm as I was instructing Eden on his stances. I quickly unraveled it and read the blotted lines on the crinkled paper: *Set up defenses. They're coming.*

My heart palpitated and my mind raced. *Who? When? Where? What do I do?* I felt like a lamb that had lost its way, with no sense of direction. If the demons were all of a sudden making an unwelcome visit, then what had been going on for the past year?

I ran into the house where I found Neró lounging on the sofa and showed him the note. He was on his feet in an instant, "I'll take care of it. You stay here with Zedekiah and Eden. If they get through all of us, then it'll be up to you. And if even you're beaten," he let out a sharp breath, "then it'll all be up to God."

I nodded, "Be careful, okay? I don't want to see a single demon get past you." I smiled nervously.

He pulled me into an embrace, “I’ll do my best. The others have been working hard, but now it’s our turn to step into this fight.”

Neró left just an hour later with a pack of food slung across his back. I lent him Rene for quick transportation. My heart dropped as his back disappeared in the horizon; when would be the next we meet? It had been so nice to have one of my fellows constantly next to me, but now they were all putting their lives on the line. I could not afford to disappoint.

Zedekiah was with me now, and I discussed the next move with him. He agreed that I should set up some precautionary defenses. Something that the Guardians could cross, but the demons couldn’t. I had to set up a fortress around the entire meadow. After my conversation with Zedekiah, I went deep into the heart of the meadow, the very first place where I was introduced into this world. I sat under the central willow tree, its leaves swaying gently in the calm breeze, and allowed my body to align with my spirit, where I asked the Almighty for advice. If anyone knew what to do, it would be Him.

I had a long and intricate conversation with the Creator, who told me all I needed to know. It wasn’t necessarily all that I had wanted to hear, but it would be enough for me to accomplish what I needed to do. My mind questioned every instruction that had been given, but I disposed of those confusing thoughts and just did as I had been told.

There weren’t many specifics when it came to setting up defenses, I simply walked around the border of the meadow spouting prayers and praises to the Lord for three days straight. The meadow was so large that it took an entire

day just to make an entire round, so by the end of the three days I had gone around completely only thrice. This would be enough to protect the meadow for a certain amount of time. The strength of these defenses would be determined by the power of my faith in them. All that was left to do now was continue building up these shields and wait.

Throughout the duration of the next two years, we only faced a few stragglers. They were small demons which had escaped the eyes of my fellows, and made it all the way to my defenses. However, all they found across the boundary was their demise. As soon as a hair of theirs crossed into the meadow, flames consumed them so much so that not a single speck of ash could be found.

In this time, Eden had grown to overtake me in height, and was fighting to be taller than Zedekiah. He had started to resemble his father a little more now that his features were more mature, but still favored me. His attitude remained unchanged; he was still the sweetest, most thoughtful son a mother could ask for. Despite me teaching him that he should take care of himself before worrying about his parents, he still insisted that he only wanted to live protecting the ones dear to him. I wanted him to choose his own path in life, the one the Lord had set before him, so I only conceded with grace. Who was I to tell him that he couldn't? I lived to complete the Mission which was written upon my heart, and protect the ones I love. He simply wished to do the same. It was humbling to know and see that I wasn't the only one who had to stand in between danger and my family; soon, it would be Eden's turn. Truly, my son was the greatest thing that had happened to me. He had grown to

become a man with a heart for the Lord, and was avid in learning all about our Creator and the wonders that follow Him.

My husband was still as wonderful as ever. He had, however, learned how to loosen up, as he was no longer constantly feeling the pressure of being a knight with many lives under his wing. His world was now just his wife, son, and the place we treasured. He had also taken this time to grow closer to the Lord, and now could understand most of my spiritual ramblings.

So, despite the impending chaos that was always creeping upon us, these years were still some of the most golden. I found myself reminiscing about the time Eden had been delivered, and the few years we had spent raising him here. Those beautiful, delicate, memorable years.

At the end of an uneventful day, Zedekiah hung up his coat as he stated, “I’m glad they’re succeeding, but I’m also worried. They’ve been holding the fort for three years now.” I was washing the dishes after having had supper, “I’m worried too, but I trust them. They’re strong, and sometimes I forget that.”

Eden entered through the front door then, “Mom, Dad, I’ve put up the chickens and fed them. There were a few eggs.” He set a basket of five eggs on the table. Shortly after moving here, we went to the nearest town and bought several hens and a rooster from a farmer.

“Thank you, dear. Go and wash up for bed.” I said, taking the eggs from the basket and putting them in the egg box. Eden ran into the washroom where a tub of water had

been warmed. I then threw myself onto the sofa, next to where Zedekiah sat.

“Z, I know that I said I trusted them, and I do, but I feel like something is going to change soon.” It was true. Lately, there was a sickening feeling in the pit of my stomach, telling me to prepare myself for something either great or gruesome.

“How so?” He ran his fingers through my hair as he listened.

“It’s just a feeling. Something’s going to happen, and we might not like it.” I sighed.

“Then,” he said, “we just have to put our faith in the Almighty. Our sights are too small to see what He has planned, so we just need to allow ourselves to be guided by Him.”

I nodded, “You’re right. I do trust him, but I get too caught up in my own worries.”

We remained there in silence, simply enjoying the other’s presence. Eden came in at some point and settled on the sofa with us, settling his head in my lap and draping his legs over Zedekiah’s. The fire crackled joyfully in the corner of the room, and our nostrils were left with a pleasant wood scent. A smile lit my face and my mind was then at ease. It was comfortable.

“WHAT IS THAT?” Eden was pointing at the sky, horror stricken on his face. I dropped my shovel and spun around, only to be taken back in terror as a black mass floated towards us.

“RUN TO THE MEADOW!” I shouted, instructing Eden and Zedekiah who were moving piles of wood from one place to another.

We all dashed to where the borders of the meadow lay. I slid to my knees right on the border with my hands clasped, bulleting through several prayers of protection. Thankfully, I had kept Alma with me that day, despite there being no known reason to. Within minutes I began to hear the distant screeches, and soon after there were black bodies pelting themselves into the meadow’s boundary, only to be burnt to nothingness. I got to my feet and ran into the sanctuary of the willow trees, praying that the protections would hold up.

It didn’t take me long to find Eden and Zedekiah, who were scrambling to secure weapons for themselves. Zedekiah had grabbed a steel rod from outside the house on his way here, and Eden had a wicked hunting dagger strapped to his waist. It bothered me that neither of them had a sword.

“What happened? Where are the others?” Zedekiah demanded.

“I have no idea! I didn’t even get a warning from Valgus, something must’ve happened!” I stressed, running a hand down my face. I could see more and more flames lighting at the boundary, but it was clearly getting weaker. It wouldn’t be long before this place was ravaged by demons.

“I need Rene.” I realized. But without me even needing to call out, he appeared.

I’m here, Gennie. Tell me what I need to do. I heard that familiar voice in my mind.

“Take Eden and Zedekiah somewhere safe, away from here!” I commanded.

“What? No way!” Eden argued, “I’m staying right here!”

“Absolutely not, young man! You will listen to your mother!” I shouted over the growing wails of decimated demons.

“I’m here to protect you!” He pleaded, “I can watch your back so *please!* Let me stay!”

I cupped his face in my hands, “You are too precious to me. I don’t want you anywhere near danger. Go with your father, please.” I said, holding his tearing eyes.

Zedekiah interjected, ”Hang on, I agree that Eden should go somewhere as he’s inexperienced and more likely to be injured, but I won’t be leaving your side. I’m your husband, and therefore your other half. I will stay.”

I stamped my foot in desperation, “Come on, guys! I’m the Guardian! I have powers that you two don’t! I can’t lose you!”

“It’s the same for us!” Zedekiah shouted. I stared at him with wide eyes. This was the first time he had ever raised his voice at me. His expression was hurt, “You’re just as precious.”

Before I could respond, the sound of a triumphant scream echoed throughout the meadow. I turned in horror and watched as the first demon flew freely in the meadow, a malicious gleam in its eyes.

“*NO!*” I shrieked.

More followed, and soon there was a black cloud of flying demons blotting out the sun. Not long after, the first grounded demons began making their way into the meadow, tearing down and trampling over willow trees. I unsheathed Alma and charged towards the oncoming monsters, slicing

through any that entered my path. However, there were far too many for me to handle on my own, even with Eden and Zedekiah's help. An overwhelming feeling of defeat seeped into my bones, and my sword grew heavier until it was resting on the ground as I watched the demons pass right by me.

A hand then gripped my shoulder, "Mom, get a hold of yourself!"

I turned to see Eden holding onto me, a flame burning in his eyes. His knife was bloodied with the purple liquid that demons turned into, and behind me were hundreds of twitching corpses. Zedekiah was going to each one and jabbing his steel rod through the remaining fiends' heads, making sure that they melted into nothing.

I stared at my son with disbelief, "You two did this? How?"

He shrugged, "Dad's one of the strongest knights out there, and I'm both his son and a Guardian's. We aren't weak, Mom." He smiled. However, this wasn't the same smile as my little boy's. It wasn't the endearing, sweet smile that he usually wore. This smile was confident and reliable. This was my son. This was Eden.

I nodded, my lip trembling and tears welling in my eyes. I pulled his head down and kissed the crown of it, "God protect you, son." I released him and said, "Let's do this. Together."

Those were the words he had been waiting for. The affirmation he needed. Eden raised his knife and held his head high, "Together."

I crossed Alma's blade with his and whirled around, facing the oncoming horde of demons. Zedekiah, in that time, had made his way to stand on my other side. He had beaten

the end of the rod to form a point, so it now resembled a sloppy spear. “Together.” He smiled, holding the rod at ready.

It was chaos. There was no conceivable way for us to stop them using only blades. I stabbed Alma into the ground and created a trench which sliced clean through the meadow, pushing one side away from the other. On the inner side of the trench, I threw up a wall similar to the one I had used when fighting alongside Neró, back when the demons had first begun appearing.

However, not even that was enough to keep the majority of them from getting past us. I wanted to keep damage to the minimum, since the meadow was precious, however that was going to have to be thrown out the window. The destruction was already awful in this area, so much so that it was unsalvageable.

I hastily barked at Eden and Zedekiah to get to my side. As soon as they were next to me, I raised the earth below us to create a platform high above the mob on the ground. The only thing about being up high was that now we were dealing with a horde in the air. I expanded the platform to stretch over the entire diameter of the meadow, creating a wall of earth that would be impenetrable so long as I was on top of it.

I rose columns of stone across the platform, from which I launched disks at the demons, decapitating ten with just one. Eden and Zedekiah stabbed and sliced at the air, taking several down. I dropped boulders on the demons below, squashing them into purple goo. It was like juicing a fruit, except far more morbid.

Corpses piled against the wall's base. Many had melted into goo, some had not. My nostrils burned from inhaling the stench left from their remains. After another hour of constant fighting on the wall, I fell to my knees and cried out, "Lord! I know you fight with us! PLEASE, HELP US OVERCOME THIS TRIAL! SHOW US YOUR STRENGTH!"

Right at that second, a brain-rattling *BOOM!* shook the platform. I turned to face the center of the meadow, where I could see a plume of smoke rising. My heart sank, thinking that the demons were turning my birthplace upside down. When I returned to my fight, I noticed something that crinkled in my palm. I opened my fingers and found a small, crinkled note which read: *We are here.*

My spirits soared by just reading those three words. And the sight of Angelique soaring past us to round up the flying demons rejuvenated me. Eden and Zedekiah cheered, and I joined in on their jubilation. I raised my sword and shouted, "AS ONE!"

Valgus appeared next to me and smiled, "As one." His eyes were deeply sunken, and he had clearly lost a lot of weight, but looked as energetic as ever.

I tackled him in an embrace and said, "Man, am I glad to see you."

He returned the gesture but said, "And I you, however this is no time for catching up. Even though we're here, we can't be sure that we can beat them all. Their numbers increased so suddenly and broke through us. I wanted to warn you, but my energy had been worn out and I needed to recuperate."

I shook my head, “I’m just relieved you’re here. We need to protect our birthplace,” I nodded my head towards the meadow’s center, “They’re already over there.”

“Vlam should already be handling it.” Valgus replied, zapping a demon with one of his light orbs.

My shoulders relaxed, “Delightful. Should I join him, or stay on the wall?” My mind was too frazzled to make a decision for myself. This battle was far different than any other I had fought in. Instead of being able to fight freely in a random field, I had to protect this place. I had to preserve it. I didn’t know the reason for the demons’ desperation in reaching it, but the meadow held a sacred space in my heart. I could not watch it fall into the hands of evil.

“If you feel inclined to go, then do so. I can watch the wall.” Valgus assured, more light orbs appearing around his head.

“Then,” I nodded curtly before turning and leaping off of the wall. Zedekiah and Eden would surely understand, though I didn’t take the time to converse with them before jumping straight into another situation. As I sprinted further into the meadow, I heard the distant voice of Eden, shouting at me to wait for him. In the moment, his words flew in one ear and out the other, and my body continued moving further into the chaos.

As I got nearer to the center, I began to see traces of the earlier explosion. Small fires were smoldering, but the flames did not spread. Thankfully, many trees still stood, untouched by what was happening around them.

When I got to the center, what I found was surprising but uplifting. Aside from the demons taken out by the explosion, there were lightning bolts striking any demons

which stepped foot within a certain boundary. “Praise you, Lord.” I muttered as I sliced through whatever demons stood in my way. As soon as I stepped foot across the barrier of lightning and into the heart of the meadow, my head was instantly cleared.

I had planned to turn and fight from within this safe space, however my attention was snatched away by a vision: an existence in my life which held my heart, whisked away. My eyes would never see it again in this life, but this existence would live on after me and pave the way for this world’s future. And just as quickly as that vision had come, it was gone. Unbeknownst to me, a tear escaped. My heart ached for what was to come, but I knew instinctively what was to happen.

Prepare yourself. I will be beside you. The words came from a torrent whirling above my head. From this torrent came the lightning, and inside the furious winds I saw a calm, peaceful state.

I crossed my sword over my breast and kneeled, allowing these tears that welled up within me to spill. I then lifted Alma up, piercing the torrent which wrapped itself around the blade and soon engulfed my hands, eventually enveloping my entire body. I tightened every single muscle of mine as I tried to sustain the power being passed into me. It felt amazing; my energy soared and my body healed itself, but this power was too much for just me. Then, a hand gripped my shoulder.

I spun around to see my reflection, however, it wasn’t me. The noise which caused my ears to deafen was silenced, and the winds expanded so that I could see this person’s face properly. “Eden.” I muttered, unsure of what was happening.

“Mom.” He smiled; that bright, adoring smile that he always wore when he looked at me.

My lip quivered and my brows knitted themselves together, “What are you doing here?” Deep down, however, I knew the answer. I just didn’t want to accept it.

He shrugged, “Protecting you.”

I shook my head and bit my lips until they bled, “I don’t need to be protected. No, I need to protect *you*. You’re my *son!*” My voice raised as my heart sank.

“Not this time.” He grabbed my hand and pulled me onto my feet. “This is what I’ve been waiting for, since the beginning.” He pulled me into his arms and squeezed me, saying then and there that this was the last time for us. My time as his mother would be ending.

I buried my head into his shoulder, my screams silent to my own ears. All I knew was that my tears were hot, and I felt weak despite all of the power I was carrying. “Why can’t it be me?”

“Have faith, Mom. I’ll see you again, and we can pick things back up then.” He stroked my head. It was weird, in this situation, shouldn’t I be the one comforting him? He’s the one leaving, but I’m the one who’s scared. “I love you, Mom.” He said.

I pulled away and looked into his face. It still hadn’t even fully matured, but he looked more grown up than me. Tears streamed down his face as well, but they weren’t the tormented and fearful ones like mine; no, these gems were filled with love and sorrow. “I love you too, Eden. Forever and ever and then some.”

He cracked a smile and leaned forward, kissing my forehead. “Goodbye for now.”

“I’ll see you later—” my voice cracked, and it felt like the world was falling apart. He grabbed my other hand and the power transferred from me into him. I couldn’t close my eyes as it happened. This was the hardest thing that would ever happen to me, yet it was so beautiful. His body filled with light, and lightning crackled between the strands of his hair. His eyes were so dazzling that it was a wonder he was even real. He then lowered himself onto his knees and clasped his hands, proceeding to bow his head. I stepped a few paces back, but no further. I would not leave the side of my child.

Then, the power within Eden pulsed, and it surged throughout the meadow, and then the entire world. The winds around us dissipated, and beyond that the demons were demolished. The meadow was rejuvenated, and the earth’s wounds were healed. My energy was replenished, but my heart was shattered. With all of these good things that had happened, my son’s lifeless body still lay before me.

I fell to my knees, hiding my face from the world. There was no world without Eden. I crawled to my world, tentatively taking his head and cradling it in my arms. The life that I had been blessed with, the joy that had been given to me, was all wrapped into this boy and taken away.

Through my sobs I cried, “The Lord gave, and the Lord hath taken away; blessed be the name of the Lord!” My voice lifted and from the very bottom of my gut I doubled over and screamed until my throat felt as though it had been ripped out and my organs wanted to burst.

In my misery, I had failed to notice Zedekiah’s touch. He gently took me into his embrace and held me as though I were a newborn baby, delicate and fragile. His own sobs

shook his body, but he held me still. My strength had been waned, my light had been dimmed, but I still had faith in the Lord. There was nothing that would tear me away from Him. Nothing.

I wanted to turn back time and hear Eden's voice once more, but nothing would allow me. Time was a constant flow, and nothing could turn it back but God. And even if it did turn back, I would be unaware of it, and still take my child's presence for granted. The earth trembled as it wept alongside me. The winds cried, the waters mourned, the light hid its face, the shadows reached for memories, and the fire screamed with sorrow as my fellows came to discover the limp body of which I was cherishing.

"Forever—" I choked, "forever and then some."

18. A Paradise to Rest

The sun shone brilliantly, and birds sang songs of rejoice, but my heart remained at the bottom of a solemn lake. My mind held nothing at all. My body had turned into a husk of emptiness. The wind tried to lift my head by brushing the hair out of my face, and the sun tried to lighten my mood, but none of it reached the bottom of this numbing abyss.

Eden now rested on a pure white marble table enclosed by a glass case. Flowers decorated the base of his chamber. Looking at him, it felt as though I could just touch him, and his eyes would open. He looked so peaceful. *What if I shook the earth from its very core. . . would he wake up then? What could I do to bring him back? Would time listen to me?*

“Genesis.” A voice cut through these destructive thoughts, making my heart tremble. Someone’s warmth pressed against my back and seeped through me, doing its best to lend me whatever comfort they could provide. “I want him back too, but I need you right now. It’s hard enough losing my son; don’t take away my wife as well.” A warm droplet fell onto my shoulder, soaking into my linen shirt.

I reached up and slid my fingers around his forearm, squeezing with what little strength I had. Just enough to let him know that I was there. My ears were open, but my eyes still wanted to deceive themselves.

“How do I stand up?” I choked, “How does a mother continue to live after losing her child?” My face grew flushed again as my suppressed emotions resurfaced. The lake began

to boil with what could only be described as fury. “How could I fail him like this?” My voice grew as my anger ebbed. It was a feeling directed at none other but myself.

“It’s not your fault,” Zedekiah whispered.

“I watched it happen! I didn’t have to give him my hands! I didn’t have to let him bear all of that responsibility! BUT I DID!” I broke down, falling back into my husband’s grasp, powerless. “I’m a Guardian. . . I control the earth. . . but I couldn’t save my son when he was right in front of me.”

“If you’re going to blame yourself, then blame me as well.” Zedekiah declared. “I could’ve kept him from going into that storm, but I couldn’t bring myself to it. . . He knew his purpose, and this was it.” Zedekiah gestured towards the glass holding our son. “You also saw it. . . the look in his eyes. Neither of us could stand in his way, because we know God had a higher calling for him. It *hurts*. It hurts so much, but when it comes to the Lord’s Will, there’s nothing we can do.”

My voice broke, “I know. . . I know.”

A week later, after I had recollected myself to some extent and was able to turn away from my son’s display, the flying ship appeared in the sky. Vlam had apparently taken Rene back down to Migdal in order to gather all those who held Eden in high regards, and brought them all here. Alvin and Valerie were the first to depart from the ship, running directly to me and Zedekiah and wrapping us in their embraces. Prince Kaius and Princess Cosia had immediately gone to the side of my son, draping themselves over the glass as though embracing him. Tears spilled down their faces and dripped down the display, showering Eden with love.

“We’ve brought gifts,” Alvin said, “to honor the memory of our dear Eden.” He stepped aside and gestured at the many chests being hoisted out of the ship.

I dipped my head, “Thank you, but I’m sure just your presence would be enough for him to be happy.” I said, staring at my feet. I didn’t want to accept anything on Eden’s behalf, but there was no other option.

“I’ll leave it beside him for now, and you can decide what to do with it later.” Alvin said softly, understanding in his eyes.

I did my best to smile, but it wouldn’t come. Valerie grabbed one of my hands, “You don’t have to pretend for us. You are welcome to feel as you do, there is nothing wrong with mourning, so don’t feel pressured to put on a facade when you’re in such turmoil.”

I nodded, my vision blurring and lip trembling. Zedekiah placed an arm around me and pulled me closer, kissing the side of my head.

The day went by slowly, yet it was over before it had even seemed to begin. There was a banquet being held on the ship in celebration of Eden, where any who were willing would stand and give a speech about their relationship with him.

As much as I didn’t want to join, I stayed until the very end. Listening to the speeches made me realize that Eden had lived far more than I had imagined. He had gotten into trouble, had life-threatening encounters, and had been more childlike than I remembered. But he had also been a steadfast, reliable shoulder to those around him. Prince Kaius had many stories to share when it came to his adventures with

Eden, many of which made me laugh and others which surprised me greatly. However, these only expanded my outlook on the life he had lived, filled with love, joy, mischief, and excitement. I never had a childhood, so it amazed me to relive my son's through other's words. At the end of the banquet, my heart had been soothed, and my eyes had been reopened.

I was the last one to leave along with Zedekiah. We stood in the solitude of the meadow, staring down at the pale face of our son, who had lived this great life right underneath our noses. Far more than what I could've provided, he had gone off to experience the world on his own, but had always returned back home.

"Will you pray with me?" I asked, interlocking my arm with Zedekiah's.

He turned to me, "Anytime, my darling, I will."

The entourage had stayed for a few days and then left, leaving me, Zedekiah, and the rest of the Guardians. The company had helped me cope and come to terms with what had happened, and I was finally ready to take the next step. I had plans. Big plans. It would take a lot of energy, but it would be the grandest resting place one could have. This would also ensure that the meadow, the birthplace of the Guardians and the final resting place of Eden, would be protected. No one would be able to touch this place unless it was within God's Will.

I stood beside Eden's display, taking a last, longing glance at my son's peaceful face. Not that long ago, that mouth would smile at me, and those eyes would look at me. Those hands would hold mine, and those arms would embrace

me. Now, they wouldn't move. They were crossed over his chest where his hands held onto a single pink carnation, which I had placed in his fingers myself. By his side rested the sword he never used, the gift which had only been a goal. There were a few scratches and scuffs on the blade from practice, but it was pure from any blood.

Zedekiah stood beside me and the Guardians behind me. I closed my eyes and allowed my deepest, most raw feelings to flow from me and into the earth. I felt the ground tingle with power as it responded to my emotions, and soon sprouts began to expose themselves all throughout the meadow, blossoming into different flowers and plants, and some growing into tall, strong trees. Mixed amongst the willows were now fully blossomed Wisteria trees, and throughout the grounds were Gladiolus, Purple Hyacinths, White Heathers, Sweet Peas, Rosemary, White Rose Bushes, Primroses, White Egret Orchids, Marigolds, Jasmines, Ivies, Snowdrops, and so much more. The meadow was now filled with colors of all kinds, and plants from all seasons, all resembling my love and grief as a mother, but my respect and admiration as a Guardian.

Then I began to carry out what I had been planning to do. The earth began to tremor, and my strength was ebbed away as far in the distance, a wall of rising earth could be seen. The earth groaned as it was stripped away from its sphere and pulled back, like a bandage revealing a bleeding wound. The ground only continued to grow, and it soon became like the sky itself, far overhead and blocking out the sun. In the distance, I could see the still bright blue of the day. However, even that was soon covered as the enormous mass of land was folded over. I had imbued the earth with an

eternal circulation of my power to keep everything intact, which was why no stones or soil had collapsed upon us. The earth now made up a dome, with Eden at its center.

Valgus created thousands of light orbs and sent them to illuminate my son's tomb. This was the grandest gift I could give him now. I had folded the tip of this continent over in order to create a new land above. This dome covered the entire far north, stopping only just before it collided with other territories.

Neró stepped forward and reached out his hand. The lake which was just a few feet to our right began to bubble, and soon a small spring formed in the center of it, rising higher and higher. Several more springs then formed around it, their heights falling in descending order. Vlam then blew across the meadow, and soon each flower was on fire. However, these flames didn't burn the flowers; instead, they were absorbed into the plants and illuminated their colors, producing small beams of light reaching upwards. Skuggi then caused his shadows to shift, and created a night sky among the trees and plants above. Angelique had a sweet summer breeze circle throughout the entire tomb, "It'll last forever." she said.

I smiled, my chest filled with love for the people standing beside me. "Then, I will do one more thing." I said, and the chests filled with gifts from Alvin and Valerie exploded, fountains of gold, silver, and precious gems spilling forth and scattering throughout the land. "These riches are useless to me, but it surrounds my son with the sincerity of those he had touched."

And then it was done. My son's resting place was grander than any king's. I knew he wouldn't care about such

things, but as his mother who only ever wanted what was good for him, this much was enough to satisfy me.

19. Life Thereafter

Years passed, and time slipped through my fingers. After Eden's death, life couldn't return to the way it was before. I believed that good things could happen just a little less, but my faith remained unshaken. As a Guardian who directly served the Lord, it was imperative that I remain steadfast, of which I did.

A few years after Eden passed, I was once again able to miraculously conceive, which struck many fears into my heart. We moved back to Migdal where I gave birth to twins, a handsome boy and a beautiful girl, both of which reminded me just how precious life was. I raised them just as I had with Eden, except this time I could be much more present in their lives. Every so often we would take trips up north to visit their big brother's tomb, however all we could stare at was the ground. I vowed to never disturb the tomb, for dismay that within the glass case I would see nothing but bones and dust. That was something a mother should never see of her child.

Neither of the twins had inherited my emerald eyes, as Eden had. Nor did they have my blonde hair. This time, they had eyes of turquoise, more similar to their father than me. Zion, my son, had taken his father's black hair, and Zoia, my daughter, had been given a soft brown head. Their mischievousness knew no bounds, but they sprinkled my days with laughter. In the end, they grew up to become wonderful adults who took hold of their passions; Zion became a knight, after his father, and Zoia toiled to become a Court Physician. Their beliefs were strong and true, and they devoted their

lives to the Creator. And eventually, they married the ones who stole their hearts, as Zedekiah had taken mine. Zion to the lovely Jasmine, and Zoia to the steadfast Henry. Zoia was the first to make me a grandmother, giving me a healthy and strong granddaughter.

Many things happened in between then and now; I met my fellows' chosen Blesseds, left with the same blessings of which I had given Eden. They were all good and kind people, who were prepared to fight for the betterment of the still tumultuous world. Zedekiah and I still had our adventures, traveling wherever our hearts desired until we could no more.

Then a few years before now, Zedekiah passed on to meet Eden before me. I remember sitting beside him, recounting the entire life we had lived together, both the ups and the downs. We laughed and chatted deep into the night until his tongue failed to respond. And when the morning rays of dawn entered our window, I sent him off with one last kiss, from a devoted wife to her loving husband.

My fellow Guardians had been beside me up until last year, leaving this world one by one until it was only me left. These passing days I spend with the Queen Mother Valerie, who is pleasant company, and I watch over my great-grandchildren when they come to see me. Kaius is ruling Migdal with all of the wisdom and more that his father had left him, and he is accompanied by a beautiful queen by the name of Victoria.

Now, when so much time has passed, and my story has been well written by my own trembling hand, I feel myself ready to move on. This world holds nothing for me,

and I am content to leave it to my descendants. My grandchildren have grown and married, and my great-grandchildren are the lights of my days; but in all honesty, I am weary. It feels as though I've lived thousands of lifetimes, which is far too many for a single person. My work as a Guardian cannot continue with my deteriorating health, but I am not bothered by it. If anything, I am ready.

With these words I tell you, live life with love and wisdom. Do not let petty things become thorns in your side, and exercise forgiveness. I may not have been born from a woman's womb, but I have become just as human as any. I make mistakes, repent, and ask for forgiveness. Then I continue on, caring to not fall into the same faults. Live well, children. Live when others can't, and love those who won't. And with this, I conclude the memoir of my life. The life of the Guardian of the Earth. The Book of Genesis.

As you can see, Genesis lived a life that was filled with many ups and many downs. Grief and overcoming it are two large parts of life that we inevitably face over time. It's hard. Painful. Sometimes we feel like there's nothing we can do to move forward. Genesis felt like this too at times, but in the end was able to put her full faith in her Master, and take the next step. And the best part? He waited for her until she could face Him. Not even a Guardian can keep her head up and back straight at all times. She received strike after strike and crumbled. . . but was able to stand back up each time. And she didn't have to do it alone. Throwing aside your pride and allowing yourself to lean on others is one step towards becoming a stronger person. If you do it alone all of the time, then there will be small shards of yourself that you miss, which eventually get swept under a rug and disappear forever. There's someone with an Eye which sees All. Lean on Him, and none of your shards will be forgotten or left behind, and you will truly become someone who is whole. Genesis knew this, but still had to figure it out the painful way. However, one thing she doesn't know yet, and won't know until her life passes on into Eternity, is that her son Eden's story is still far from over. Be ready, because our beloved Blessed will be returning one day.