

THE
DAWNBRINGER CHRONICLES

HERO
RISING

BOOK ONE

JACOBA A. SANSOUCIE

JACOB A. SANSOUCIE

Hero Rising



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To my beloved wife, Miracle, whose unwavering support makes every endeavor possible. And to all those who dare to dream—go out and make it happen.

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Now, there's another person I need to acknowledge—someone who doesn't even know they've played a role in my becoming a writer. That person is Brandon Sanderson. And no, this isn't some weird fan letter. I just want to give credit where it's due. Back in 2020, when the world went on pause and I suddenly had more time on my hands than I knew what to do with, I found myself scrolling through YouTube (as one does during a lockdown) and stumbled upon Brandon's creative writing lectures. I had this random urge to write something—anything—but it felt like a wild idea.

At the time, I didn't even know who Brandon Sanderson was (don't come for me, okay?). I was already a huge fan of Tolkien, *The Hobbit*, and *Lord of the Rings* (basically, anything involving elves and swords), but I hadn't ventured into Sanderson's universe. After a bit of research, I realized, "Wow, this guy is a big deal!" And there he was, generously sharing college-

level creative writing lectures for free. I couldn't believe it. So I binged them, taking in all the wisdom he had to offer, and it gave me the confidence to dive headfirst into writing.

Fast forward four years, and here I am, holding my completed novel. If it weren't for those lectures, I might still be staring at a blank page. So, in good conscience, I had to acknowledge the impact Brandon Sanderson has had on me—even if he doesn't know it. This is my small way of saying thanks.

I hope you enjoy reading this book as much as I enjoyed writing it. There were ups and downs along the way, and moments when doubt crept in. But in those times, I followed Brandon's simple advice: "just keep writing." I have plenty more stories in the works and can't wait to share them with you. Thank you for reading, for buying, and for spreading the word—because, after all, word of mouth is the best marketing!

With all my gratitude,

Jacob A. SanSoucie

Prologue

A child's scream pierced the summer air, rising above the rustling leaves of the Wyldewood. Carson McIntyre dropped his axe mid-swing, leaving the half-split log forgotten on the ground. The cry came again, closer this time, raw with terror.

"Och, by Auredor's mercy," he breathed, plunging through the underbrush toward the sound. Sweat from the day's labor stung his eyes, his muscles already aching from hours of stable work and woodcutting. None of that mattered now.

The cries led him to a rocky hollow where his heart nearly stopped. A bearcat, its muscled form as large as a mountain lion, had cornered a small boy against the weathered stone wall. The child couldn't have been more than two or three years old, his tiny frame trembling as he pressed himself against the rocks.

"Away with ye!" Carson bellowed, but the predator merely flicked its tufted ears, more focused on its intended prey than the newcomer's shouts.

Carson's mind raced. He possessed earth magic—if you could call his meager abilities magic at all. He'd never used it for more than shaping stone fences or helping till the soil around the Silvermane estate. But right now, that small gift was all he had.

The bearcat tensed, preparing to spring.

Carson steadied his breathing, focusing inward to where his Enera flowed like a modest stream. He spoke the focusing words, feeling the familiar warmth as his Enera responded.

Stones materialized in the air before him, solid as the earth itself. With a sharp gesture, he sent them hurtling toward the predator. The impact threw the bearcat against the hollow's wall with a satisfying thud. It scrambled to its feet, yowling in pain and fear before disappearing into the undergrowth.

"There now, laddie," Carson called softly, sliding down the embankment. The boy's sobs quieted to hiccups as Carson knelt beside him. "Let's have a proper look at ye."

The child was well-dressed despite the dirt and tears, wearing a light coat that seemed out of place in the summer heat. Carson checked for injuries, finding none, then noticed something embroidered on the coat's collar: 'Holland Blackthorn.'

"Holland, is it?" Carson asked gently. "Where're your folk?"

The boy's lower lip trembled. "Gone," he whispered, the word barely audible.

Carson lifted the child into his arms, feeling the small body shaking against his chest. "Aye, we'll sort this out, won't we?" he murmured, more to himself than the boy.

The cottage behind the Silvermane mansion was a humble thing compared to the noble estate's towering spires and ivy-covered walls, but it was home. As Carson approached, the scent of fresh bread wafted through the open windows, mixing with the salt breeze from the Anduin Sea.

"Etty?" he called, shouldering open the door. "I need your help here, lass."

His wife stood at the counter, her dark hair escaping its tie as she worked. She turned, wiping flour-covered hands on her apron, then froze at the sight of the child in Carson's arms. "Divine above," she whispered. "What's happened then?"

"Found him in the Wyldwood," Carson said, settling Holland onto a kitchen chair. "Bearcat had him cornered in the hollow."

“A bearcat?” Etty’s hand flew to her mouth. “Is the poor child—”

“Aye, he’s right as rain, thank Auredor.” Carson ran a hand through his beard, still feeling the remnants of panic. “But he’s not telling me much beyond ‘gone’ when I ask after his folk.”

Etty approached slowly, the way she might a spooked horse. She knelt before Holland, her voice soft as morning mist. “You must be hungry, love. Would ye like some bread? It’s still warm from the oven.”

Holland’s eyes widened at the mention of food, and he gave a tiny nod.

As Etty cut a slice from the loaf she’d been preparing for Lady Lily’s birthday celebration, Carson watched her hands tremble slightly. They’d tried for years to have a child of their own, each failure cutting deeper than the last. Now here was this boy, appearing like an answer to their prayers—but someone else’s child, lost or abandoned in the woods.

“We’ll need to alert the guard,” Carson said quietly. “His coat’s got a name—Holland Blackthorn. Someone must be looking for the lad.”

Etty placed the bread before Holland, who took it with both hands but didn’t eat. “Go on then, love. It’s yours.”

Only then did he take a cautious bite, crumbs falling onto his fine coat.

“Blackthorn,” Etty mused, watching the boy eat. Her face clouded suddenly, and Carson recognized the look—something was troubling her beyond the obvious situation before them.

“What is it, lass?” he asked.

“I saw something today in town that...” She glanced at Holland, then lowered her voice. “They flogged Mr. Parney in the square.”

Carson straightened. “The furniture maker? What for?”

“He was caught selling his pieces without a proper license,” Etty said, her voice tight with anger. “He’d set up a small workshop just outside Krestfell.”

“But he’s been trying to get that license for years.” Carson kept his voice low, mindful of the child eating nearby. “Every merchant guild in the district’s turned him down.”

“Aye, and we both know why.” Etty’s voice dropped even lower. “He spoke against Lord Eldric’s timber taxation in the district council five years past. The Governor doesn’t forget such slights.”

Carson’s jaw tightened. “How bad was it?”

“Bad enough. His wife and eldest daughter have signed contracts with noble houses just to survive.” Etty wiped her eyes with the corner of her apron. “That’s not living, is it? Signing your life away because someone powerful holds a grudge?”

Carson reached across the table, taking her hand. “We’re fortunate enough, you and I. Working the estate—”

“Fortunate?” Etty’s eyes flickered to Holland, who was focused on his bread. “We live in fear of every word we speak. One wrong comment, one misplaced criticism of the Governor’s policies...” She shook her head. “The whole of Coralhelm lives under his shadow.”

A knock at the door made them all jump. Holland dropped his bread, shrinking back in his chair.

“Carson?” a voice called. “Lady Silvermane’s asking after the firewood for tonight’s feast.”

“Och, I’d clean forgotten.” Carson muttered, then raised his voice. “Tell them I’ll have it shortly.” He turned to his wife, voice low. “What’re we to do with him while I finish my work?”

“He’ll stay with me,” Etty said firmly, already moving to gather

Holland into her arms. The boy went willingly, perhaps sensing the maternal warmth in her embrace. “Away with ye now. Get your work done, and I’ll send word to the guard about our guest.”

Carson nodded, though something in his gut told him this wouldn’t be as simple as finding the boy’s family. He’d felt it in the woods—that peculiar sense that this was more than chance. Looking at Etty now, holding Holland as if he belonged there, that feeling only grew stronger.

“Mind Lady Lily’s bread,” he said, trying to lighten the moment.

Etty’s smile was warm but distracted, her attention focused on the child in her arms. “Go on then. We’ll be right here.”

The weeks that followed proved Carson’s instincts true. Despite their best efforts—and even the Silvermane family’s considerable influence throughout Coralhelm—no trace of Holland’s family could be found. No records of any Blackthorns existed in the district’s ledgers, and no one recalled seeing a lost child or desperate parents in the days before Carson found him.

Each passing day, the boy grew more comfortable in their home. He’d follow Carson around the estate grounds, watching with wide eyes as he tended the horses or chopped wood. At night, Etty would sing him the old songs of Dalemark, her sweet voice carrying him to sleep.

After three months, when hope of finding Holland’s family had faded to resignation, Carson and Etty requested an audience with Lord Eldric. The Governor’s study was a testament to his power—massive oak doors, walls lined with leather-bound books, and a desk carved from the Wyldewood’s hearthtrees that could have fed a common family for a year.

"You wish to keep the boy?" Lord Eldric didn't look up from his papers, his voice carrying the casual authority of a man unused to denial.

"Aye, my lord," Carson said, standing straight despite his nervousness. "We've grown fond of him, and with no family coming forward—"

"And what benefit would this arrangement bring to my estate?" Lord Eldric interrupted, finally raising his eyes. The dark mole on his right cheek seemed to emphasize his frown.

Carson swallowed hard. "We'd raise him to serve the estate, my lord. As we do. Train him proper in all the duties—"

"Very well." Lord Eldric returned to his papers, waving a dismissive hand. "But remember this: the boy's position here exists solely by my grace. Should either of you forget that..." He left the threat unspoken.

"Thank you, my lord," Carson managed, bowing deeply. "We'll see he's raised proper."

That night, as Etty cradled Holland in her arms, singing him to sleep with an old Dalemark lullaby, Carson watched from the doorway of their modest cottage. Beyond the window, the Silvermane mansion loomed against the starlit sky, its towers a constant reminder of their place in the world. But here, in this moment, none of that mattered.

Holland's eyes drifted closed, his small hand clutching Etty's apron. Despite Lord Eldric's cold conditions, despite the uncertainty of their world, Carson felt that same certainty he'd experienced in the Wyldewood. This boy had come into their lives for a reason.

"Sleep well, laddie," he whispered, watching his new son's eyes drift closed. "Tomorrow's the first day of our story together."

He couldn't have known then just how remarkable that story

PROLOGUE

would become, or how the abandoned child they'd taken in would one day shake the very foundations of Eldorien itself.

I

The Spark

1

Strange Memories

The storm hammered against Holland's shack, each gust threatening to tear the thatch from its aging beams. Rain found its way through the worn roof, dripping steadily onto the floorboards where puddles had already formed. This was nothing unusual for the eastern shores of Coralhelm—tempests rolled in from the Anduin Sea as regular as sunrise, their fury spent as quickly as it came.

Holland thrashed in his narrow bed, trapped in a dream that felt more memory than fantasy. Images flashed through his mind: a battle he'd never fought, faces he'd never seen, love and loss he'd never known. Each fragment cut deeper than the last, until pain became all he knew. His fingers clutched at sweat-soaked sheets while overhead, the storm matched his torment with its own.

He woke with a gasp, heart thundering against his ribs. The darkness pressed close, broken only by flashes of lightning that turned his humble room stark white. "Just a dream," he whispered, but the words rang hollow. Whatever had haunted his sleep felt too real, too raw to dismiss so easily. Even now,

the echoes of that other life clung to him like sea spray, refusing to fade with waking.

Holland pushed himself up from the bed, muscles aching as if he'd actually fought those phantom battles. The tin cup by his window rattled with each lingering gust as he filled it from the rain barrel. The water was cool against his throat, washing away the last bitter taste of the dream.

Dawn broke through the storm's retreat, painting the clouds in fierce golds and deep roses. Holland pulled aside his threadbare curtain, watching the Silvermane estate emerge from shadow. The mansion stood proud on its hill, morning light gleaming off its windows while the servant's quarters huddled in its shade. The rain-soaked earth released its rich scent, promising another hot summer day in Coralhelm.

The path to the McIntyre cottage was well-worn, his boots following grooves carved by years of daily visits. Ahead, smoke curled from the chimney, carrying the promise of fresh bread and Etty's cooking. The modest home sat in the shadow of the Silvermane mansion, a constant reminder of the gulf between servant and noble.

"Holland!" Etty's voice carried across the wet grass. "Your breakfast will go cold if ye don't hurry yourself!"

A smile tugged at his lips. "Coming, Miss Etty!"

Before he reached the door, Carson appeared in the frame, his weathered face stern. "The master's horses willnae wait on your appetite, lad. Lord Eldric wants them ready within the hour."

"I'll be quick about it, Mr. Carson," Holland promised, ducking past him into the warmth of the cottage.

The McIntyres had raised him since he was three, found abandoned in the Wyldewood. They were his family in every

way that mattered—their love evident in every meal Etty prepared, every lesson Carson taught. Yet he never called them mother or father. The words always caught in his throat, held back by the shadow of memories he couldn't quite grasp. They never pressed him on it, understanding some wounds needed time to heal.

“Aye, and eat up,” Etty fussed, sliding another piece of warm bread onto his plate. Despite years of stable work building his frame strong and sinewy, she still fretted over his meals like he was that small, abandoned boy they'd taken in.

Their cottage, though humble, held more warmth than any room in the grand mansion. Etty's kitchen was her domain, where savory aromas mingled with the comfort of belonging. Carson's quiet strength filled every corner, as steady as the foundations he'd helped lay twenty years ago. They'd built more than a home here—they'd built a sanctuary.

Within the sanctuary of the stable, the familiar scent of hay and leather mingled in the air. Carson's weathered hands moved with practiced efficiency over the saddle straps while Holland worked beside him, each movement precise from years of training.

“Make sure those saddles are cinched up tight, lad,” Carson said, his voice carrying easily in the quiet space.

“Aye, Mr. Carson. Tighter than a merchant's purse strings.” Holland adjusted the final strap, but his mind wandered elsewhere. The weight of unspoken words pressed against his chest until he couldn't hold them back any longer. “Mr. Carson... I'm entering Selection Day again.”

Carson's hands stilled on the leather. A heavy silence filled the stable, broken only by the soft nickering of horses. When he finally spoke, his voice was low, careful. “Aye, I thought ye

might. But tell me true—why’re ye so set on leaving? Have we not given ye a good life here?”

Holland’s throat tightened. “It’s not that. You and Miss Ety... you’ve given me everything. More than I deserve—”

“None of that nonsense,” Carson cut in sharply. “Ye deserve every bit of love we’ve given ye, and more besides.”

“That’s just it,” Holland pressed on. “The dreams I’ve been having... they’re different now. Clearer. Like memories of a life I haven’t lived yet. There’s something waiting for me beyond Krestfell, Mr. Carson. I can feel it in my bones.”

Carson turned to face him fully, his expression grave. “Dreams are dangerous things to chase, lad. They can lead ye places ye’re not ready to go.”

“But what if I am ready?” Holland met his foster father’s gaze. “What if all these years of you teaching me, preparing me—what if it was for this?”

A long moment passed between them, filled with years of shared understanding. Finally, Carson sighed, his shoulders dropping slightly. “Ye’re not just talking about Selection Day, are ye? This is about proving something to Lord Eldric and his ilk.”

“It’s about proving something to myself,” Holland corrected quietly. “I’m tired of being the voidborn servant boy. I want to be more than what they say I can be.”

Carson studied him, years of concern etched in the lines of his face. “Then promise me something, lad. Promise ye’ll not let their cruelty make ye cruel. Whatever ye become, keep that good heart of yours. It’s worth more than all their magic put together.”

The words settled over Holland like a blessing. “I promise, Mr. Carson.”

They returned to their work, the familiar routine now charged with new meaning. Outside, the sun climbed higher, promising another sweltering summer day in Coralhelm. But inside the stable, something had shifted—a quiet understanding between a father who had to let go and a son who had to find his own path.

The morning sun blazed across the courtyard as Holland and Carson led the horses out. The nobility of Coralhelm had gathered, their fine clothes already wilting in the summer heat. At their center stood Lord Eldric Silvermane, tall and gaunt, his very presence seeming to steal the warmth from the air.

Lord Eldric's silver hair caught the sunlight, swept back to display the sharp angles of his face. Every detail of his appearance was calculated to command attention—from his immaculate riding coat to his polished boots—save for the dark mole on his right cheek that marred his otherwise aristocratic features.

"You there. Boy." Eldric's voice cut through the morning air. "Come here."

Holland approached, keeping his eyes lowered as custom demanded. The gathered nobles fell silent, anticipating their morning's entertainment.

"I am told," Eldric's words dripped with disdain, "that you intend to make a spectacle of yourself at Selection Day. Again." He spoke as if each word pained him, as if addressing a servant directly was beneath his dignity. "Have you learned nothing from your previous humiliation?"

Before Holland could respond, Eldric's hand flashed out. The slap echoed across the courtyard, drawing titters from the assembled nobility. Holland's cheek burned, but he kept his stance, refusing to stumble.

“A voidborn wretch, presuming to compete with his betters.” Eldric’s lip curled, revealing perfect white teeth. “Tell me, do you imagine your... physical labors... will stand against generations of refined magical breeding? Against those born to power?”

The nobles laughed on cue, a chorus of practiced derision. Holland could feel Carson’s tension from across the yard, knew the old stableman was forcing himself to remain still.

“Answer me when I address you,” Eldric commanded, his voice sharp with authority.

Holland raised his eyes, meeting Eldric’s cold gaze. “Yes, my lord. I will compete.”

“You will compete,” Eldric mimicked, his tone mockingly formal. “Such aspirations from one who cannot even light a candle with magic. Tell me, does mucking out stables give you delusions of grandeur?”

Another wave of laughter rippled through the crowd. Eldric stepped closer, his voice dropping to a whisper meant only for Holland’s ears. “Remember your place, boy. You were born nothing, and nothing you shall remain. That is the natural order of things.”

Holland stood silent, letting the words wash over him like the morning’s rain. His dreams still burned bright in his mind, defying Eldric’s proclamation of natural order.

“Now,” Eldric straightened, addressing his audience once more, “I believe we have a hunt to begin. Though I dare say tracking a voidborn’s ambitions would prove poor sport indeed.” He mounted his horse with practiced grace, looking down at Holland with final contempt. “See that the horses are properly cared for upon our return. Try not to let your... aspirations... interfere with your actual duties.”

As the hunting party rode out through the estate gates, their laughter fading into the morning air, Holland touched his cheek where Eldric's ring had cut the skin. The sting of it felt like a promise—not of submission, but of change to come.

* * *

The Wyldewood swallowed them whole, ancient oaks and towering pines closing ranks behind the hunting party. Holland and Carson moved like shadows through the undergrowth, their steps silent from years of practice. Behind them, the nobles' chatter shattered the forest's peace—a parade of silk and velvet astride horses worth more than a commoner's yearly wage.

The morning's rain had left the forest thick with scent: wet earth, crushed pine needles, the musty sweetness of decay. While the lords adjusted their elaborate hunting clothes and fumbled with ceremonial spears, Holland read the woodland's signs like a well-worn book. A broken twig here, a scraped bark there—the forest spoke to those who knew its language, magic or no.

Carson caught his eye, a knowing look passing between them. They both understood the irony: these nobles, with all their magical gifts, couldn't track a deer if it walked up and introduced itself. Yet here was Holland, the voidborn stable boy, leading them to their quarry.

"And there it stood," Lord Eldric's voice cut through the forest's whispers, "magnificent as the ancient tales describe. The Crimsonhart, its antlers gleaming like forged iron, eyes burning with otherworldly fire." He gestured expansively from his mount, making sure every noble hung on his words. "Larger

than any stag in recorded history, they say. Of course, that was before I ended its reign over these woods.”

Holland exchanged a subtle glance with Carson as they led the party forward. Every servant in Coralhelm had heard this tale a dozen times, each telling grander than the last. The Crimsonhart had grown from a large stag to a mythical beast that supposedly breathed fire and spoke in riddles.

The ancient oak loomed ahead, its branches heavy with acorns. Holland’s fingers found a smooth stone in his pocket, weighing it thoughtfully. The morning’s humiliation in the courtyard still stung his cheek, and Eldric’s endless self-aggrandizement grated on his last nerve.

“The beast charged,” Eldric continued, his voice swelling with false modesty, “but I stood my ground. One perfect throw of my spear—”

The stone flew true, striking the branch above Eldric’s head. A cascade of acorns rained down, pelting the nobleman and startling his horse. The beast reared, throwing its prestigious rider face-first into a patch of mud.

Shocked laughter erupted from the hunting party before being hastily stifled. Eldric scrambled to his feet, mud dripping from his silver hair, his perfect composure shattered. The dark mole on his cheek seemed to throb with his rising fury.

“My lord!” Holland rushed forward, innocence personified. He plucked an acorn from the ground, holding it up for inspection. “The squirrels must be particularly fierce this season.”

Carson’s weathered face remained carefully neutral as he helped Lord Eldric remount, though the corner of his mouth twitched. The other nobles tried to hide their smirks behind gloved hands, but their eyes danced with barely contained

mirth.

Eldric's jaw clenched so tight it could have cracked nuts. His cold blue eyes fixed on Holland with calculating hatred, promising retribution. When he spoke, his voice was quiet, controlled, and all the more dangerous for it. "Indeed. How... fortunate... that you were here to witness such natural phenomena."

The hunt pressed deeper into the Wyldewood, tension crackling like static in the air. Carson's keen eye caught movement—a flash of tawny hide through the leaves. "There, my lord," he whispered, gesturing toward a young stag grazing in the shadows.

Eldric's lips curled into a smile that didn't reach his eyes. "Flank the creature, boy," he commanded, his voice honeyed with malice. "Drive it toward us."

Holland nodded and began circling wide, each step placed with practiced care. This was a dance he knew well—the careful stalking, the subtle pressure to guide prey toward the hunters. Yet something felt wrong. The hair on the back of his neck stood up, an instinct he didn't understand warning him of danger.

Eldric's fingers tightened around his spear, but his eyes never left Holland's back. The weapon rose, silent as a viper, aimed not at the deer but at the unsuspecting servant. In the moment before he threw, Eldric's voice carried just loud enough for Carson to hear: "Let's see how the voidborn handles real sport."

The spear cut through the air, faster than thought. Carson's warning died in his throat. But Holland—Holland *moved*.

Time seemed to slow, fragments of half-remembered dreams crystallizing into pure instinct. His body twisted, an action both foreign and familiar, as if he'd performed it a thousand times before. His hand snapped up, catching the spear mid-flight. The weapon spun once, twice in his grasp, bleeding momentum

until it came to rest, point down, in the soft earth.

Silence fell over the forest. Even the birds had stopped singing.

Holland stood frozen, his fingers still wrapped around the spear's shaft, heart thundering in his chest. He hadn't thought—hadn't planned—hadn't even seen the spear coming. Yet his body had known exactly what to do.

The nobles' faces showed a mixture of shock and fear. But Eldric—Eldric's rage transformed him. His aristocratic features twisted into something ugly as magic flared to life in his palm, flames dancing between his fingers. "Insolent wretch," he snarled, the fireball growing larger with each heartbeat. "You dare make a fool of me?"

"My lord, please!" Carson threw himself between them, his voice trembling but determined. "The feast awaits your guests. Surely that's a more fitting end to the day than—than this." His eyes pleaded, knowing full well what Eldric's temper could unleash. "Let the boy shovel stables for a month. He'll learn his lesson."

The flames writhed in Eldric's hand, reflecting in his cold eyes as they bored into Holland. For a long, terrible moment, the forest held its breath. Then, with a hiss like angry snakes, the fire winked out.

"A month in the stables?" Eldric's voice dripped venom. "Oh no, Carson. Our voidborn friend has earned far worse than that. Make it two months!" He jerked his horse's reins, turning back toward the estate. "Come. The day's sport is done."

"By all that's holy, lad," Carson's voice shook as he gripped Holland's shoulder. "How in the world did ye do that? I've never seen anyone move so fast in all me years."

Holland stared at his hands, still feeling the ghost of the spear's

weight. "I don't know," he admitted quietly. "It was like... like someone else was moving for me. Like a memory I didn't know I had."

Carson tightened his grip on Holland's shoulder, his voice dropping to a whisper. "Listen to me carefully, lad. Ye need to stay out of Lord Eldric's sight for a while. That man's pride is a dangerous thing, and after today..." He shook his head, worry etched deep in the lines of his weathered face. "Just keep your head down until Selection Day. No more pranks. No more risks. Do ye understand?"

Holland nodded, his mind still reeling from the near miss. "I understand, Mr. Carson."

Back at the estate, Holland made straight for the stables, putting as much distance between himself and Lord Eldric as he could manage. Carson followed, the weight of the day's events pressing down on both of them. As they tended to the horses, the familiar routine brought some peace, but neither could shake the memory of that spear cutting through the air—or how Holland had caught it.

Carson glanced at the boy again, worry etched in his weathered face. "It's alright, lad," he said softly. "If ye don't feel safe in that shack tonight, ye'll stay with me and Etty. We'll not have ye alone if there's trouble brewing."

Holland managed a faint smile. "Thanks, but I'll be fine. Just need some rest."

"Back from the hunt already, are ye?" Etty's familiar voice carried through the stable as she appeared in the doorway, her apron dusted with flour. "Did those fine lords manage to catch anything, or were they too busy strutting about like peacocks?"

Carson chuckled softly, shaking his head. "Ach, no game today, lass. They were more interested in hearing themselves

talk.”

Etty’s sharp eyes shifted to Holland, her concern plain as day. “You’re pale as morning milk, lad. What’s wrong?”

“It’s nothing, Miss Etty,” Holland replied quietly. “Just... a long day. I’ll be right as rain by morning.”

“Nothing, he says!” Etty wasn’t having it. “Ye’ll be wanting supper then. Need something warm in your belly after a day like this.”

Holland offered her a weak smile. “No need to fuss, Miss Etty. I’ll be alright. Just tired is all.”

Etty exchanged a worried glance with Carson as Holland made his way out of the stable, disappearing into the gathering dusk. The moment he was gone, she turned to Carson, hands planted firmly on her hips. “Now then, what in the world happened out there?”

Carson sighed, his gaze lingering on the stable door. “Ye wouldn’t believe me if I told ye,” he said, his voice heavy with the weight of what he’d witnessed. “But something’s changing in that boy, Etty. Something I cannae quite put my finger on.”

Etty’s brow furrowed with worry. “We’ll just have to keep a close eye on him then. Whatever it is, he’s still our boy.”

As they finished with the horses, Carson recounted the day’s events in hushed tones, each revelation deepening Etty’s concern. And as night crept in, they both knew that whatever had begun with the throw of that spear, it was far from over.

* * *

Instead of heading to his shack, Holland’s feet carried him toward the shore. The sun hung low over the Anduin Sea, painting the waves in shades of amber and gold. Here, away

from the Silvermane estate's oppressive shadow, he could breathe easier.

The old hermit's hut perched on the rocky shoreline like a weathered seabird's nest. Smoke curled from its crooked chimney, and the usual collection of curious objects—shells, driftwood, and strange crystals—decorated its exterior. Old Thalius had lived there as long as Holland could remember, though no one seemed to know exactly when he'd arrived or where he'd come from.

Holland found the old man sitting on a worn bench outside his door, carefully carving what looked like a piece of driftwood. His silver-white hair and beard caught the evening light, and his eyes—an unusual shade that seemed to shift between blue and gold—sparkled with their usual keen intelligence.

"Ah, young Holland," Thalius smiled, his deep voice carrying easily over the sound of the waves. "I thought you might visit today. There's a storm brewing in your heart—I can see it plain as the ones that roll in from the sea."

Holland settled onto his usual spot, a smooth boulder worn comfortable by years of similar visits. "Is it that obvious?"

"To these old eyes? Indeed." Thalius set aside his carving. "You're thinking about Selection Day again, aren't you? About how the nobles use their Enera while you must rely on wit and strength alone."

"How do you always know what's on my mind?"

Thalius chuckled, the sound rich and warm like distant thunder. "When you've lived as long as I have, you learn to read people better than any book." He reached into his pocket, pulling out what looked like a smooth black stone shot through with veins of gold. "Tell me, what do they say about being voidborn?" Thalius's eyes held that peculiar gleam that always

preceded his most intriguing discussions.

Holland's jaw tightened. "That we're mistakes. Broken. That since the founding of Thalassar, since the War of Ashes itself, there's never been anyone born without Enera—except for a handful of us." He kicked at the sand beneath his feet. "The nobles call it a curse."

"Ah, the nobles." Thalius's voice took on a thoughtful tone. "They've forgotten much in their rush to claim power, to divide the world into their neat hierarchies." He pulled out the black stone again, its golden veins catching the dying light. "Did you know that during the War of Ashes, when kingdoms burned and rivers ran red, there were those who could turn Enera itself into a weapon of devastating power?"

Holland shook his head. Like most in Eldorien, he knew little of that terrible time. The War of Ashes had reshaped their world, but its true horrors were rarely spoken of.

"One hundred and fifty years of bloodshed," Thalius continued, his voice distant. "But that's not even the most intriguing part of our history. Tell me, what do you know of the Missing Years?"

"The fifty years before the war? Nobody knows what happened then. It's as if..." Holland searched for the right words.

"As if time itself had been erased," Thalius finished. "Strange, isn't it? A kingdom like Thalassar, with all its scholars and record-keepers, and yet no one can recall what transpired during those years." He leaned forward. "But the Blessing Stones—they were here long before any of that. Since the very creation of our world."

"What does this have to do with being voidborn?"

"Everything." Thalius's eyes seemed to shift color in the

fading light. “You see, when Auredor created the Blessing Stones, it was a gift to all people. Every youth who reaches their eighteenth year receives one of the thirty-two Divine Blessings—a moment that marks their entry into adulthood. Each blessing unique, each person given their own way to contribute to our world.”

He traced a pattern in the dirt with his finger. “The nobles twisted this truth, using these sacred gifts to build their hierarchy. But that was never Auredor’s intention. The Divine Blessings were meant to bind us together, to help us serve one another. A blacksmith’s blessing is no less valuable than a warrior’s—each plays its part in the tapestry of life.”

“Yet here we are,” Holland said quietly.

“Here we are indeed.” Thalius’s voice carried a weight of sadness. “The nobles forgot—or chose to forget—that the Blessing Stones were never meant to create division. They were meant to give each person their own unique gift, their own way to contribute to the world.”

Holland frowned. “But what about those of us born without any Enera at all?”

“Perhaps,” Thalius said carefully, “being voidborn isn’t a curse but a gift of a different kind. After all, in a world shaped by Enera, what could be more unique than one who exists outside its influence entirely?”

“You sound like you know something I don’t,” Holland said, studying the old man’s face.

Thalius smiled mysteriously. “I know many things, young Holland. And one of them is that history has a way of moving in cycles. The Missing Years, the War of Ashes, the rise of noble power—these are all part of a pattern that’s still unfolding.” He paused, his expression growing serious. “And sometimes, the

most important players in these patterns are the ones who stand apart from the established order.”

“More riddles,” Holland sighed, though he couldn’t help but smile. “You know, sometimes I think you enjoy being cryptic.”

“And sometimes,” Thalius’s eyes twinkled, “the truth is too vast to be spoken plainly. But remember this: being voidborn doesn’t make you less than anyone else. It makes you unique in all of Eldorien—and uniqueness, my young friend, often precedes great change.”

“Great change,” Holland repeated skeptically. “Like the kind of change that lets a voidborn stable boy survive Selection Day?”

“Ah, Selection Day.” Thalius picked up a handful of sand, letting it sift through his fingers. “The Church of Harmony’s answer to the growing divide between noble and common folk. When the kingdom of Thalassar was established, they watched as a rigid class system took root. Their solution? Let any youth of sixteen or seventeen summers compete for citizenship, regardless of their birth.”

He let the last grains of sand fall. “Such a noble purpose—to bridge the gap between classes through merit alone. Now look what it’s become—just another tool for the nobility to remind commoners of their place.”

“Hard to believe, looking at it now,” Holland said bitterly. “With nobles buying their way through rounds while the rest of us fight until we can barely stand.”

“Like young Lord Faron last year,” Thalius nodded, making Holland start. The old man’s knowledge of current events always surprised him, especially for someone who rarely left his beach. “Purchasing byes through the early rounds while you fought your way to the semi-finals.”

“Only to face an opponent fresh as morning while I could

barely lift my fists.” The memory still stung. “What’s the point of even having the tournament if the outcome is already decided by who has the most gold?”

Thalius’s strange eyes fixed on Holland. “Perhaps that’s exactly why a voidborn competitor makes them so uncomfortable. Gold can buy advantage, and Enera can grant power, but neither can guarantee victory against someone who relies purely on skill and will.”

“Tell that to the fire mage who nearly burned me alive in the quarter-finals.”

“And yet you survived,” Thalius pointed out. “While others, with all their Enera and magical talent, fell before that same opponent. Have you never wondered why?”

Holland thought back to those matches. “I had to be... creative. Find ways to counter their magic without having any of my own. Use the arena, their expectations against them.”

“Exactly.” Thalius stood, walking to the water’s edge. “Like that spear today—no magic helped you catch it. No Enera guided your hand.”

Holland froze, staring at the old man’s back. “How... how did you know about that? I haven’t told anyone, and it only happened hours ago.”

Thalius turned, a mysterious smile playing at his lips. “The waves carry many stories to those who know how to listen.”

“The waves,” Holland repeated flatly. “You expect me to believe the sea told you about what happened in the forest?”

“I expect you to believe that knowledge, like the tide, flows in its own way.” Thalius’s eyes held that familiar, enigmatic gleam. “But perhaps the more interesting question isn’t how I know, but rather how you did something that should have been impossible.”

Holland opened his mouth to press further, then closed it. He'd known the old hermit long enough to recognize when he wouldn't get a straight answer. Still, it unsettled him how Thalius always seemed to know things he couldn't possibly know.

"You're doing it again," Holland sighed. "Speaking in riddles."

Thalius's laugh rolled like distant thunder. "Is it a riddle when the answer simply isn't what you expect it to be?"

"Not what I expect?" Holland shook his head. "What I expect is a simple answer about how you knew about the spear. Instead, you talk about waves and tides and—" He stopped, noticing the amused glint in Thalius's strange, color-shifting eyes. "And you're enjoying this, aren't you?"

"Life's greatest truths rarely come in simple packages, young Holland." Thalius bent down to pick up a piece of driftwood, examining its worn surface. "Take this wood, for instance. Looking at it now, could you tell me its entire journey? Which storm cast it into the sea? Which distant shore it came from?"

"That's different," Holland protested. "You knowing about what happened today, that's not some mystery of nature. You couldn't have—" He paused, a sudden thought striking him. "Unless... you were there? Hidden in the forest?"

Thalius's smile widened. "Now there's an interesting theory. The old hermit, sneaking through the Wylde-wood, spying on noble hunting parties. Tell me, does that sound more reasonable than the waves bringing me news?"

Holland groaned in frustration. "You're impossible sometimes, you know that?"

"So I've been told," Thalius chuckled. "Often, over many years." His expression grew more serious. "But perhaps instead of worrying about how I know what I know, you might consider

what it means that you—a voidborn with no magical ability—could catch a spear thrown with killing intent by one of the most powerful nobles in Coralhelm.”

The reminder of Eldric’s attempt on his life sobered Holland. “I still don’t understand how I did that. It was like...” He struggled to find the words.

“Like remembering something you never learned?” Thalius suggested quietly.

Holland’s head snapped up. “Yes. Exactly like that. But how—”

“Did I know what you were going to say?” Thalius finished, his eyes twinkling. “Perhaps the same way I knew about the spear.”

“Now you’re just playing with me.”

“Perhaps,” Thalius agreed, seeming utterly unrepentant. “Or perhaps I’m helping you ask the right questions. After all, isn’t it curious that these impossible reflexes, these memories that aren’t memories, should surface now? Just days before Selection Day?”

Holland studied the old man’s face, searching for any hint of a real answer. “You know something. Something about me, about what’s happening to me. Don’t you?”

Thalius’s expression softened. “I know many things, Holland. Some of which you’re not ready to hear, others you’re not yet ready to understand. But I do know this—” He placed a weathered hand on Holland’s shoulder. “What happened today wasn’t a fluke. And what you are—what you’re becoming—is far more significant than simply being voidborn.”

“That’s not an answer,” Holland said quietly.

“No,” Thalius agreed. “But it’s all I can give you for now.” He looked up at the darkening sky. “You should head back.

Tomorrow will bring its own challenges, and you'll need your rest."

Holland stood, brushing sand from his clothes. "One of these days, old man, you're going to have to give me a straight answer."

"One of these days," Thalius smiled, his eyes now definitely gold in the fading light, "you won't need one."

As Holland walked back along the shore, the waves keeping time with his footsteps, he couldn't shake the feeling that Thalius knew exactly what lay ahead. The old hermit's words, cryptic as they were, seemed weighted with purpose—as if he were slowly preparing Holland for something beyond just Selection Day.

But for what?

The answer, like so much about the mysterious hermit, remained just out of reach, like trying to catch seafoam in his hands.

Selection Day

Dawn painted the Wyldewood in shades of gold and shadow as Holland faced the steepest hill before him. His legs trembled from the previous two ascents, but he forced himself forward. Loose stones skittered beneath his feet, threatening to send him tumbling back down. Each step was a battle against both gravity and exhaustion.

The morning mist clung to his skin, his breath visible in the cool air. Selection Day loomed ahead—his last chance. Lord Eldric’s attempt on his life in the forest had only hardened his resolve. If he couldn’t win his freedom through the tournament, he’d face worse than a spear in his back.

Reaching the summit, Holland barely paused to catch his breath before moving to the fallen Hearthtree he’d been using for his strength training. The massive log’s bark was smooth in patches where his hands had worn it down over countless lifts. He squatted, fingers finding their familiar holds, and heaved upward. His muscles screamed in protest as he raised the log above his head, arms shaking with the effort.

No magic to aid him. No noble training masters to guide him.

Just determination, raw strength, and the weight of everything he needed to overcome.

The log crashed back to earth, and Holland moved to the river. The sacks he'd prepared lay waiting, heavy with stones chosen for their weight. As he balanced them across his shoulders, the rough stick he used as a yoke bit into his flesh. Each step along the twisting trail tested his balance, the uneven ground forcing him to adjust constantly.

This was his advantage, he told himself. While noble-born competitors trained in pristine courtyards with padded practice weapons, he fought against the Wyldewood itself. Every root, every loose stone, every treacherous slope taught him lessons no training master could provide.

The last rays of sunset faded from the Wyldewood's canopy as Holland finally lowered his aching fists. Blood from his split knuckles had left dark stains on the Heartthtree's pale bark—tomorrow's opponents wouldn't be so forgiving. He flexed his hands, wincing at the sting.

Sleep came in fitful bursts that night, his dreams filled with tournament rings and falling spears. When dawn finally broke, Holland rose from his cot, muscles protesting every movement. Selection Day. After years of preparation, it had finally arrived.

The morning mist rolled in from the sea as he made his way toward Carson and Etty's cottage. They'd insist on feeding him a proper breakfast before the tournament, and truth be told, he needed their steady presence today more than any meal.

A familiar voice drifted from behind the rose bushes near the cottage, stopping him in his tracks. His heart quickened—he knew that voice as well as he knew the sound of the sea.

"You look exhausted," Lily said, stepping out from behind the fragrant blooms, holding a burlap sack. Morning light caught

in her golden hair, and despite his weariness, Holland found himself smiling.

“My lady,” he bowed, the formality somewhat spoiled by his disheveled appearance. “Shouldn’t you be safely inside the estate, away from common folk?”

“Don’t you dare,” Lily scolded, though her eyes sparkled with warmth. “Not with me, Holly.” The nickname, her special name for him, carried years of shared secrets and stolen moments. She stepped closer, genuine concern crossing her features as she noticed his raw knuckles. Without hesitation, she took his calloused hands in her soft ones, examining the damage. “You’ve been pushing yourself too hard again.”

Such a simple gesture, yet it embodied everything that set Lily apart from her family. Where Lord Eldric saw only stations and bloodlines, his daughter saw people. While nobles recoiled from servants’ touch, she offered comfort freely, regardless of rank.

“I’ll be fine,” Holland assured her, though he didn’t pull his hands away. “Nothing worse than stable work.”

“Stable work doesn’t usually leave you bleeding.” Her brow furrowed with worry. “I’ll bring you some of Master Jerome’s healing salve before you leave for the tournament. And don’t even think about refusing,” she added, seeing his protest forming. “I heard about what happened in the forest with Father.” Her voice dropped lower, thick with emotion. “The servants whispered about the spear... if you hadn’t caught it...” She trailed off, composing herself. “Just promise me you’ll be careful today. Father was humiliated, and he doesn’t forget such things easily.”

Holland nodded solemnly. “I know. Carson warned me to keep my distance these past few days.”

"It's more than that." Lily glanced over her shoulder, a habit born from years of avoiding her father's watchful eyes. "I overheard something last night. Something you need to know."

The worry in her voice made Holland step closer, though still maintaining a careful distance. Even here, someone might see.

"After the Blessing Day ceremony," she continued, her voice barely above a whisper, "when you're legally considered an adult... they plan to exile you from the estate."

The words hit harder than any of his morning training. Holland had always known Lord Eldric wanted him gone, but hearing it made it real. "Carson and Etty—"

"Will have no say in it. Father's using his position as your legal guardian." Lily's hands twisted together, a rare show of the anxiety she usually kept hidden behind perfect poise. "It's not right. None of it is right. Carson and Etty raised you, not him. He just—"

"Used them," Holland finished. "Used their kindness to keep them under his thumb." He looked toward the cottage where the only parents he'd ever known waited. "If not for them—and you—I'd have run away years ago."

"Then win today," Lily said with sudden fierceness. "Show them all that worth isn't measured by birth or station." Her blue eyes held his, bright with determination. "I'll be watching from the nobles' gallery. When everyone else is cheering for their champions, know that I'm cheering for you."

Holland glanced at the rose bush beside them, heavy with morning dew. With careful fingers, he plucked a perfect crimson bloom, offering it to her. "Thank you, Lily. For everything."

Her smile, bright as sunrise, warmed something deep in his chest as she accepted the rose. Then she pressed a burlap bag

into his hands. “For Carson and Etty,” she said. “And don’t forget—I’ll bring the healing salve before you leave for the tournament.”

She disappeared behind the roses as quietly as she’d appeared, leaving only the lingering warmth of her presence and the scent of flowers in the air. Holland watched the space where she’d been, the bag heavy in his hands, his heart heavier still.

The cottage door creaked open behind him. “Lad?” Carson’s voice carried the morning’s chill. “Is that you out there?”

Holland turned, forcing his thoughts away from golden hair and secret smiles. The scent of sausages drifted from inside, and his stomach reminded him that training wasn’t the only preparation needed for today.

“Aye, Mr. Carson,” he said, holding up the bag. “Brought something from Miss Lily.”

The cottage welcomed him with its familiar warmth, the hearth fire crackling softly. Etty stood at the stove, her dark hair already escaping its morning bun as she turned sausages in the pan. The simple domesticity of the scene made Holland’s chest tight. How many mornings had he spent in this kitchen? How many more would he have?

“Is that cheese I smell?” Etty asked, her eyes brightening as Holland revealed the contents of Lily’s bag. She shook her head with a fond smile. “That girl’s got a heart of pure gold, she does. Not a drop of her father’s poison in her veins, thank the stars.”

Carson settled into his chair at the table, his weathered face serious. “Speaking of Lord Eldric,” he said, his light Dalemark accent thickening with concern, “word from the stables is he’s been meeting with the tournament officials. Behind closed doors, mind you.”

“Y’ed think he wouldn’t be so bold about it,” Etty sighed,

placing a loaded plate in front of Holland. “Talking openly about buying victories and such.”

“He’s the governor,” Carson replied, his voice bitter, his accent thickening with his anger. “And the king’s own brother at that. Who’s gonna stop him? Being of royal blood makes him think he’s untouchable.” Carson’s jaw tightened. “Last year’s tournament was proof enough. Young Lord Faron barely lifted a finger ‘til the final rounds, while other lads fought themselves to exhaustion. And there sat Lord Eldric in the governor’s box, smirking like he’d already won. The Silvermane name opens every door in Thalassar, and his royal connection means even the king turns a blind eye to his schemes.”

Etty made a disapproving sound as she turned another sausage. “Royal blood or no,” she said, her soft lilt carrying across the kitchen, “a man should have more honor than t’ buy his son’s victories.”

“Honor?” Carson scoffed. “That word means somethin’ different to the likes of Lord Eldric. He sees it as his right—being the king’s brother and all. Thinks the same rules don’t apply t’ Silvermanes.”

Holland pushed his sausage around the plate Etty had just set before him, appetite diminishing as he thought of the corruption he’d face today. The eggs and sausages—normally his favorite breakfast—seemed to lose their appeal under the weight of his thoughts. “At least I know what I’m up against.”

“Aye, that ye do,” Carson said, reaching across the table to clasp Holland’s shoulder. “But don’t ye forget—you’ve got something those noble-born lads don’t. You’ve earned every bit of strength in those arms, every callus on those hands. They may have their magic and their fancy training masters, but you’ve got grit.”

“And a good head on your shoulders,” Etty added, finally settling into her own chair after serving them all. “Though sometimes I wonder, the way ye push yourself in that forest.” Her worried eyes fell to his raw knuckles. “Have ye been at those trees again?”

“Miss Lily’s bringing some healing salve before the tournament,” Holland said quickly, trying to forestall her concern. “I’ll be fine.”

“That girl,” Etty’s face softened. “She’s got a pure heart, she does. Like a rose blooming in thorny soil.”

Carson nodded in agreement, but his expression remained serious. “Whatever happens today,” he said, his voice low and intent, “you remember something, lad. You’re more than what they say you are. More than voidborn, more than a stable boy. You’re our son in every way that matters.”

The words caught in Holland’s chest, making it hard to breathe. Everything he wanted to say—his gratitude, his love for these two people who had raised him—seemed stuck in his throat.

“Now don’t ye get all quiet on us,” Etty said, wiping suspiciously at her eyes with her apron. “Just eat your breakfast proper. Can’t fight on an empty stomach, can ye?” She stood abruptly, turning back to the stove to hide her tears, though her sniffing gave her away.

The morning light streamed through the cottage windows, catching the silver in Carson’s hair and glinting off the wetness in Etty’s eyes as she pretended to busy herself with the pots. Holland forced himself to eat, knowing they were right—he’d need his strength today. But each bite was accompanied by the weight of what he stood to gain—and what he stood to lose.

Holland's boots clicked against the ancient cobblestones as he made his way through Krestfell's winding streets. The morning sun shone on the timber-framed houses, their sharply sloped roofs designed to shed the relentless eastern rains. Around him, the city was already alive with the pulse of Selection Day.

The bustling heart of Coralhelm thrummed with excitement. Sailors' voices carried from the shipyards, mixing with the haggling of merchants beneath colorful market awnings. The scent of the sea rode the wind, mingling with the aroma of fresh bread and smoking chimneys. Everything felt heightened today, as if the city itself held its breath in anticipation.

From his vantage point, Holland could see where Krestfell's divisions lay bare. To his right, the Noble District rose like a separate world—a realm of sprawling mansions and meticulously tended gardens where every detail screamed of wealth and privilege. To his left stretched the familiar streets of the Commoner District, where modest wooden homes stood shoulder to shoulder, their weathered facades telling stories of generations who'd endured.

The Shirebrook River cut through it all, a steady flow that connected Krestfell to the Anduin Sea. Ships dotted its surface, laden with goods bound for Valoria and beyond, a reminder of why Coralhelm stood as one of the wealthiest districts in all of Thalassar. Not that much of that wealth ever trickled down to people like him.

Ahead, the Thane Arena rose against the morning sky, its stone arches and spires dwarfing everything around it. Named for a hero whose deeds had faded to legend, today it would witness another attempt at making history. The sea breeze

swept through its open design, carrying salt and promise—and perhaps, Holland thought, a chance to change everything.

The crowd already gathered outside the arena split instinctively: nobles in their finery to the elevated sections, commoners to the expansive lower areas. Even here, the divisions of Krestfell held firm. But today, in the arena itself, those divisions might mean nothing. Today, skill and courage would matter more than birth and station.

Or at least, that's what the rules promised.

Beyond the arena's entrance, the air grew thick with tension. Nobles lounged in their cushioned gallery seats, servants scurrying between them with wine and delicacies. The excitement among the noble families was palpable—and with good reason. Selection Day wasn't merely a tournament; it was a gateway to Valadent Academy, the most prestigious school in all of Thalassar. Only the victors would earn the right to attend, making each spot invaluable.

This explained the fervor with which noble families had bid for the tournament byes during Lord Eldric's hunt last week. Each bye meant one less fight, one less chance for their precious heirs to face defeat or injury. More importantly, it meant a shorter path to victory, to Valadent, and to the power and prestige that came with graduation. A commoner might dream of the academy, but nobles saw it as their birthright—one they'd pay handsomely to secure.

In the commoner section, people packed the wooden benches shoulder to shoulder, their excited whispers building like waves against a shore. Holland caught fragments of conversation about the matches ahead, about odds and favorites, about the three hundred years since a commoner had won. Three hundred years since anyone without noble blood had walked

through Valadent's hallowed gates.

At the heart of it all sat Father Caelan, the Selection Day Overseer. His presence commanded attention—not through grandeur or intimidation, but through the quiet authority he carried. His royal blue robes, trimmed with silver and gold embroidery, marked him as a monk of the Church of Harmony. The broad silk sash at his waist, alternating bands of silver and gold, spoke of his connection to the divine. But it was his eyes that drew Holland's attention—keen and observant, missing nothing.

The monk's carved briarwood pipe seemed an extension of himself, smoke curling lazily upward as he surveyed the arena. Each puff appeared deliberate, like he was weighing more than just tobacco in that weathered bowl. Here was the one person Lord Eldric couldn't touch, the one guarantee of fairness in a tournament where gold often spoke louder than skill.

Lord Eldric himself stood nearby, every inch the governor and royal prince. His silver hair caught the morning light, but the smile he wore didn't reach his cold eyes. As the king's younger brother, he wielded his power with the confidence of someone who knew no consequences would touch him.

"Ladies and gentlemen, nobles and commoners alike," Father Caelan's voice rang clear across the arena, cutting through the murmurs and whispers. "We gather under the banner of Selection Day not just to witness competition, but to glimpse the true essence of character. In this arena, before the eyes of Aurendor, we are all equal—tied not by rank or birth, but by the shared thread of fate."

The monk paused, his eyes sweeping across both sections of the arena. "Today's victor will receive full sponsorship to attend Valadent Academy for three years, their education and

boarding paid in full by the Crown.”

Holland’s heart thundered in his chest at these words. Valadent wasn’t just a school—it was a path to citizenship. If he could win, if he could graduate, he would become a full citizen of Thalassar. No longer would he be bound by the restrictive laws that kept commoners in their place. No longer would Carson and ETTY have to bow and scrape before Lord Eldric. As a citizen, he could own property, start a business, even challenge noble authority through legal channels. It was more than just an education—it was freedom.

“Let this tournament serve as a testament to unity in pursuit of greatness,” Father Caelan concluded, “where neither station nor privilege clouds the path to victory.”

Father Caelan bowed his head, offering a silent prayer. The crowd erupted in cheers, a wave of excitement sweeping through the arena as the significance of the moment washed over them.

Lord Eldric, ever the practiced manipulator, clapped loudly, his face beaming with exaggerated approval. “A stirring speech, Father Caelan! Truly, I share your sentiments entirely,” he declared with feigned admiration, though the curl of his lips betrayed the lie.

Father Caelan, not one to be easily deceived, raised a single eyebrow, his expression touched with dry humor that seemed to glide just beneath the surface. “Ah, my lord, your words ring with the charm of a lark’s song in spring, though I find the sincerity of your praise as elusive as a cool breeze on a summer’s day.” His tone remained respectful, yet carried enough wit to subtly hint at the dissonance between Eldric’s flowery words and his notorious reputation.

For a brief moment, the governor’s mask faltered, confusion

flickering across his sharp features as he processed the monk's response. Unsure whether he'd been insulted or praised, Eldric chose caution, offering a warm smile in return. "You're very welcome, Father."

As the two men turned their attention back to the arena, the crowd's energy surged like a rising tide, their collective anticipation hanging thick in the air. The Selection Day Tournament had begun, and with it, the delicate dance of deception, honor, and ambition was set in motion.

The first match was announced, and the crowd's attention shifted to a young noble stepping into the arena. Lord Alic Thorne from Gullhaven, barely sixteen, gripped his rapier with trembling hands. His opponent, Roderic Ironshod, strode in like the mountain of a man he was. At seventeen, Roderic's days at his father's forge had built him into someone who looked more warrior than blacksmith's son.

Holland watched carefully. Roderic was more than just another competitor—he was a friend, someone who understood what it meant to dream beyond the station you were born to. They had grown up together sharing the same hopes, the same burdens. Now they both stood on the cusp of something that could change their lives forever.

Alic's water magic might have given him an advantage, had fear not frozen him in place. The young noble's knees locked as Roderic approached, his massive smithing hammer slung casually over one shoulder. Before Roderic could even swing, Alic crumpled to the ground in a dead faint.

The Battle Judge's laughter barely stayed professional as he checked the fallen noble. "Winner by forfeit—Roderic Ironshod!"

The commoner section erupted in cheers, while the nobles

turned up their noses or whispered behind jeweled hands. Holland caught Roderic's eye as his friend left the arena, and they shared a knowing look. One small victory for the common folk, but the day was far from over.

The next match brought Lady Lyra Parr and Lady Isolde Wyrmsbane to the arena floor. Both noble-born, both trained since childhood in the arts of combat and magic. Lyra's bow seemed to sing as she nocked her first arrow, her movements flowing like water as she darted between the stone barriers Isolde conjured with her earth magic.

The ground trembled beneath the spectators' feet as Isolde, rooted like an ancient oak, commanded the very earth to rise at her bidding. No weapon graced her hands—her magic was weapon enough. The air grew thick with dust as stone walls erupted from the ground, blocking Lyra's arrows with devastating precision.

The final exchange left the crowd breathless. Isolde's assault came like an avalanche—great chunks of earth hurtling through the air with unstoppable force. The sound of Lyra's magical barriers shattering echoed through the arena like breaking glass. When the dust settled, Lady Isolde stood victorious, and even the nobles seemed awed by the display of raw power.

Holland studied every move, every technique. Each match was a lesson he couldn't afford to ignore. But it was the next fight that truly caught his attention—Tavish Hargrove, the fisherman's son from Anchor's Point, against Lord Nathaniel Ravenscroft.

Tavish entered the arena proudly carrying his father's harpoon, the weapon gleaming with a sheen of seawater. Nathaniel's daggers flashed in the sunlight as he twirled them with practiced ease, small flames dancing along their edges.

The difference in their training showed in every movement—Tavish’s raw talent against Nathaniel’s years of expensive tutoring.

The commoner fought with everything he had, sending blasts of water that would have capsized lesser opponents. But Nathaniel’s precision, honed by countless hours with the realm’s finest instructors, proved too much. Each strike of his fire-enhanced daggers came with surgical accuracy, until finally, Tavish fell.

The defeat in the fisherman’s son’s eyes spoke volumes. It wasn’t just a loss—it was a reminder of all the advantages denied to those of common birth.

Holland’s own match approached. He gripped the borrowed sword tighter, feeling its unfamiliar weight. Lord Percival Thornridge waited in the arena, already conjuring flames that danced around him like eager serpents. The noble’s reputation for fire magic preceded him, but something stirred in Holland’s chest—a certainty he couldn’t explain.

As Holland stepped into the arena, jeers rained down from the noble section. “Give up, you voidborn wretch!” The words were familiar thorns, but today they couldn’t pierce his resolve. His eyes found Lily in the crowd, her golden hair catching the sunlight. When their gazes met, she discreetly brought her hand to her lips, blowing him a kiss. Holland smiled, pretending to catch it and pull it to his heart.

“You go get ‘em, my boy!” Carson’s voice cut through the noble din.

“Do your best, lad!” Etty’s encouragement followed, their voices a reminder of everything he fought for.

Lord Percival stood waiting, flames already dancing around his fingers. The noble hadn’t even drawn his sword yet, clearly

expecting his magic alone would suffice against a voidborn opponent. The smirk on his face spoke of absolute certainty in his victory.

Holland didn't wait for the noble's showmanship. The moment the match began, he charged forward, his borrowed sword low and ready. The sudden aggression caught Percival off guard—commoners were supposed to be cautious, hesitant. They weren't supposed to attack first.

Percival's flames roared to life, painting the arena in orange light. Heat seared the air as fireballs hurtled toward Holland. But something strange was happening in Holland's mind—he could see the patterns, predict the trajectories. His body moved in zigzag lines, each step precise, each dodge perfectly timed. The flames passed close enough to singe his clothes, but couldn't touch him.

The noble's confidence faltered. Holland pressed forward, moving faster than he'd ever moved before. His mind filled with battle tactics he'd never learned, instincts he'd never known he possessed. Rather than question this strange gift, he embraced it, letting his body flow with this newfound knowledge.

Percival finally drew his sword, barely catching Holland's strike in time. Steel rang against steel, the sound sharp and clear above the crowd's gasps. The noble tried to maintain distance, launching more fire spells, but Holland had closed the gap. The heat was intense, sweat streaming down his face, but he didn't relent.

In a move that felt as natural as breathing—though he'd never practiced it—Holland executed a sweeping kick. Percival's sword went flying, its clang against the arena floor echoing through the sudden silence. Before the noble could complete another spell, Holland's fist connected in a perfect uppercut.

Percival crashed to the ground, unconscious before he hit the dirt.

The arena erupted. Commoners leaped to their feet, their cheers thunderous. Holland stood over his fallen opponent, chest heaving, the borrowed sword still steady in his grip. He looked up at Lord Eldric's platform, meeting the governor's cold stare. For once, there was something like uncertainty in those noble eyes.

Father Caelan leaned forward in his seat, his pipe forgotten in his hand. "Fascinating," he murmured, studying Holland with keen interest. "Most fascinating indeed."

The Battle Judge raised Holland's arm. "Winner—Holland Blackthorn!"

As the cheers washed over him, Holland caught sight of Lily again. Her smile was radiant, though she tried to hide it behind her fan. In the commoner section, Carson and Ety were embracing, tears streaming down his foster mother's face.

One victory closer to citizenship. One step closer to freedom. But the hardest fights still lay ahead.

Several rounds had passed, each match eliminating competitors until only four remained. Two from noble lineage, two from humble origins—a balance that hadn't been seen in tournament history. The crowd buzzed with anticipation, nobles shifting uncomfortably in their cushioned seats while commoners dared to hope.

Father Caelan's pipe smoke curled thoughtfully as he studied the tournament bracket. "Curious," he mused, drawing Lord Eldric's attention. "Young Corbus Housen... I don't recall seeing him fight in any of the previous rounds."

"Ah." Lord Eldric's smile didn't reach his eyes. "Fortune has favored the boy. A remarkable string of byes, wouldn't you

say?”

“Six consecutive byes.” Father Caelan’s tone remained carefully neutral, though his eyes narrowed slightly. “The odds of such an occurrence must be... astronomical.”

“Aurendor works in mysterious ways, Father Caelan.” Eldric’s voice carried a note of warning beneath its silk. “Who are we to question divine will?”

“Who indeed?” Father Caelan took another pull from his pipe, the smoke rising like incense between them. Both men knew the truth—that gold, not Aurendor’s grace, had paved Corbus’s path to the semifinals. But to speak such thoughts aloud would be dangerous, even for a monk of Father Caelan’s standing.

Then came the moment that would change everything—Roderic’s semifinal match against Corbus Housen.

Holland’s stomach knotted as he watched his friend enter the arena. Roderic’s hammer seemed heavier now, after his previous matches, but he held it high. The blacksmith’s son had fought his way here through skill and determination, while his opponent had merely waited in the shadows, protected by his family’s gold.

Across the arena, Corbus smirked, and something glinted at his throat. Holland squinted, then felt his blood run cold. A runestone—illegal in tournament matches—hung from a silver chain. The gem pulsed with forbidden power, its presence a blatant mockery of the tournament’s rules.

The Battle Judge’s eyes flickered to the stone, then quickly away. His hand unconsciously patted the heavy purse hidden beneath his robes—a purse that hadn’t been there that morning. He raised his arm to begin the match, purposefully avoiding Father Caelan’s direction.

“Be careful, my friend,” Holland whispered, his fingers grip-

ping the wooden railing until his knuckles turned white.

The first exchange came without warning. Corbus's hands shot up, the runestone at his throat flaring with unnatural light. A boulder, larger than any Holland had seen in the previous matches, materialized above the arena. The raw power emanating from it made the air thick and heavy, tasting of metal and magic.

Roderic reacted on instinct, slamming his hammer into the ground. A wall of stone erupted before him—solid, well-crafted, born from years of understanding how stone could bend to will. For a heartbeat, Holland dared to hope.

Then the boulder struck.

The impact shook the entire arena. Roderic's barrier exploded into fragments, the sound like a thousand plates shattering at once. Through the dust, Holland saw his friend roll to avoid the worst of it, but blood already streaked down his face from where stone shards had cut him.

"That's not natural earth magic," someone in the crowd muttered. Others nodded, eyes drawn to the gleaming stone at Corbus's throat. But the Battle Judge remained silent, his hand still touching that hidden purse.

Roderic pushed himself up, legs trembling but steady. His hammer dragged in the dirt as he raised it, leaving a curved line in the arena floor. Blood dripped from his chin, but his eyes held the same determination Holland had seen countless times at the forge. Iron in his veins, Carson always said about the Ironshod family.

"Still standing?" Corbus's voice dripped with contempt. "Let's fix that."

The second boulder came faster than the first, wrapped in a sickly green glow from the runestone's power. This time,

Roderic couldn't raise a defense in time. The impact lifted him off his feet, and the sound of his body hitting the ground echoed through the sudden silence of the arena.

Holland's world narrowed to his friend's crumpled form. "Get up," he whispered, the words a desperate prayer. "Please, get up."

Roderic stirred, trying to push himself up on shaking arms. His hammer lay just out of reach, its head half-buried in the dirt. The same hammer that had shaped metal since he was strong enough to lift it, that had helped build half the houses in the Commoner District. Now it might as well have been a league away.

Then Corbus stepped forward, and Holland's blood turned to ice.

The noble's boot pressed into Roderic's cheek, grinding his face into the dirt. "Know your place, smith's son," he sneered, loud enough for the front rows to hear. The runestone pulsed at his throat, as if eager for more violence.

Roderic—who had shared his last crust of bread when Holland was hungry, who had taught him the ways of the forge, who had dreamed with him of a better future—lay helpless as noble cruelty displayed itself for all to see.

"ENOUGH!" Father Caelan's voice cracked like thunder across the arena. The monk had risen from his seat, pipe forgotten, his face dark with righteous anger. "Lay a finger on him once more, young lad, and you shall find yourself disqualified!"

The sudden authority in his tone made even Lord Eldric stiffen. Corbus hesitated, his boot still pressed against Roderic's face. The runestone pulsed once more before he stepped back, his smirk never wavering.

Holland was already moving, vaulting over the barrier into the arena. The dirt crunched under his boots as he ran to his friend. He could hear the Battle Judge making weak protests about unauthorized entry, but Father Caelan's voice cut through again: "Let the boy tend to his friend."

The judge fell silent, his hand still hovering near his hidden purse.

Gently, so gently, Holland lifted Roderic. His friend's labored breathing was hot against his shoulder, each step drawing a barely suppressed groan. Blood matted Roderic's hair, and Holland could feel the unnatural heat where the enhanced magic had struck him.

The crowd reached out as he passed, their touches filled with solidarity and shared pain. Some whispered prayers to Aurendor, others whispered promises of remembrance. But Holland felt only the weight of his friend in his arms and the burning in his chest that had nothing to do with exertion.

"My boy!" Mr. Ironshod's voice cracked as Holland carried Roderic into the mending ward. The blacksmith's massive hands, calloused from years at the forge, now trembled as they reached for his son. Mrs. Ironshod sobbed quietly beside him, already preparing clean cloths and water.

But before Holland could step away, Roderic grabbed his wrist with surprising strength. His voice came rough through split lips: "When you face him... be careful."

"If I face him," Holland corrected, but Roderic shook his head, wincing at the movement.

"Because you're Holland," he said, as if that explained everything. A tear cut through the blood on his cheek. "Do it for me. For all of us."

Mr. Ironshod caught Holland's eye as he turned to leave, the

blacksmith's expression a mix of pride and pain. "Thank you," he said softly. "Now go show them what we're made of."

Walking back to the arena, Holland felt something crystallize inside him. The anger at Roderic's defeat, the years of noble oppression, the dream of citizenship—it all hardened into steel-cold purpose. His next match against Nathaniel Ravenscroft wasn't just about winning anymore.

It was about justice.

Nathaniel stood waiting, his twin daggers already wreathed in flames. Unlike Corbus, there was no mockery in Nathaniel's stance—only the confidence of years of proper training.

Holland gripped his borrowed sword tighter, feeling the worn leather of its handle. The weapon felt strange in his grip, yet somehow right. From the noble section, he heard the usual jeers, but they seemed distant now, unimportant.

"Begin!" called the Battle Judge.

Nathaniel moved first, his daggers leaving trails of fire as he darted forward. Holland had seen him fight before—had watched him dispatch Tavish with those same precise strikes. But something was different now. As the noble's blades came for him, Holland's body seemed to know exactly what to do.

He stepped aside, the flames passing close enough to heat his cheek. His borrowed sword moved as if guided by memories he'd never made, parrying strikes he shouldn't have seen coming. Nathaniel's eyes widened slightly—this wasn't how a common-born was supposed to fight.

"Stand still, damn you," Nathaniel growled, his flames growing hotter with his frustration. The air shimmered with heat as he pressed his attack, forcing Holland to give ground.

But with each step back, Holland felt more certain. More focused. The sword in his hand became an extension of himself,

and the strange combat instincts flowing through him felt as natural as breathing. When Nathaniel lunged again, Holland was ready.

His blade met Nathaniel's daggers in a shower of sparks. The noble's fire magic seared the air between them, but Holland held firm. There was a pattern to Nathaniel's attacks—a rhythm learned from expensive tutors and countless practice bouts. Once Holland saw it, he could counter it.

The next exchange came faster. Nathaniel's daggers blurred with speed, flames trailing in their wake. But Holland moved like water, each dodge precise, each parry perfectly timed. The noble's frustration grew with every failed strike, his flames burning wilder, less controlled.

"How?" Nathaniel panted, sweat gleaming on his brow. "How are you—"

Holland didn't let him finish. He pressed forward, his borrowed sword singing through the air. Nathaniel's eyes widened as his perfect defense crumbled. One dagger went flying, then the other, their flames extinguishing as they hit the dirt.

The noble stumbled backward, raising his hands to cast another fire spell. But Holland was already there, his sword at Nathaniel's throat.

For a moment, the arena held its breath.

Then Nathaniel lowered his hands. "I yield," he said, the words bitter on his tongue.

The Battle Judge's voice rang out: "Winner—Holland Blackthorn!"

The crowd erupted, their cheers thunderous. But Holland barely heard them. His eyes were already turning to where Corbus waited, knowing that the real fight—the one for Roderic—

was still to come.

In the wake of Holland's victory, Lord Eldric rose from his seat, his face a mask of barely contained fury. With one sharp gesture, he silenced the cheering crowd, his authority cutting through their joy like a blade through silk.

"Order," he commanded, each word precise and cold. "Will be maintained. Those who disturb the peace will be removed." The threat in his voice needed no elaboration. The crowd fell quiet, their celebration dampened but not extinguished.

Lord Eldric straightened his embroidered jacket, composing himself. "We shall observe an intermission before the final match of the Selection Day Tournament." His eyes swept the arena, challenging anyone to object.

Then he turned to Father Caelan, offering a smile that didn't touch his eyes. "If you'll excuse me, Father. There are matters requiring my immediate attention."

Father Caelan inclined his head, pipe smoke curling between them like an unspoken accusation. Without another word, Lord Eldric strode from the platform, his silken robes billowing behind him.

A Champion Crowned

Father Caelan found Holland in the mending ward, his head bowed beside Roderic's cot. The young man's knuckles were white where they gripped the edge of his chair, though his friend's breathing had steadied into the rhythm of healing sleep.

"Quite the display of swordsmanship out there," Caelan said, keeping his voice low. The pipe in his hand had gone cold, forgotten in the excitement of the match.

Holland's shoulders tensed, but he didn't turn. "Just trying to survive, My Lord..."

"Ah, where are my manners." Caelan settled onto a nearby stool, the wood creaking beneath him. "I'm Father Caelan of the Church of Harmony." He pulled a worn leather pouch from his robes and began tamping fresh tobacco into his pipe. "I've been tasked with overseeing Selection Day, though I suspect Lord Eldric finds my presence... inconvenient."

That earned him a glance from Holland, quick but assessing. "Will this count as confession, Father? If you truly wish me to speak freely."

"Confession?" Caelan's laugh was warm as he lit his pipe. "No,

lad. Consider this a conversation between two souls who've both seen the shadows beneath Coralhelm's gilded surface." Smoke curled between them like an offering of trust. "What's spoken here stays here."

Holland's gaze returned to Roderic, to the bandages wrapped tight around his friend's chest. "Few share that perspective, Father Caelan. Particularly among those who dine in marble halls." His voice dropped lower, barely a whisper. "I've seen men flogged for less than meeting a noble's eye."

The pipe smoke turned bitter in Caelan's mouth. He let out a long breath, watching it dissipate in the ward's dim light. "Aye, lad. This world has twisted far from what it was meant to be. The nobles speak of honor while forgetting its meaning." He leaned forward, his eyes kind but intent. "But you're not here to merely survive, are you? I saw it in the way you fought—there's something more driving you."

Holland's fingers traced the edge of Roderic's blanket, smoothing an invisible wrinkle. "The Valadent Academy," he said finally, the words carrying the weight of years of dreams. "Everyone says it's impossible. A voidborn at Valadent?" A bitter smile crossed his face. "But it's the only path to citizenship I'll ever have."

"Ah." Caelan drew on his pipe, the ember's glow reflecting in his eyes. "And yet you fight with skills that would shame many a noble-born warrior. Curious, for one without Enera."

Holland stiffened, but Caelan raised a peaceful hand. "Peace, lad. I'm not here to accuse. I'm here because I saw something out there that reminded me of old tales—tales of warriors who fought not with magic, but with something deeper." He gestured to Roderic's sleeping form. "Something that drives a man to stand against impossible odds for those he holds dear."

“Tales won’t change what I am,” Holland said, but his voice held less certainty now. “Every day, I’m reminded that I have no magic, no station, no—”

“You have heart,” Caelan interrupted, his voice suddenly firm. “Like the Felarians of old.”

“The what?”

Caelan’s eyes grew distant, as if seeing beyond the ward’s stone walls. “Magnificent creatures, the Felarians. Lions with wings of flame, they say, though none have been seen in an age. But it wasn’t their fire that made them legendary.” He tapped his pipe against his palm. “It was their heart. Their courage to stand against any foe, no matter the cost.”

“And like them,” Holland said quietly, “I’ll probably vanish into legend too. Another tale of someone who dared to dream too high.”

The old monk studied him for a long moment, smoke wreathing his head like a crown. “You know, lad, I’ve spent decades in the Church’s libraries, reading accounts of great deeds and greater failures. And do you know what I’ve learned?” He leaned forward, his voice dropping to barely a whisper. “The most remarkable stories always begin with someone doing what everyone else claimed was impossible.”

A groan from Roderic made Holland lean forward, but his friend merely shifted in his sleep, the bandages stark white against his skin. Holland settled back, his jaw tight. “Dreams are dangerous things, Father. They make you forget your place.”

“And who decided your place, I wonder?” Caelan’s pipe smoke drifted upward, catching the light from the ward’s narrow windows. “The same nobles who turned the Blessing Stones into tools of division rather than unity?”

Holland glanced at the door before answering. “I had a dream

recently,” he said, voice low. “Not the kind that fades with morning light. This one... it felt like memory. Like I was living another life entirely.” His hands clenched and unclenched in his lap. “I was someone else. Someone stronger. Someone who could—” He broke off, shaking his head.

“Could what?” Caelan prompted gently.

“Could make a difference.” The words came out barely above a whisper. “But dreams like that... they’re more curse than blessing. They make reality harder to bear.”

Caelan set his pipe aside, the ember dying to ash. “Dreams shape us, lad, whether we wish them to or not. They’re like seeds in fertile soil—even in darkness, they grow toward light.” He gestured to the arena beyond the ward’s walls, where the crowd’s distant murmur still echoed. “What I saw out there wasn’t just survival. It was defiance. Purpose.”

“Purpose?” Holland’s laugh held no humor. “My purpose is to serve Lord Eldric’s house until I die or he finds a reason to cast me out. That’s the reality of being common-born.”

“Reality,” Caelan said, “has a curious habit of changing when we least expect it.” He reached into his robes and withdrew something that caught the light—a small medallion bearing the seal of the Church of Harmony. “Sometimes, lad, fate deals cards we never thought to see in our hand.”

The medallion caught a shaft of sunlight, sending ribbons of gold dancing across Roderic’s blanket. Holland recognized the intricate design—the Selection Day winner’s medal, its surface etched with the ancient symbols of the Church of Harmony.

“Eighteen of these are awarded across Thalassar today,” Caelan said, letting the medallion spin slowly on its chain. “One for each district. More than just metal and markings, they represent something the nobles have forgotten—that true

worth isn't measured by birth or blessing, but by the strength of one's spirit."

Holland watched the medal turn, each flash of light like a beckoning finger. "The last common-born to win one was—"

"Three hundred years ago," Caelan finished. "A farmer's son, if I recall correctly. Not just in Coralhelm, but in all eighteen districts, no commoner has claimed victory since." He shook his head sadly. "The nobles' grip has grown that tight, their corruption that complete."

He smiled then, tucking the medal back into his robes. "Though I suspect Thalassar will soon have a new tale to tell."

"Father, I—"

"The final match approaches," Caelan said, rising from his stool. His knees cracked in protest, but his eyes were bright with purpose. "And while I must maintain my neutrality as overseer..." He paused at the door, glancing back. "Remember this, lad—sometimes the greatest act of defiance is simply refusing to accept the story others have written for you."

As the monk's footsteps faded down the corridor, Holland looked at Roderic's sleeping face, then toward the arena where Corbus waited. The distant roar of the crowd seemed to pulse with his heartbeat, like the wingbeats of those legendary Felarians, calling him toward something larger than survival.

Holland made his way toward the arena entrance. His fingers brushed the worn leather of his sword grip, a habit that had become as natural as breathing.

"There's our lad." Carson's voice was rough with emotion as it cut through the pre-match clamor. He and ETTY stood waiting, their faces a mirror of pride and worry that made Holland's chest tight.

Carson cleared his throat, fighting for composure. "Ach, listen

here—” He stopped, then did something he hadn’t done since Holland was small. He pulled him into a fierce embrace, his calloused hands gripping Holland’s shoulders. “Show these fancy lords what a commoner can do, aye?”

“Ye’ve got the heart of a lion,” ETTY added softly, her eyes shining with unshed tears. She pressed a quick kiss to his cheek. “For luck, my dear boy.”

Holland straightened, drawing strength from their presence. “I won’t let you down.”

“Lettin’ us down?” Carson’s laugh was gruff. “Not possible, lad.” His voice grew thick with emotion. “Now go give that noble prat what’s comin’ to him.”

As Holland turned toward the arena, the roar of the crowd growing louder with each step, he felt the warmth of their love like armor around his shoulders. He might face Corbus alone in the ring, but he carried the strength of the McIntyres with him.

Lord Eldric swept onto the elevated platform, his silver-threaded cloak billowing behind him. The late afternoon sun caught the jewels adorning his fingers as he raised his hands for silence.

“My dear people of Coralhelm,” his voice carried across the arena with practiced authority. “The moment we’ve all awaited—the grand finale of Selection Day!” He paused, savoring the nobles’ applause. “Please, take your seats.”

Father Caelan resumed his position in the overseer’s chair, but his eyes narrowed at this break from tradition. “My Lord,” he said, keeping his voice carefully neutral. “Is there a reason the Battle Judge isn’t making the customary announcements?”

Eldric’s smile didn’t reach his eyes. “The people expect certain... standards, Father. Would you have me disappoint

them?” He turned back to the crowd before Caelan could respond. “Presenting our first contestant—skilled in earth magic, favored son of House Housen—Lord Corbus!”

The noble section erupted in cheers as Corbus strode into the arena, his ceremonial armor gleaming. Eldric’s voice cooled noticeably as he continued, “And his opponent... Holland Blackthorn.”

The commoners’ response drowned out Eldric’s disdain. They reached across the barriers, hands outstretched to touch Holland’s shoulders as he passed. Their support was a wordless rebellion—each pat on the back a defiance of noble authority.

In the arena below, Holland and Corbus faced each other. Holland’s grip tightened on his sword as he remembered Roderic’s broken body in the healing ward. Across from him, Corbus basked in the nobles’ chants, his lips curled in that same cruel smile he’d worn while defeating Roderic.

The arena bell rang, its clear tone cutting through the crowd’s roar.

The final match had begun.

Holland charged forward as Corbus gripped the runestone hanging at his throat—a crystal reservoir of extra Enera that glowed with stored power. The noble’s advantage was clear; while Holland’s body ached from six brutal matches, Corbus had faced only Roderic before this. That single fight had been enough to show his cruelty.

Stones erupted from the ground, whistling through the air like angry wasps. Holland weaved between them, his feet finding purchase in the torn earth as if guided by instinct. Each movement carried the weight of exhaustion, but the memory of Roderic’s broken body drove him forward.

The crowd gasped as he closed the distance. His blade sang

through the air, meeting Corbus's hastily conjured stone sword with a screech of steel on stone. They clashed in a deadly dance, neither willing to yield. Each strike felt familiar to Holland, as if his body remembered battles his mind had never fought.

Corbus pressed forward, drawing deep from his runestone's power. Fresh earth magic rippled through the arena, forming barriers and projectiles that forced Holland to dive and roll. His muscles screamed in protest—the toll of six previous matches evident in every labored breath.

"Look at you," Corbus taunted, his movements fluid and fresh. "Stumbling around like a drunk. Did you really think you could match a noble after exhausting yourself against lesser opponents?" He punctuated his words with a barrage of stone spikes that caught Holland's arm, drawing blood.

Holland's blade deflected another spike, but his movements were slowing. The nobles in their elevated seats leaned forward, sensing blood in the water. Even Lord Eldric's permanent scowl had twisted into an anticipatory smile.

Desperate, Holland launched into a combination that had served him well in earlier matches—a feint to the left, followed by a spinning strike. But Corbus was ready, having watched Holland's previous fights. The runestone flared brilliant blue as he channeled a massive surge of Enea.

The ground beneath Holland exploded upward. He managed to dodge the first pillar, but the second caught him squarely in the ribs. The impact sent him flying, his sword spinning away into the dust. The arena fell silent save for Holland's ragged coughing, flecks of blood staining the dirt beneath him.

On his knees, lungs burning for air, Holland watched Corbus approach. The noble's hands wove through the air, magic condensing into a jagged stone dagger. The runestone pulsed

at his throat, promising power enough to make any “accident” look convincing.

Corbus’s smile mirrored the one he’d worn while breaking Roderic.

But as death approached, something stirred in Holland’s mind—ancient memories, not his own, rising like a tide. A single word blazed through his consciousness, demanding to be spoken. It burst from his throat with the roar of a beast long forgotten:

“VITERNULLUM!”

The word hung in the air like thunder, and for a heartbeat, nothing happened. Then Corbus’s stone dagger crumbled, dissolving into useless pebbles between his fingers. His confident smirk faltered.

“What—?” He reached within for more Enera, hands weaving the familiar pattern of a spell. Nothing happened. The ground remained still beneath his feet, deaf to his commands. Panic flashed across his face as he clutched at the runestone, only to find it dark and lifeless as coal. “Impossible!”

Holland rose slowly, each movement a battle against his battered body. Something had happened—something powerful—but the word that had burst from his lips moments ago slipped away like water through his fingers. He couldn’t remember what he’d said, only that Corbus’s magic had vanished—and with it, his advantage.

“No magic?” Holland spat blood onto the arena floor. “Now you know what it feels like to be voidborn. Let’s see how well you fight when we’re truly equal.”

Corbus backpedaled, his composure shattering. He’d never faced an opponent without the crutch of his earth magic or his runestone’s borrowed power. “Stay back!” His voice cracked as

he scrambled for the sword at his belt, fingers fumbling with the clasp.

Too slow.

Holland closed the distance in three quick strides. His first punch caught Corbus in the jaw, snapping his head back. The second drove into his stomach, doubling him over. All the fury of six grueling matches, all the rage at seeing Roderic broken, all the years of noble oppression—Holland poured it into his fists.

The nobles' section erupted in outraged cries as their champion fell back under the assault. Lord Eldric half-rose from his seat, face purpling with rage. But no one dared interrupt. Even without magic, the fight had to play out.

Corbus tried to defend himself, throwing wild punches that Holland easily avoided. Years of hard labor had built strength that no amount of noble training could match. A spinning kick caught Corbus in the chest. He crashed to the ground, blood streaming from his nose, all pretense of superiority gone.

Holland stood over him, chest heaving. Something shifted in the air—a pressure, a presence that made the crowd hold its breath. But Corbus saw more. His eyes widened in terror as he beheld not just a commoner, but something ancient and powerful—a spiritual manifestation with wings of flame and the intensity of a lion.

Corbus raised trembling hands. "I yield!" The words came out in a terrified rush. "I yield, I yield! Don't kill me!"

The silence shattered.

The commoner section exploded in deafening cheers, their combined voice shaking dust from the arena's highest reaches. They poured over the barriers, lifting Holland onto their shoulders. Their chant began low but swelled until it shook the

arena walls:

“CHAMPION! CHAMPION! CHAMPION!”

Through the haze of victory, Holland caught glimpses of the chaos his triumph had unleashed. The commoner section was a storm of celebration, while the noble seats churned with barely contained outrage. Somewhere in between, Lily leapt to her feet, her joyous cry cutting through the discord of her fellow nobles.

“That’s our boy!” Carson’s voice carried over the din, thick with emotion. He and Ety stood embracing each other, tears streaming down their faces. Holland had never seen Carson cry before.

Lord Eldric’s face had turned an alarming shade of purple. “This... this can’t be happening,” he sputtered, each word dripping with venom. “I refuse to acknowledge this... this commoner as winner.”

The crowd fell silent, the temperature in the arena seeming to drop. Even the nobles who had been sneering moments before shifted uncomfortably in their seats. To deny a clear victory on Selection Day was unprecedented.

Father Caelan rose from his seat, the Selectee’s Medal hanging from his grip. “Lord Eldric, would you have me record in our annals that you attempted to obstruct the sacred traditions of Selection Day?”

The implication was clear. While the Church’s stance on commoner rights remained a delicate matter, Selection Day’s traditions were sacrosanct. Breaking them would spark controversy even among Eldric’s peers.

Eldric’s jaw worked soundlessly, the vein in his temple throbbing. His gaze darted between the medal and the waiting crowd. Even he wouldn’t risk such a public scandal.

Caelan turned to address the crowd. “My dear friends and fellow Eldoriens,” Father Caelan’s voice filled the arena. “We have witnessed a remarkable display of skill, determination, and courage. Holland Blackthorn has proven himself worthy of Selection Day’s ancient traditions.”

He descended from the overseer’s platform with practiced grace. The crowd held its breath as he approached Holland, who still stood in the center of the arena, blood and sweat mingling on his brow. Behind him, Corbus was being helped away by the healers, his earlier bravado replaced by stunned silence.

“Kneel, Holland Blackthorn.”

Holland dropped to one knee, his body screaming in protest from the day’s battles. Father Caelan lifted the Selectee’s Medal, its runes etched deep by centuries of tradition.

“With the authority vested in me by the Church of Harmony, and in accordance with the ancient laws of Selection Day, I name you Selectee.” The medal’s chain settled around Holland’s neck, its weight unfamiliar yet significant. “Rise as a candidate of Valadent Academy.”

The commoner section erupted once more, their cheers drowning out the mutters of dissent from the noble seats. Lord Eldric had gone deathly still, his rage frozen into a mask of cold hatred. But even he couldn’t speak against the formal declaration.

As Holland rose, his eyes found Lily in the crowd. She was beaming through tears, propriety forgotten as she clapped openly for him. Then he found Carson and Etty—his family in all but blood—their faces shining with fierce pride.

* * *

The celebration's roar faded to murmurs as Father Caelan wove through the thinning crowd. He found Holland at the center of a dwindling circle of well-wishers, the young man's shoulders drooping despite his attempts to stand tall.

"Holland—" Caelan paused, watching the new champion accept congratulations with uncertain nods. "Or should I say Selectee Holland?"

"Just Holland, Father." His voice was hoarse from the day's exertion. Sweat and dirt still streaked his face, dried blood crusting at the corner of his mouth.

"That match with Corbus..." Caelan lowered his voice, drawing closer. "Something happened. A word you spoke that stripped his magic away. Yet when I try to recall it—" He tapped his temple. "Nothing. As if it never existed. Others say the same."

Holland's hand went to his throat, a nervous gesture. "I thought I was the only one. There was this moment where everything just... shifted. Like someone else's memories poured into my head. Then they vanished, taking the word with them." He met Caelan's gaze. "Does that sound mad?"

"Mad?" Caelan's lips quirked. "The truly mad rarely wonder about their sanity, my boy. They're far too convinced of their own reason."

Relief flickered across Holland's face, but uncertainty lingered in his eyes. Caelan squeezed his shoulder, noting how the young man tensed at the touch before forcing himself to relax.

"I leave for the capital tomorrow," Caelan said. "I would very much like to converse with you again. When you reach the academy, seek me out at the church."

"I will. And Father?" Holland's fingers brushed the medal at his chest. "Thank you. For standing up there, when Lord

Eldric—”

“Rest now. Today’s victory is yours, but tomorrow brings new battles.”

As Caelan walked away, he caught sight of Carson and Etty hovering nearby. They flanked Holland like protective shadows, supporting him as his legs finally began to shake. The day’s toll could no longer be ignored—seven matches worth of punishment demanded payment from muscle and bone.

They guided him home to his shack as Holland’s steps grew heavier with each passing moment. By the time they reached his cot, he could barely keep his eyes open.

Carson pulled off Holland’s boots while Etty fussed with the blankets. Neither mentioned how his fingers remained curled around the Selectee’s Medal, clutching it like an anchor to this moment—proof that it wasn’t just another dream of escape.

He was asleep before they reached the door, his breathing deep and even. Tomorrow would bring changes, challenges, and choices. But for now, he’d won something no one could take away: a future of his own making.

* * *

Eldric’s boots echoed off stone walls as he paced the corridor beneath the arena. “How did this happen, Darrius? How did your pampered heir lose to a stable boy?”

Lord Darrius wrung his hands, sweat beading on his forehead despite the corridor’s chill. “The runestone worked perfectly until... until it just shattered, my Lord Governor. I don’t understand—”

“Clearly.” Eldric’s voice could have frozen water.

In the torchlight, Corbus huddled against the wall, knees

drawn to his chest. His eyes, usually sharp with arrogance, stared unseeing down the hall toward the arena. The boy who'd strutted into the match was gone, replaced by something broken.

Eldric's boot caught Corbus in the ribs, sending him sprawling. "Answer me, boy! How did that voidborn trash best you?"

The kick seemed to jar something loose. Corbus looked up, trembling. "He... changed. At the end. It wasn't human anymore."

Darrius and Eldric exchanged glances. "What nonsense is this?" Darrius asked his son.

"His aura..." Corbus's voice cracked. "He had no Enera, but there was something else. Something ancient. Powerful." His hands shook as he touched his chest where the runestone had hung. "It drained everything. My magic, the runestone, all of it—gone in a heartbeat."

"The word," Eldric pressed. "What did he say before your magic failed?"

"I can't—" Corbus's eyes went wide, like a spooked horse. "It's just... gone. But when I fell, when I looked up at him..." He shuddered. "Wings of flame. A lion's spirit burning through human flesh."

"Get him out of my sight," Eldric snapped at the hovering attendants. They hurried to help Corbus up, but the young noble could barely stand.

Once Corbus was gone, Darrius's composure cracked. "He has to pay for this, Eldric. My son—"

"Your son failed." Eldric's words cut like a knife. "But you're right about one thing. No voidborn learns to fight like that on his own. Someone's been teaching him, preparing him." A cold smile curved his lips. "Find out who, and I'll make them wish

they'd never heard the name Holland Blackthorn."

"And the boy himself?"

Eldric's smile widened, showing teeth. "Leave that to me. I believe it's time we reminded everyone what happens to commoners who reach above their station."

* * *

Dawn crept over Krestfell Bay, its mist twining between ships like restless spirits. Father Caelan watched the fog dance from his carriage window, his mind still churning over Holland's victory. The word—the impossible word that had stripped Corbus's magic away—nagged at him like a loose thread he couldn't quite grasp.

"Driver!" The urgency in his voice surprised even him. "Change course for Stonehaven."

Three days later, the modest abbey of Stonehaven rose before them, its weathered stones holding centuries of secrets. Unlike the grand cathedrals of the capital, this church's power lay in what it contained: one of the sacred Blessing Stones, where thousands came each year to receive Aarendor's gifts.

Brother Bolar met him at the door, his thin frame nearly lost in the folds of his robes. "Father Caelan? We weren't expecting—"

"Is Maelis here?"

The monk nodded, leading him through torch-lit corridors to a heavy oak door. Inside, Father Maelis hunched over his desk, his red mane streaked with silver. He looked up from his writing, ink-stained fingers pausing mid-stroke.

"Caelan?" Maelis rose, embracing him like a brother. Once Bolar had withdrawn, he asked, "What brings you racing across

the kingdom?”

“A boy.” Caelan leaned forward. “A commoner who won Selection Day.”

Maelis nearly knocked over his inkwell. “Impossible. The nobles have controlled those tournaments for centuries.”

“This boy had no magic, Maelis. No Enera at all. Yet when defeat seemed certain, he spoke a word—” Caelan’s hands clenched. “A word none of us can remember. It stripped his opponent’s magic away like autumn leaves in a storm.”

Maelis’s face went still. From his desk drawer, Maelis produced an iron key, its surface worn smooth by generations of use. He crossed to a metal crest of the Church of Harmony mounted on the wall. Behind it lay a keyhole, small and innocuous. The lock turned with a sound like distant thunder.

Together, they pushed aside the adjacent bookcase, its hidden hinges moving with surprising silence. Beyond lay a stairwell, descending into darkness. Maelis lit a torch, and they followed the familiar steps down.

The secret library welcomed Caelan like an old friend. Though he’d walked these stacks countless times, the sight still filled him with reverence. Towering shelves stretched into shadows, their ancient wood dark with age and secrets. Books bound in leather and metal filled every space, their spines marked with scripts so old few could read them. Scrolls packed crystal cases, their parchment yellow and fragile as autumn leaves. The air itself felt heavy with knowledge, thick with the sweet-musty scent of aging paper and ink.

Three reading tables stood in the chamber’s heart, their surfaces scarred by centuries of scholars’ work. Brass candlesticks waited at each station, their flames soon pushing back the darkness as Maelis worked his way around the room.

“The text was here,” Caelan said, moving with certainty to a particular shelf. But Maelis was already there, pulling the scroll from its resting place.

Dust swirled in the candlelight as they unrolled the scroll carefully on the nearest table. Caelan’s fingers found the passage almost instinctively—he’d read it years ago, though its meaning had seemed merely academic then.

He who Eldorien hath chosen shall possess the blessings of Auredor, e’en if their souls lack harmony with Eldorien. Yea, they shall wield that which we dare not utter, for to the unchosen, ‘tis veiled in obscurity—an idiom of the divine, to annul all that dares to obstruct their path...

“This is it,” Caelan said, his voice barely above a whisper. “Holland used a word none of us can remember, and it stripped away his opponent’s magic.”

Maelis gripped the edge of the table, his knuckles white. “The prophecy speaks of one chosen by Eldorien itself. Are you suggesting—”

“I don’t know what I’m suggesting.” Caelan ran a hand through his hair. “But a voidborn boy winning Selection Day? A word of power that vanishes from memory? It can’t be coincidence.”

“If you’re right...” Maelis let out a slow breath. “If the Dawnbringer prophecy is truly unfolding—”

“Then everything changes.” Caelan straightened. “Holland’s Blessing Day approaches. He’ll be here soon, seeking Auredor’s gift like all who come of age.”

“What would you have me do?”

“Watch him. Guard him, if you can. And Maelis?” Caelan’s voice hardened. “Watch Eldric Silvermane too. That man would strangle hope itself if he thought it threatened his power.”

“How will I know the boy?”

“Brown hair, brown eyes, strong for his age. He’ll arrive with Eldric’s party—a commoner among nobles.” Caelan’s mouth twisted. “Though after Selection Day, I doubt anyone could miss him. Remember his name: Holland Blackthorn.”

Later, as Caelan’s carriage disappeared into the gathering dusk, Maelis stood at the abbey’s gates. The old ballad rose unbidden to his lips, its familiar verses carrying new weight:

In shadows deep where fears hold sway, A Dawnbringer comes to light the way, Chosen by Eldorien’s ancient might, Blessed by Aurendor’s sacred light.

Through broken halls and kingdoms proud, Where noble magic dims the crowd, The voiceless speak, the weak grow strong, As power bows to right from wrong.

With words of power long forgot, That break the chains the proud have wrought, The Dawnbringer stands, both sword and shield, Till crown and common learn to yield.

When hearts unite and spirits soar, As prophesied in days of yore, The world shall wake to greet the dawn, And find the light we thought was gone.

His voice echoed off ancient stones, and for the first time in years, the prophecy felt less like legend and more like dawn breaking over the horizon.

The Blessing Stone

A month after Selection Day, spring had swept through Coralhelm like a painter's brush. Holland walked the winding path through Wyldewood Forest, the Selectee Medal a familiar weight against his chest. Not that he'd planned to wear it—but after the townsfolk of Krestfell had scolded him for hiding it away, he'd understood. To them, this simple piece of metal meant more than victory. It meant possibility.

He touched the medal absently, remembering the whispered conversations in Krestfell's taverns and market stalls. Commoners gathering in corners, dreaming of their own shops, their own trades. But permits came from noble mayors, and those permits rarely found their way into common hands. Instead, skilled craftsmen worked from shanty workshops, always watching for the enforcers who'd brand them criminals for daring to make their own way.

Some had swung from the hangman's noose for such dreams. The nobility claimed it was about order, about proper channels. But everyone knew the truth—dead craftsmen couldn't compete with noble-owned shops.

The path opened onto Krestfell's craftsmen's quarter, where the Ironshod Smithy stood proud against the morning sun. Three generations of smiths had worked these forges, established back when blacksmiths were scarce enough that even nobles couldn't deny them permits. Those days were long gone.

"Good day, Mr. Ironshod!" Holland called. "Is Roderic about?"

The smith's face split into a grin. "Ah, Mr. Champion! You honor our modest establishment. How fare Mr. Carson and Miss ETTY?"

"Please," Holland smiled, "just Holland." He pulled a cloth-wrapped package from his satchel. "They're well. Asked me to bring you this."

Mr. Ironshod's eyes lit up at the smell of fresh bread. "Miss ETTY's work! Finest baker in Coralhelm, mark my words." He gestured toward the back. "Roderic's in the yard. Go on through."

Holland weaved through the smithy's displayed wares—tools, hinges, and construction fittings that showed Mr. Ironshod's mastery. Quality that demanded higher prices, thanks to the mayor's crushing taxes. Yet customers still came, choosing craftsmanship over the cheaper noble-owned shops.

In the rear courtyard, twin furnaces breathed heat into the morning air. Roderic sat beneath an awning, surrounded by half-carved wooden handles. His hands moved slowly but steadily, each cut precise despite the lingering stiffness in his joints. The bruises Corbus had left might have faded, but Holland could still see how his friend favored his left side, how deep breaths made him wince.

"Hey, Roddy!"

Roderic looked up, a grin splitting his face. "Well, if it ain't

the champion himself! Come to visit us common folk?”

“Says the man who had half of Krestfell betting on him.” Holland settled onto a nearby stool. “How’re the ribs?”

“Better when I don’t laugh.” Roderic set aside his carving. “Which means you should probably leave before you start telling jokes.”

“That bad, are they?”

“Worse.” Roderic’s grin widened. “Almost as bad as your attempts at noble speech. ‘I say, good sir,’” he affected an exaggerated noble accent, “‘would you be so kind as to pass the salt?’”

Holland clutched his chest in mock offense. “I do not sound like that!”

“Oh, but you will. Just wait till you’re at that fancy academy. Bet you’ll come back talking about...” Roderic waved his hand dramatically, “‘the utterly magnificent splendor of proper etiquette.’”

“Actually,” Holland matched Roderic’s terrible accent, “I believe the correct term is ‘ostentatious comportment.’”

“Osten-what now?”

“No idea. I heard it once before. But it sounds noble, doesn’t it?”

Their laughter filled the courtyard, but something in Holland’s chest tightened. He’d been putting this off all morning.

“Roddy...” The smile faded from his face. “I’m leaving tomorrow. For the Blessing Stones in Stonehaven. And after that—”

“About time.” Roderic’s voice was quiet but firm. “Been wondering when you’d tell me.”

“I should have come sooner. It’s just—”

“What? Worried I’d be stuck here, bitter about my ribs while

you're off becoming something greater?" Roderic tossed a wood shaving at him. "We both knew you wouldn't stay in Krestfell forever. Some people..." He gestured at himself, at the handles he was carving. "Some of us are meant to make the tools. Others are meant to use them to change the world."

"Roddy—"

"Just promise me one thing." Roderic's eyes met his, serious now. "When you're up there with all those nobles, don't forget what it's like down here. Don't forget the people who can't get permits, who work from shanties because they've got no choice. Don't forget us."

Holland gripped his friend's shoulder. "Never."

They spent the next hours talking about everything and nothing, both knowing it would be their last chance for a long while. When Holland finally stood to leave, Roderic grabbed his arm.

"Show them," he said softly. "Show them all what a commoner can do."

* * *

The walk back through Krestfell felt different than when he'd arrived. Word of his presence had spread, and at every corner someone waited to greet the commoner champion. Mothers pressed warm kisses to his cheek, their children peeking from behind skirts with wide-eyed wonder. Fathers clasped his hand with work-hardened grips, their congratulations only slightly undermined by casual mentions of unmarried daughters.

"My Sophie's quite the cook," one hopeful mother said, smoothing her apron. "And she's got such a gentle heart—"

"Thank you, Mrs. Thimbley," Holland managed, heat creeping

up his neck. “But I’m afraid I’m not ready for marriage quite yet.”

“Ah well,” she sighed, patting his cheek. “Can’t blame a mother for trying. You do us proud at that academy, you hear?”

Their hope followed him like a physical thing, pressing against his shoulders heavier than any noble’s expectations. To them, he wasn’t just Holland anymore. He was proof that the walls between common and noble weren’t as solid as they seemed. That someone could break through.

The Selectee Medal hung warm against his chest, a constant reminder of everything it represented. Not just to him, but to every parent who dreamed of better things for their children. Every craftsman working from a hidden workshop, dreaming of their own shop. Every commoner who’d ever looked up at those manor houses on the hill and thought: *maybe*.

He touched the medal, remembering Father Caelan’s words after his victory. “*Today you won more than a tournament, Holland. You won hope. Guard it well.*”

He just prayed he wouldn’t let them down.

Holland’s feet carried him past Krestfell’s borders, toward the small cabin where Thalius made his home. The old hermit had become more than just a mentor—he was the closest thing to a grandfather Holland had ever known. Even if half the time he couldn’t tell whether Thalius was being profound or just enjoying the confusion on Holland’s face.

Smoke curled from the cabin’s chimney, dancing with the late afternoon light, mingling with the sweet scent of pipe tobacco that always seemed to follow Thalius. Before Holland could knock, Thalius’s voice called from inside. “Either come in or stop blocking my sunlight, boy.”

Holland grinned, pushing open the worn door. The cabin

smelled of herbs, woodsmoke, and Thalius's ever-present pipe, which sent lazy rings toward the ceiling. But something was different—empty crates and packed bags lined the walls. His smile faltered.

"You're leaving?" The words slipped out before he could stop them.

Thalius looked up from his chair by the fire, pipe in hand, his eyes twinkling beneath bushy brows. "The road calls when it calls. Like that medal around your neck—it has its own timing."

Holland touched the medal self-consciously, then sank onto a stool near the fire. "I wanted to show you. And to tell you I'm heading to Stonehaven tomorrow, for my blessing." His voice caught. "I won't be coming back. Lily told me—her father's made his decision. Once I receive my blessing, I'm to be exiled from the estate. From Krestfell entirely."

"Ah." Thalius tapped his pipe against the hearth. "Lord Eldric always did fear what he couldn't control."

Holland nodded, staring into the flames. "I'll have to leave them—Carson, Etty, Lily, everyone. They're the only family I've ever known, and I can't even protect them."

"Family," Thalius mused, sending another smoke ring floating upward. "A curious thing, family. Not just blood and bone, but something deeper. Something that lives here—" he tapped his chest, "—where distance can't touch it."

"But—"

"The heart, Holland, is not a vessel with limits. It grows with each person we let in. Those we leave behind make room for those we've yet to meet. Both can exist together, like stars in the night sky—separate, yet part of the same constellation."

Holland frowned. "I don't understand."

"You will." That cryptic smile played at Thalius's lips. "Speak-

ing of understanding... Blessings are curious things. Some are common as copper, others rare as starlight. And some..." He paused, eyes glinting in the firelight. "Some haven't been seen in so long, people have forgotten they exist."

"What do you mean?"

"Mean? Must I mean something?" Thalius chuckled. "Perhaps I'm just an old man who talks too much. Or perhaps..." His eyes met Holland's, suddenly sharp as steel. "Perhaps you'll discover something at that ceremony that hasn't been seen since before the fifty-year void."

Holland opened his mouth to ask more, but Thalius was already standing, reaching for a leather pouch on his shelf. "Here. For the road ahead."

The pouch felt warm in Holland's hands. Inside lay a key, its metal ancient and dark with age. Intricate patterns swirled across its surface, catching the firelight in ways that made them seem to move. The bow was shaped like a crown, or perhaps flames—it seemed to shift when he wasn't looking directly at it.

"What does it open?"

"Questions, questions. You'll know when you need it." Thalius's voice grew serious. "Keep it close, Holland. Always. Some keys unlock more than just doors—they unlock destiny itself." He clasped Holland's shoulder. "You've grown strong, boy. Stronger than you know. But remember—true strength isn't in what you can do, but in what you choose to do with it."

Holland stood slowly, the weight of farewell heavy in his chest. This wise, peculiar old man had guided him over the past few years. Every riddle, every cryptic smile had pushed Holland to think beyond what he thought possible.

"I... thank you, Thalius. For everything." His voice roughened. "I wish—"

“No wishes needed, boy.” Thalius’s eyes softened as he drew Holland into an unexpected embrace. He smelled of pipe smoke and wisdom, if wisdom had a scent. “I believe our paths will cross again one day, if Aurendor allows it.”

Something in the way he said it made Holland’s skin prickle, as if the words held more meaning than he could grasp. But before he could ask, Thalius was already shooing him toward the door, that familiar mysterious smile playing on his lips.

Later, as Holland walked home in the gathering dusk, the key hung heavy at his side. He couldn’t shake the feeling that Thalius had known something—about the blessing that waited in Stonehaven. But like so many conversations with the old hermit, the truth danced just out of reach, like trying to catch smoke with bare hands.

* * *

The morning air was crisp as Carson checked the wagon’s wheels one final time, his movements precise after years of preparing noble carriages. Three days to Stonehaven—the journey would test both axle and spirit.

“The supplies are secure,” Holland said, tightening the last rope. His birthday gift from Etty, a new traveling cloak, hung from his shoulders. The date wasn’t really his—Carson had simply marked the day he’d found a small boy abandoned in Wyldewood Forest. By chance or fate, it matched Lady Lily’s own birthday, and she’d delighted in sharing her celebration with him ever since, sneaking him sweets despite his protests.

The Silvermane carriage gleamed in the morning light, its silver trim catching the sun. Carson took the reins while Holland and Etty settled into the supply wagon behind. As

they passed through the estate gates, Holland caught a glimpse of Lily watching from her window. Her slight nod carried the weight of what was to come—after the blessing ceremony, her father’s exile would force him from Coralhelm forever.

The road unwound before them like a dusty ribbon, carrying them through Coralhelm’s changing landscape. Etty’s stories and laughter made the hours flow easier, though Holland caught the worry in her eyes when she thought he wasn’t looking. They both knew this journey marked more than just his blessing day.

At Brindlebrook, the journey’s midpoint, the Silvermanes disappeared into a fine inn while Holland helped Carson and Etty make camp. Under a tapestry of stars, wrapped in warm blankets, they shared the comfortable silence of family. Holland memorized every detail—the way Carson’s laugh echoed in the night, how Etty’s hands moved as she told stories of her childhood in Dalemark. Soon, memories would be all he had of them.

Stonehaven emerged from the morning mist like something from a storybook. The town nestled against towering cliffs, protected by natural walls of weathered stone. A winding path led them down into Emerald Valley, where grass rippled like green waves in the breeze. The distant thunder of a waterfall echoed off the rocky walls.

But it was the Blessing Stone that drew every eye. Ancient and imposing, it rose from the cliff face like a dragon’s spine, its weathered surface telling tales of countless blessings given. At its end stood a waist-high cylinder of rock, worn smooth by time and touch. The handprint carved into its surface seemed to pulse with possibility.

The town square churned with excitement. Twice a year, Stonehaven transformed from a quiet valley town into the

beating heart of Aurendor's blessings. People packed the streets, their voices filled with anticipation.

The line to register snaked through Stonehaven's square, filled with the buzz of excited voices and the smell of fresh bread from nearby stalls. Holland shifted his weight, boots scuffing against worn cobblestones as the morning sun warmed his neck.

When he finally reached the monk's table, the weathered wood was smooth beneath his palms. The monk looked up, eyes sharp beneath his hood.

"Here for the Blessing Stone Ceremony?" The monk's quill hovered over the parchment, ready to record.

"Yes, sir." Holland's voice came out steadier than he felt.

"Your name, young man?"

"Holland Blackthorn."

At a nearby post draped in shadow, Brother Bolar's breath caught. The name hit him like a physical thing. *Watch for the boy from Krestfell*, Father Maelis had said. *The commoner who won Selection Day.*

"Place of origin?" The registration monk's quill scratched against parchment.

"Krestfell, sir." Holland watched the ink flow, marking his presence in Stonehaven's records.

"Parents' names?"

The question hung in the air for a heartbeat. Holland thought of the Wyldewood, of abandonment and finding home. Of Carson's steady hands teaching him to ride, of Etty's warm embrace when nightmares woke him. His voice filled with quiet pride.

"Carson and Etty McIntyre." He straightened his shoulders. "My parents, sir."

The monk's quill paused, perhaps hearing something in Holland's tone. His eyes softened slightly. "Very well, Holland Blackthorn. The Ceremony begins at sunset." He sprinkled sand over the wet ink. "May Aurendor guide your blessing."

As Holland turned away, Brother Bolar melted deeper into the shadows. His hands trembled slightly as he adjusted his cloak. Father Maelis needed to know—the boy had arrived.

The Resting Stones Inn hummed with life, packed with travelers from across Thalassar. Voices from the Silverwood mixed with Ironvale accents, while sailors' tales from Havenshore drifted through pipe smoke and laughter. Holland followed Carson and Etty through the press of bodies, the floorboards creaking beneath their feet.

"Oi, ye big ugly toad!" Carson's voice boomed over the din.

The tavern fell quiet. A mountain of a man turned from the bar, his bald head gleaming in the lamplight, gray mustache curled like a sleeping cat. "Are ye talking ta me, ye smelly horse bucket?"

Tension crackled. Then both men's faces split into grins.

"Percy, ye old devil!" Carson wrapped the giant in a bear hug, their laughter infectious enough to restart the tavern's chatter.

"Too long, ye daft fool." Percy's voice rumbled like distant thunder. His eyes found Etty, then settled on Holland. "And this must be the lad who's got all of Coralhelm chatterin'."

He extended a hand thick as a tree branch. "Percy Thornhaven. Known yer da since we were wee troublemakers in Dalemark." His grip was firm but careful, like a man used to measuring his strength.

"Got yer room ready, just like ye asked." Percy's eyes twinkled. "Though Carson, ye might've mentioned in yer letter that yer boy here was the Selection Day champion. News traveled faster

than yer letter.”

Holland glanced at Carson, warmth spreading in his chest. They’d planned this months ago, preparing for the day Holland would receive his blessing.

Percy led them up creaking stairs to a modest room. A single bed with a worn quilt stood against one wall, a small cot tucked into the opposite corner. Holland set their bags down while Ety smoothed the bedding with practiced hands.

“The dining hall’s filled ta the rafters,” Percy said, “but I’ve kept a spot fer ye near the hearth. Best seats in the house, if ye ask me.”

The dining hall took Holland’s breath away. Yellow cedar beams soared overhead, carved with intricate patterns that caught the lamplight. Hunting trophies and tapestries covered the walls, each telling its own tale. The hall buzzed with energy as nearly a hundred people shared food, drink, and stories.

They’d barely settled at their table when a shadow fell across them. A figure in shabby, dark robes stood beside Holland, the fabric worn thin at the edges.

“Pardon me, young man.” The voice was refined, a nobleman’s accent despite his appearance. “Might you be Holland Blackthorn from Krestfell?”

Carson’s hand tightened on his mug. “Who’s askin’?”

“I assure you, I mean the lad no harm,” the figure said, pushing his hood back slightly. “I am Brother Bolar, a monk of Stonehaven. Father Maelis, who oversees today’s ceremony, wishes a word with you before it begins.”

Holland frowned. “Why the hidden robes? And how does Father Maelis know me?”

“The matter requires... discretion.” Brother Bolar’s voice lowered further. “Father Maelis is a close friend of Father

Caelan.”

“Father Caelan?” Holland straightened.

“Indeed,” Brother Bolar nodded. “He sent word ahead about you.”

Etty reached across the table, her fingers brushing Holland’s arm. “Be careful, love.”

Holland squeezed her hand, then stood. “If Father Caelan sent you, I’ll come.”

The crowd parted around them as Brother Bolar led the way out of the inn, into Stonehaven’s bustling streets.

Brother Bolar led Holland through winding streets that climbed toward the Abbey. The valley spread out below them, dotted with thousands of campfires where those who couldn’t afford lodging made their temporary homes. In the fading light, the fires looked like fallen stars scattered across the grass.

Holland studied his guide’s back. The monk’s shabby robes seemed at odds with his noble bearing, and something about his hurried pace set Holland’s nerves on edge. The sun dipped behind the valley’s towering walls, casting long shadows across their path.

“Brother Bolar,” Holland started, but movement in the corner of his eye made him pause. Someone was following them, keeping to the deeper shadows.

They approached the city gates when a figure stepped into their path. Even in the dim light, his fine clothes marked him as nobility. Lord Darrius Housen’s lips curled into a devious smile.

“There he is, guards!” Darrius’s voice carried the practiced outrage of nobility scorned. He held up an empty coin purse. “That commoner boy stole the aurens from my purse. Arrest him at once!”

Guards materialized from the shadows, surrounding them. Brother Bolar stepped forward, “There’s been a misunderstanding—”

A guard’s club caught him in the back, sending him stumbling. “Common filth should keep quiet unless spoken to.”

“But I’m a monk of the—” Brother Bolar’s protest ended in a grunt as another guard punched him in the midsection, causing him to crumple to the ground.

Holland felt rough hands seize his arms. The last thing he saw before they dragged him away was Darrius Housen’s satisfied smirk, illuminated by the dying light of day.

* * *

Water dripped somewhere in the darkness, each splash echoing off stone walls. Holland shifted on the damp floor, trying to find a position where the chains wouldn’t bite into his wrists. The cell stank of mold and worse things, the kind of smell that spoke of years of misery soaked into the very stones.

Other prisoners huddled in the shadows, but their eyes gleamed when they looked his way. Holland forced his breathing to stay steady, even as fear and rage churned in his gut. The Blessing Ceremony would begin soon. Carson and Etty would be waiting, wondering, worrying—

The cell door screeched open. Torchlight spilled across the floor as Lord Darrius stepped in, flanked by guards. The other prisoners pressed themselves against the back wall, but Holland’s anger burned hotter than his caution. He lunged forward, only to be yanked back by the chains.

Darrius’s fist drove into his stomach. Air rushed from Holland’s lungs as he crumpled to his knees.

“My son still has nightmares because of you,” Darrius snarled, following with a kick that sent Holland sprawling. “You strut around after winning Selection Day like you belong among your betters.” A backhand split Holland’s lip. “You’re nothing but a voidborn wretch.”

The word “voidborn” rippled through the cell. Whispers stirred in the shadows. Every prisoner knew the story—a commoner winning Selection Day, defying generations of noble rule. Hope, dangerous and forbidden, sparked in the darkness.

“Shut your filthy mouths!” Darrius spun toward the whispering prisoners, his fine clothes a mockery in the dim cell. He turned back to Holland, boots clicking on stone. “You’ll learn your place, boy. I’ll make sure—”

A mountain of a man stepped between them. Muscle rippled beneath prison rags as he crossed his arms. “Did I hear right? This is Holland Blackthorn? The one who won at Krestfell?”

“Stand aside, filth.” Darrius’s hand went to his sword. “Or—”

“My lord.” The warden’s voice cut through the tension like a blade. He stood in the doorway, Father Maelis and Brother Bolar at his shoulders. Brother Bolar’s shabby robes couldn’t hide his noble bearing.

“Warden.” Darrius straightened, smoothing his tunic. “I was merely questioning the thief about my stolen aurens.”

“Interesting.” The warden’s eyes narrowed. “You claimed the boy stole from you moments before his arrest. Yet Brother Bolar here—” he gestured to the monk, “—was with him at the time. On the opposite side of the city from where you claim to have been.”

Color drained from Darrius’s face. “A commoner’s word against—”

Brother Bolar shed his cloak, revealing the pristine robes of

the Church beneath. "I am not a commoner, Lord Darrius."

The city guards behind the warden nodded, confirming they'd seen Darrius elsewhere at the time of the alleged theft.

Darrius's jaw worked. "I... I must have been mistaken. My deepest apologies." He turned to leave, but paused beside Holland. His whisper carried poison: "This isn't over, boy. I will make you suffer."

The cell door clanged shut behind him. The warden produced a ring of keys, the iron singing against Holland's shackles as they fell away.

"Thank you," Holland managed, his stomach still aching. The big prisoner who'd stood up for him offered a hand, pulling him to his feet.

"The ceremony begins soon," Father Maelis said. "I've arranged for you to be called last. And afterward..." he paused. "Come to the abbey. We have much to discuss."

Outside, evening painted Stonehaven's streets in purple shadows. Torches flickered to life as Holland followed Father Maelis and Brother Bolar through winding streets. The Blessing Stone's silhouette loomed ahead, ancient and imposing against the darkening sky.

Hundreds of fires dotted the grassy expanse before the stone, where common folk huddled against the spring chill. The nobles' grandstand rose above them like a wooden castle, draped in rich banners that snapped in the wind.

Holland's heart sank. Finding Carson and Etty in this sea of faces seemed impossible. He scanned the crowd, throat tight—"Holland! Over here, my boy!"

Carson's voice cut through the din. Holland spotted his father's raised hand, waving like a banner above the crowd. Relief flooded through him as he rushed over, dropping onto

the grass beside them.

Etty's hand went to his face, gentle fingers probing the bruise forming on his cheek. "What happened to ye, love?"

"Tripped on my way back," Holland lied, hating the taste of it. "Sorry I'm late."

Carson's eyes narrowed, catching the lie, but he said nothing. Before he could press, Father Maelis's voice rolled across the gathering like thunder.

"Good evening, Children of Eldorien!"

The crowd fell silent. Even the torches seemed to still their dance.

"We gather tonight to witness an ancient tradition," Father Maelis continued, his voice carrying to every corner of the field. "When each child of Eldorien comes of age, they journey to the Blessing Stones, scattered throughout our realm. Here, they receive Auredor's divine blessing, a gift that shapes their destiny."

He paused, surveying the crowd. "One hundred and forty-seven young souls stand ready to receive their blessings. Let us begin."

The crowd erupted in cheers, but Holland barely heard them. His eyes were fixed on the Blessing Stone, its weathered surface etched with thirty-two ancient symbols. Each mark represented a blessing, a destiny. His destiny—if he truly had one—waited there.

He felt Carson's hand squeeze his shoulder, warm and steady as the stone itself.

One by one, names rang out across the field. One by one, young souls stepped forward to meet their destiny. Each touch of hand to stone birthed azure light that raced like lightning through the rock's jagged tail. Each blessing blazed to life in

ancient symbols, declaring futures of blacksmiths and warriors, healers and hunters.

“Lily Silvermane,” Father Maelis called.

Holland’s breath caught as Lily approached the stone. Her azure gown caught the firelight, making her seem to float across the grass. She placed her hand against the weathered surface with quiet grace.

Blue light surged through the stone. It wrapped around her like a mantle, making her gown shimmer like starfall. The sigil that blazed to life—a quill pen wreathed in light—drew murmurs of approval from the nobles’ stands. The Administrator’s blessing. Holland smiled, knowing how perfectly it suited her gift for leadership, her desire to help others.

More names. More blessings. Holland’s hands grew cold with waiting.

“Holland Blackthorn of Krestfell,” Father Maelis’s voice rang clear across the field, “son of Carson and Etty McIntyre.”

Etty’s hand flew to her mouth, tears spilling down her cheeks. Carson’s weathered face softened, years of love and worry etched in every line. They’d raised him, loved him, treated him as their own—but to hear him claim them here, before all of Stonehaven... Etty gripped Carson’s hand so tight her knuckles went white. Their boy. Their son.

In the nobles’ stands, Lord Eldric Silvermane’s face twisted with disgust, but Holland barely noticed. His heart hammered against his ribs as he stood, each step toward the Blessing Stone feeling like a league. The crowd’s whispers pressed against him like physical things. Sweat slicked his palms despite the cool night air.

This was it. The moment that would define him. Prove he belonged in this world of magic and destiny—or mark him

forever as nothing but a voidborn wretch.

His stomach churned as he approached the ancient stone. The thirty-two sigils seemed to watch him, judge him. His hand trembled so badly he had to clench it into a fist. Blood roared in his ears, drowning out everything but his own thundering pulse.

Please, he thought, though he wasn't sure who he was begging. *Please*.

His palm pressed against the stone. Cold. Silent. Dead.

The world tilted beneath his feet. He tried again, panic clawing up his throat. Nothing. No light. No blessing. No destiny.

Lord Eldric's laughter cut like a knife. "I told you a voidborn would amount to nothing!"

Holland's vision blurred. One last time. One last chance. His hand shook so violently he had to brace himself against the stone—

The world exploded in gold.

Not azure like the others—this was molten sunlight, raw power that roared up the stone's face like liquid fire. The force of it nearly knocked Holland backwards. Heat pulsed through his arm, not burning but alive, ancient, aware.

The light devoured the other sigils in its wake, climbing higher and higher until it reached the summit. There, beneath centuries of vine and moss, it blazed like a captured star. The brightness forced nobles to shield their eyes, cast shadows that danced like spirits across the common folk's upturned faces.

The very air seemed to hold its breath.

Then, with a sound like distant thunder, a new sigil burned itself into the rock. Crown, sword, and scepter, intertwined in majestic unity. A thirty-third blessing—impossible, unknown,

yet undeniably real. The golden light wrapped around Holland like a mantle, and for a heartbeat, he felt something vast and ancient brush against his mind.

As the light faded, leaving only the emblem burning against ancient stone, the world spun beneath Holland's feet. A memory that wasn't his own flashed through his mind—another hand, another time, the same blazing sigil. A sense of destiny so heavy it made his knees weak.

Then it was gone, leaving him swaying before the stone.

"Holland!" Carson's voice cut through his daze. His foster father was there in an instant, strong hands steadying him. Etty wasn't far behind, her face a mix of awe and concern.

"What blessing was that?" Carson's question trembled with both wonder and worry.

Holland stared at the still-glowing sigil, trying to make sense of what had just happened. His whole body hummed with echoes of that ancient power. "I don't know," he managed, his voice hoarse.

In the stunned silence that followed, Father Maelis's voice rang out with barely contained urgency. "Thank you all for attending. The ceremony is concluded."

Brother Bolar appeared at Holland's side, his refined accent tight with tension. "Come with me. Now. Father Maelis needs to speak with you."

The golden sigil continued to burn above them, a beacon in the gathering dark, as Holland followed Brother Bolar toward whatever destiny awaited.

* * *

Candlelight flickered across the stone walls, casting Father

Maelis' study in dancing shadows. Holland gripped the arms of his chair, the wood smooth beneath his fingers. Brother Bolar had taken Carson and Etty back to gather his belongings, leaving him alone with questions that burned like coals in his mind.

The golden light. The impossible sigil. A thirty-third blessing that shouldn't exist.

The door's hinges protested as Father Maelis entered, closing it with a soft click that seemed to seal them away from the world. His eyes crinkled at the corners as he studied Holland.

"Well," Maelis said, settling into the chair across from him, "you've certainly caused quite a stir." The attempt at lightness fell flat against Holland's churning thoughts.

"What was it?" Holland's voice came out hoarse. "That light, that symbol—why was it different?"

Maelis leaned forward, candlelight deepening the lines in his face. "I know the name of your blessing, Holland." He glanced at the door, then lowered his voice. "But I cannot speak it. Not here. Not now."

"Why?" The word tasted bitter. More secrets, more mysteries.

"Because names have power," Maelis said. "And this one—this blessing—could get you killed if the wrong ears heard it whispered."

Holland's stomach dropped. "What do you mean, killed?"

"Lord Eldric's men have already blocked the northern and southern passes." Maelis stood, his robes rustling in the silence. "You must leave tonight. Find Father Caelan in the capital. He's the only one who can help you now."

"Tonight?" The word caught in Holland's throat. Outside the study's window, darkness had already claimed Stonehaven. "But Carson and Etty—"

“Are waiting to say goodbye.” Maelis’s voice softened. “Come. There’s a hidden path through the valley wall, but we must hurry.”

The abbey’s back courtyard was thick with shadows. Carson and Etty stood beneath a gnarled oak, their faces pale in the moonlight. Holland’s steps faltered. How many times had they been there for him? Every scraped knee, every nightmare, every triumph—

Etty reached for him first. Her arms wrapped around him, smelling of fresh bread and home. “We’re so proud of ye, love,” she whispered, her Dalemark accent thick with tears.

Carson’s embrace enveloped them both, strong and sure as always. “Ye’ve grown into a fine man, son.” His voice broke on the last word. “More than we could’ve ever hoped for.”

Holland tried to speak, but his throat closed around the words. Everything he wanted to say—thank you, I love you, I’m sorry—stuck like thorns in his chest.

“Don’t ye dare look back now.” Etty’s hand was warm against his cheek, wiping away tears he hadn’t realized were falling. “Go forward, and we’ll see each other again.”

“Holland, wait.”

The soft voice cut through the night like a knife. Lily Silvermane stepped from the shadows, moonlight turning her hair to silver. She must have followed them from the tavern, must have known—

“My lady,” Father Maelis began, but Lily’s eyes never left Holland’s face.

“I know you must go,” she said, moving closer. “But I couldn’t let you leave without...” Her voice trembled. “Without telling you that you are loved. By Carson and Etty. By Roderic. By all of Krestfell.” She took a shaking breath. “By me.”

The world narrowed to her face, to the tears sparkling in her eyes. “Lily, I—”

She crossed the space between them and kissed him. Everything he’d wanted to say, everything he’d held back, poured into that kiss. Time seemed to stop, holding them in a perfect moment of moonlight and promise.

Brother Bolar made a strangled sound. Father Maelis cuffed him lightly, turning both their faces skyward with a poorly hidden smile.

When they finally parted, Lily’s fingers lingered on his face. “Come back to me,” she whispered. “You promised.”

“I remember.” Holland’s voice was rough. “Use your blessing well. Make Krestfell better. The people need someone like you.”

She nodded, stepping back. Each step seemed to physically pain her until she disappeared into the abbey’s shadows.

“That’s one lady you’d best treat right,” Father Maelis said softly, “or may the sun fall from the sky and burn you up.”

The forest closed around them like a dark cloak. Father Maelis led them to where the valley wall rose like a black tide against the stars. Moss-slick stone stretched up until it vanished in shadow. Holland’s boots crunched on fallen leaves, each step taking him further from everything he’d ever known.

Maelis pressed his palm against the rock face. “Duskara,” he whispered. The word seemed to hang in the air like mist.

The stone rippled. There was no other word for it—solid rock flowing like water beneath Maelis’s touch. A passage opened, narrow and darker than the night around them.

“Listen carefully.” Maelis gripped Holland’s shoulder, his voice barely above a whisper. “Brother Bolar will guide you through. Once you reach the other side, make for the capital. Find Father Caelan at the Church of Harmony.” He glanced

over his shoulder, as if the very trees might be listening. “Tell him this, exactly as I say it: ‘The King’s Beacon is Lit.’”

Holland’s breath caught. Something about those words sent a shiver down his spine, like the echo of that ancient power he’d felt at the Blessing Stone.

“Repeat it,” Maelis insisted.

“The King’s Beacon is Lit.”

“Good.” Maelis released him. “Now go. And Holland—” His eyes gleamed in the darkness. “Trust your instincts. They may be older than you think.”

Brother Bolar lit a small lamp, its flame barely stronger than a candle. The passage seemed to swallow its light. “Stay close,” he said.

Holland took one last look at the valley, at the scattered lights of Stonehaven below. Somewhere down there, Carson and Etty were probably still watching the forest’s edge. Somewhere, Lily was—

“Don’t look back,” Brother Bolar said gently. “The path ahead is treacherous enough without regret weighing you down.”

Holland nodded and stepped into the passage. Stone flowed shut behind them, sealing them into absolute darkness save for their tiny lamp. The way forward was narrow, rough, and steep—but it was the only way now.

The Journey To Watford

Cold rain found every gap in Holland's cloak, each drop like a needle against his skin. He huddled deeper beneath a massive pine, but its branches offered little shelter from the spring storm. His breath fogged in the air, tiny clouds that dissolved into the constant drizzle.

Three days of running. Three days of looking over his shoulder, of snatching sleep in moments between watchful breaths. The rain had started last night, turning the world into a gray blur that matched the ache in his chest.

Back home, Etty would have a pot of potato soup simmering over the hearth. Holland's stomach clenched at the memory—thick slices of potato swimming in creamy broth, the scent of rosemary and garlic filling their tiny cottage. On special days, when she managed to get pig trimmings from the Silvermane kitchens, she'd crisp them up and sprinkle them over top...

Holland pressed his forehead against his knees, forcing the thought away. Memories wouldn't fill his belly or dry his clothes. They'd only make the loneliness sharper, the cold deeper.

The rain finally slackened, thin rays of sunlight piercing the clouds. Holland quickly changed into his spare clothes, laying the wet ones across low branches. Half the day was gone, but there was still time to put more distance between himself and whoever might be following.

He kept to the forest's edge, well away from the main road. Lord Eldric's men would be watching for any trace, any hint of his passing. One mistake could—

Voices carried on the wind, rough and threatening. Holland's first instinct was to shrink deeper into the trees, to keep running. But something in those voices made him pause. Made him listen.

Through dripping branches, Holland crept closer. A merchant's wagon stood in the muddy road, surrounded by six figures with drawn blades. The merchant himself—a lean man in weather-worn noble's clothes—stood with his back to the wagon, hands raised.

“Hand over your goods and auren,” the bandit captain drawled, blade catching weak sunlight. “Might let you keep breathing, if you're quick about it.”

The merchant's voice wavered. “Please, take what you want. Just—”

Holland's fingers found a rock, smooth and heavy. He should run. Should stay hidden. Instead, memories flickered through his mind—Carson standing between him and noble bullies, Ety sharing bread with beggars, his own promises to make things right.

“Leave him alone!” The shout tore from Holland's throat as he burst from cover. His thrown rock caught the nearest bandit in the temple with a wet crack. The man dropped.

The captain's laugh was ugly. “Well now. What's this? A

hero?" He jerked his chin at his men. "Kill him."

Five bandits rushed forward, steel gleaming. Holland's mind raced—he had no weapon, no plan, nothing but the burning certainty that he couldn't watch another person suffer while he did nothing.

The first blade came for his throat. Holland moved without thinking, body flowing like water. The sword whistled past his ear as he ducked, rolled, came up inside the bandit's guard. His elbow found the man's nose. Bone crunched.

More memories surfaced, but these weren't his own. Countless fights, countless battles, muscle-memory older than his bones. His body knew things his mind didn't understand.

A second bandit thrust with his sword. Holland caught the man's wrist, twisted. The blade spun free. Holland snatched it from the air, steel singing as it found his grip.

The sword felt right. Felt known. His arms remembered forms he'd never learned, steps to a deadly dance written in his blood. He moved like smoke between the bandits, blade weaving patterns of silver light.

One fell, clutching a slashed arm. Another stumbled back from a pommel strike to the jaw. Holland spun, parried, struck—

An arrow hissed past his cheek, hot pain following its path. Blood trickled down his face. Another arrow came, but Holland's blade was already moving. Steel met wood with a crack. His sword flicked down, caught a loose stone, sent it spinning up toward the tree where—

A crash of branches. A body tumbled from above, bow splintering beneath it.

The remaining bandits broke, melting into the forest like morning mist. Their captain spat a curse and followed, leaving

only the merchant staring at Holland with wide eyes.

“Are you hurt?” Holland asked, reaching up to touch his bleeding cheek. The merchant shook his head, a nervous laugh escaping him.

“Thanks to you, I’m quite well. Though I truly thought I’d be meeting Auredor today.” He straightened his travel-stained coat with oddly elegant hands. “I’m Magnus, a merchant from Vulkan in the Emberholme district. And you, my timely savior, are?”

“Holland.” He lowered the sword, suddenly unsure what to do with it. Those memories of battle were already fading like morning dew, leaving him wondering how he’d done any of it.

“Your camp is nearby?” Magnus brushed mud from his coat with practiced fingers. “I’d feel safer spending the night in your company, assuming you’ll have me. These roads grow more dangerous by day.”

Holland hesitated. The merchant had seemed genuine during the fight, but caution had kept him alive these past days. Still, there was safety in numbers. He nodded. “This way.”

They concealed Magnus’s wagon beneath fresh-cut branches, then led his horses through the deepening shadows. At Holland’s camp, he quickly built a small fire, banking it carefully to keep the flame low and hidden. His snares yielded two rabbits—at least something had gone right today.

As Holland cleaned and prepared the catch, Magnus settled by the fire with a grace that seemed out of place in the wilderness. Even his worn clothes carried an air of nobility—not the stiff formality Holland was used to, but something more relaxed, almost rebellious.

“You handled yourself well back there,” Magnus said, watching Holland work. “Not many would step into a fight against

such odds.”

Holland kept his attention on the rabbits, turning them carefully over the flames. “Just happened to be in the right place.” Let Magnus make of that what he would.

“Quite fortunate for me.” Magnus produced a flask from his coat. “Would you care for some? Vinemach’s finest brandy, not that watered-down tavern swill.”

Holland shook his head. Best to keep his wits sharp.

“Wise,” Magnus said, taking a small sip before tucking the flask away. “I’m bound for Watford myself, then on to Oliveford in the Belfane District. You?”

Holland hesitated, then decided a partial truth was safe enough. “The capital.”

“Ah!” Magnus’s eyes brightened. “Then might I suggest we travel together as far as Watford? The roads are safer with company, and from there you can take a river boat to the capital—quickest route by far. The Shirebrook runs straight to it.”

The offer made sense. Too much sense to refuse out of mere caution. “How far to Watford?”

“Two days’ ride, if the weather holds.” Magnus gestured at the roasting rabbits. “And I’m happy to share provisions along the way. Better than traveling alone in these times.”

Holland turned the rabbits one final time, considering the offer. Two days with a companion who could fight—he’d seen Magnus reach for a weapon during the bandit attack, though he hadn’t needed to use it. Someone who knew the roads north. Someone who, despite his noble bearing, seemed to hold no love for the usual aristocratic posturing.

“Agreed,” Holland said finally. “To Watford.”

“Splendid!” Magnus’s smile was quick and genuine. “Though

I should warn you—I've been told I talk too much. Particularly about trade routes and the ridiculous tariffs Lord Eldric keeps imposing on merchants." His nose wrinkled at the name. "The man thinks he can strangle all commerce that doesn't fill his own coffers."

Holland's hand tightened on the spit at the mention of Eldric, but he kept his face neutral. "The rabbits are done."

They ate in comfortable silence, the fire crackling softly between them. The meat was plain—Holland hadn't dared carry salt or spices—but hot food and relative safety made it taste better than it should have.

"I'll take first watch," Magnus offered as they finished. "You look like you haven't slept properly in days."

Holland wanted to argue, but exhaustion dragged at his limbs. Still... "Wake me at midnight."

"Of course." Magnus settled against a tree trunk, his relaxed posture belied by alert eyes. "Rest easy, young friend. Whatever drives you toward the capital can wait a few hours."

Holland wrapped himself in his cloak, using his pack as a pillow. The fire's warmth and the sound of Magnus softly humming some merchant's ballad slowly lulled him toward sleep. His last thought was that he should be more wary, should ask more questions...

But for the first time in three days, he slept without dreams.

* * *

Dawn painted the forest in watercolor greys. The wagon's wheels creaked beneath Holland and Magnus, a steady rhythm broken only by the morning chorus of birds. They kept to the northern road, Magnus handling the reins with practiced ease.

“You know,” Magnus said, adjusting his worn noble’s coat, “most people expect a different story when they learn I’m from Vulkan. They picture some stuffy lord’s son, all proper manners and empty titles.” He chuckled. “But I found that life... lacking.”

Holland studied his companion’s profile. Despite his noble bearing, there was something different about Magnus—something that didn’t quite fit with the aristocrats Holland had known in Krestfell.

“The Merchant’s Blessing showed me another path,” Magnus continued, his voice warm with conviction. “Trade routes instead of title deeds. Real people instead of court politics.” He clicked his tongue at the horses. “Most of my workers are commoners, actually.”

“Why commoners?” Holland asked, curiosity getting the better of his caution.

Magnus’s eyes crinkled with a genuine smile. “Because they’re better at the work, plain and simple. More dependable than half the nobles I’ve dealt with, and they actually care about doing the job right.” He adjusted the reins. “When a commoner gives you their word, they mean it. No games, no hidden agendas. Just honest work for honest pay.”

They passed the morning in comfortable conversation, Magnus sharing tales of far-off markets and strange customs. But Holland noticed his companion never pressed for details about Holland’s own journey, never pushed past the careful walls Holland had built. It was a courtesy that made the miles pass easier.

By late afternoon, Watford emerged from the trees—a town built more for utility than beauty, its buildings clustered around the swift-flowing Shirebrook River. Magnus guided the wagon to a merchant’s storehouse, where he quickly conducted his

business with practiced efficiency.

“Well, my young friend,” Magnus said as they led the horses to the stable, “this is where we part ways. I’m for Oliveford, while your path leads to the capital.” He produced a well-worn map from his satchel. “The river’s your best route—faster than walking, safer than the roads.”

Holland studied the careful markings, committing them to memory. “Thank you, but I couldn’t—”

“Keep it.” Magnus pressed the map into his hands. “I’ve got others, and you’ll need it more than I will.” His eyes twinkled. “Consider it payment for saving my life back there.”

Before Holland could protest further, Magnus handed him two crisp apples. “Here, give these to Burt and Daisy. They’ve earned a treat.” Holland offered the apples to the horses, patting their necks as they munched contentedly.

They said their farewells with a firm handshake, Magnus climbing back into his wagon with a final wave. “If you’re ever in Vulkan,” he called, “ask for Magnus. Any merchant will know where to find me.”

It wasn’t until Magnus had disappeared around a bend that Holland checked his satchel and found the leather pouch. Fifty golden aurens gleamed up at him, along with a folded note: *I knew you wouldn’t accept payment, so I tucked it in your bag. Remember, my friend, that sometimes receiving a blessing is as noble as giving one. —Magnus*

Holland shook his head, but couldn’t help smiling. With coin in his pocket and a map in his hand, perhaps his luck was finally turning.

The Golden Griffin—Watford’s only inn—rose before him, its whitewashed walls and polished wooden floors a welcome sight after days on the road. More welcome still was the innkeeper’s

nod when Holland placed six aurens on the counter.

“Room’s yours for the night,” the man said. “Small, but clean. And dinner’s included.”

Holland followed him up narrow stairs, past a partially open door where voices spilled out in heated discussion. He caught fragments of argument—something about sixty aurens and incomplete merchandise—but his attention was drawn to two elven figures storming out, their grace at odds with their obvious anger.

The innkeeper showed him to a tiny room with a narrow bed. It wasn’t much, but after nights of sleeping on forest ground, it felt like luxury. Holland set his pack down, ready to explore the town while daylight lasted.

The marketplace of Watford assaulted Holland’s senses. Stalls crowded the cobbled streets, their wooden frames draped with everything from silk scarves to cured meats. Merchants hawked exotic birds in gilded cages while others displayed tobacco pipes carved from rare woods. Some shops bore signs marked with noble seals—a familiar reminder that even here, class divided the world.

A scream shattered the afternoon bustle.

“Help! Somebody, please!” A woman’s voice cracked with terror. “My girl is gone!”

Holland pushed through the gathering crowd, finding a woman near a farmer’s stall. Her market basket lay forgotten at her feet, apples scattered across the dirt.

“What happened?” Holland asked, keeping his voice steady.

“Abigail—” The woman’s words came between gasping sobs. “She was right here. I only turned away for a moment to look at the produce, and when I looked back—” She pressed trembling hands to her face. “My baby...”

Heavy boots announced the town watch's arrival. Their captain, a weathered man with hard eyes, took in the scene with grim recognition.

"Another one," he muttered. "Ma'am, I'm Captain Vattik. When exactly—"

"Another?" Holland cut in. "This has happened before?"

Vattik's jaw tightened. He drew Holland aside, voice low. "Five children in three weeks. No traces, no witnesses." His calloused hand rubbed at his temples. "Like they vanish into thin air."

Holland turned back to the spot where Abigail had disappeared. Something tugged at his senses—a new awareness that made his skin prickle. The ground seemed to shift beneath his gaze, revealing what others couldn't see: the ghost of small footprints, and beside them, larger ones that shouldn't have been so clear.

Scents separated in his mind like threads unraveling: bread from the bakery, fish from the river, sweat and leather and horses. But underneath it all, something sweet and distinct—like a child's ribbon.

"Do you have anything of hers?" Holland asked the mother. "Something she wore recently?"

She fumbled at her pocket, producing a blue hair ribbon. "She wore this this morning..."

Holland took it carefully. The moment the silk touched his fingers, the sweet scent blazed in his mind like a beacon. The footprints seemed to glow, leading away from the market square.

He could follow this. Something in his blood, in his bones, knew he could track these kidnappers where others had failed. But how? He'd learned basic tracking in the Wyldewood, but

this was different—this was like seeing with new eyes, breathing with new senses.

The trail led north, toward the river. With each step, the tracks grew clearer, the scent stronger. Five miles out, he found the riverport.

Hidden behind thick brush, Holland studied the scene. Guards patrolled between moored boats and weathered buildings. Canvas-covered shapes lined the dock like giant coffins. A noise from the east drew the guards' attention, giving Holland his chance.

He moved between crates and barrels, each step placed with instinctive precision. At the nearest canvas-covered shape, he lifted one corner and his stomach turned to ice.

Iron cages. Children huddled inside like animals, tear-streaked faces pale in the afternoon light.

His first impulse was to act—to break locks, to fight guards, to end this horror. But that same new instinct that guided his tracking now held him back. Too many guards. Too many ways this could go wrong.

Then he heard them talking.

"One more night of this," a guard grumbled, "then we get paid."

"About time," his companion answered. "Tomorrow morning we load 'em up, ship 'em off to the highest bidder."

Holland's blood ran cold. He had until morning. But first, he needed help.

The race back to Watford felt like running through mud. Every second counted, but the town watch was his only hope. He burst into their headquarters, heart hammering.

"Captain Vattik—" he started.

"Not here." The lieutenant barely looked up from his desk.

“Wait outside if you must.”

“But the kidnapped children—”

“I said wait outside, boy.” The lieutenant’s voice cracked like a whip. “Or leave entirely. Your choice.”

Holland found himself on a bench outside, fists clenched in frustration. Then, through the open window behind him, voices drifted out.

“Remember,” one guard whispered, “tomorrow morning at the river checkpoint.”

“Right,” another answered. “We traded shifts with the rookies.”

“Rathbourne’s boats come through with the kids, we sign their papers, we get paid. Simple.”

“Easy money.”

Holland’s last hope crumbled. The watch was part of it. They were all part of it.

Which meant he was on his own.

Rising from the bench, Holland headed back to the Golden Griffin. He had until morning to figure out how to save those children. And he would save them, or die trying.

6

The Twins Of Belfane

Holland paced the Golden Griffin's common room, the weight of what he'd discovered making food impossible. Children in cages. A corrupt town watch. And come morning... He ran a hand through his hair, fighting down nausea. He couldn't do this alone, but who could he trust?

The inn's door burst open, letting in a blast of evening air and two arguing figures.

"That pig cheated us, Thalen!" A female voice, musical but sharp with anger. "Thirty aurens promised, and he gives us half?"

"Keep your voice down, Elly." The male elf guided his companion to a corner table, his blue bandanna dark with sweat. "Getting angry won't buy us passage to Valoria."

Holland's attention caught on their pointed ears, their matching silver hair. Half-elves, by their looks. And something about their argument...

"What about the town watch?" the woman asked, quieter now.

Her brother's laugh was bitter. "And tell them what? 'Sorry,

but the nobleman who hired us to steal vessel inspection routes didn't pay us enough?" He slumped in his chair. "Face it, Elowen. We're stuck here while Academy term gets closer."

Holland's mind raced. Vessel inspection routes. A nobleman who cheated them. The pieces clicked together with sickening clarity.

Before he could think better of it, he approached their table. "This nobleman," he said quietly. "Was his name Rathbourne?"

The twins turned as one, wariness flickering across identical features. The woman's hand dropped to a concealed weapon.

"Who's asking?" the brother demanded.

"Someone who just found out what those inspection routes were for." Holland met their eyes. "And someone who needs help stopping it."

"What do you mean, what they were for?" Elowen's fingers didn't leave her dagger, but curiosity edged into her voice.

Holland glanced around the common room. A few merchants by the fire, a servant clearing tables. Too many ears. "Mind if I sit?"

The twins exchanged looks—a silent conversation passing between them. Finally, Thalen nodded to an empty chair.

"I'm Holland Blackthorn," he said, keeping his voice low. "And those inspection routes you stole? They're how Rathbourne plans to smuggle children out of Watford."

"Children?" Elowen's face drained of color. "What are you—"

"Five taken here in Watford these past three weeks. But there are more, many more." Holland leaned forward. "I found them today. Dozens of children in cages by the river, waiting to be shipped by Rathbourne's boats."

Thalen's tankard hit the table hard enough to slosh. "That's impossible. We wouldn't—" He swallowed hard. "We didn't

know.”

“The town watch?” Elowen asked, but her tone said she already knew the answer.

“Bought and paid for. I overheard two guards talking about letting Rathbourne’s boats through tomorrow morning. For a price.”

Elowen gripped her brother’s arm, knuckles white. “Thay, those routes we stole... they’ll use them to avoid the military checkpoints. To smuggle *children*.”

“Like cargo,” Thalen whispered. The bitterness in his voice had turned to ash. “By Auredor’s grace, what have we done?”

“Nothing yet,” Holland said. “But tomorrow morning—”

“We’ll help.” Elowen’s voice cut like steel. “Whatever you’re planning, whatever you need.” She met her brother’s eyes. “We have to make this right.”

Thalen nodded slowly, guilt hardening to resolve. “Tell us everything.”

* * *

The candles had burned low, casting long shadows across their corner table. Plans had been made, roles assigned. Now all they could do was wait for nightfall.

“So,” Elowen said, breaking a moment of tense silence. “The Valadent Academy?” She studied Holland with renewed interest. “That’s why you’re heading to the capital?”

Holland nodded, suddenly conscious of his common clothes, the dirt still under his fingernails from tracking through the woods.

“Then you must be—” Her eyes widened. “No. The Selection Day champion from Krestfell? We thought that was just a story,

something the nobles made up to mock.”

In answer, Holland pulled the medal from beneath his shirt. Candlelight caught the silver surface, making the academy’s crest dance.

“Incredible.” Thalen leaned forward, wonder replacing his usual sarcasm. “A commoner actually won.”

“You sound surprised.” Holland’s voice held an edge. Three years of noble sneers had taught him what to expect.

But Elowen was already reaching for her own medal, identical to his. “Because we know how hard it is to beat their system.” The silver disk caught the light like her hair. “Even with noble blood, they still tried to keep us out.”

“Noble blood?” Holland asked.

The twins exchanged looks—that silent communication again. Finally, Elowen nodded.

“Our father was a Thalassar Sentinel,” Thalen said quietly. “Commander of the eastern border guard in Belfane. Our mother...” A smile touched his lips. “They called her the Moonchild. Said her hair made starlight look dull.”

“An elf,” Holland realized.

“The nobles tolerated their marriage, barely.” Bitterness crept into Elowen’s voice. “Until Father died putting down a commoner uprising in the north. Then suddenly his half-breed children weren’t quite noble enough.”

“Elly—” Thalen warned, but his sister’s words spilled out like a dam breaking.

“They tried to sell our mother, did you know that? Like she was property. She died protecting us, and our grandmother...” Elowen’s fingers tightened around her medal. “She raised us and paid our tuition in advance. Said education was the one thing they couldn’t take from us.”

“But they took everything else,” Thalen finished. “The magistrate claimed our estate the day our grandmother died. Left us with nothing but prepaid tuition we couldn’t access until term started.”

“So you entered the Selection Day tournament,” Holland said. “To claim the winner’s refund.”

Thalen’s smile turned wry. “Fought our way to the finals. Then I had an unfortunate accident.”

“He threw the match,” Elowen corrected, nudging her brother. “Said something about his ‘kid sister’ needing it more.”

“Ten minutes,” Thalen protested. “You’re ten minutes younger.”

“And you never let me forget it.”

Their banter felt practiced, comfortable—the kind of easy relationship Holland had always envied in others. But underneath it, he sensed the steel that had kept them alive, kept them fighting.

“And now Rathbourne,” Holland said softly.

The twins’ smiles faded.

“Now Rathbourne,” Elowen agreed. “But we’re going to make that right.” She glanced at the darkening window. “Starting tonight.”

* * *

Moonlight filtered through passing clouds, casting shifting shadows over the Shirebrook River. Holland crouched in the underbrush, the Frey twins flanking him on either side. His stolen sword felt heavy at his hip—a reminder of yesterday’s bandit attack. To his right, Thalen gripped his club blade, while Elowen cradled her bow with practiced ease.

Below them, the kidnappers' camp sprawled along the riverbank. Guards patrolled between canvas-covered cages and weathered buildings, their torches cutting through the darkness.

"Remember," Holland whispered, "timing is everything. Thalen, take the eastern flank. Wait twenty minutes, then create your diversion. That'll give Elowen and me time to reach the western side." He glanced at the twins. "Be careful."

Thalen adjusted his blue bandanna. "Try not to get killed without me." He melted into the shadows, heading east.

Holland and Elowen crept through the darkness toward the riverbank. As they moved, Elowen's lips curved into a smile.

"This is actually rather exciting," she whispered.

Holland's heart hammered against his ribs. "You're not nervous?"

"Not really." Her eyes gleamed in the darkness. "This is living, isn't it? Any moment could bring disaster or triumph."

"What are you, some kind of daredevil?" Holland's pulse quickened as they neared the guard posts. "My heart's about to burst, and you're acting like you were born for this."

Elowen's soft laugh was barely a breath.

In the distance, a bell began to toll.

"MAULBEASTS!" Thalen's voice rang through the night. "Everyone up! Pack of Maulbeasts in the eastern woods!"

The camp erupted. Guards scrambled for weapons, faces pale at the mention of the massive, antlered predators. Holland had seen a Maulbeast once, its ten-inch claws leaving gouges in solid oak. The thought of facing a pack of them sent most of the guards rushing east, leaving only a handful to watch the cages.

"Now," Holland breathed.

They moved like shadows along the riverbank. A guard turned, torch raised—then crumpled as Elowen’s arrow found its mark. Another fell to Holland’s blade before he could cry out. The night swallowed their bodies without a sound.

At the cages, Holland’s hands trembled as he pulled back the canvas. Dozens of children huddled inside, their faces pale in the moonlight. Some couldn’t be more than five or six years old. The sight made his stomach turn.

“It’s alright,” he whispered, trying to keep his voice steady. “We’re here to help.”

“Holland.” Elowen’s voice was tight. She pointed to the heavy locks securing each cage. “These won’t yield to steel. We need keys.”

He searched the fallen guards, but found nothing. “They must be in the shack.” He nodded toward a weathered building fifty yards north. “Watch them. I’ll be back.”

The shack’s interior was pitch black. Holland eased the door open, his heart thundering as moonlight spilled across a sleeping form. Rathbourne lay sprawled on a bed, his chest rising and falling with each snore. Around his neck gleamed a key.

Holland crept forward, each floorboard a potential betrayal. Sweat trickled down his spine as he reached for the chain. Rathbourne snorted, shifted—then settled. The key was almost free when a drop of sweat fell from Holland’s brow.

It landed on Rathbourne’s face.

The merchant’s eyes snapped open, meeting Holland’s in a frozen moment of mutual shock. Then Rathbourne’s scream shattered the night.

Holland stumbled back as Rathbourne lunged for a dagger. The merchant’s bulk betrayed surprising speed as he swung the

blade in a wild arc.

“You’ll regret this, boy!” Rathbourne spat.

Holland’s gaze darted around the room, landing on a chamber pot. Without thinking, he kicked it upward. Porcelain shattered against Rathbourne’s head, contents raining down. While the merchant howled in disgust, Holland struck. One precise kick, and Rathbourne collapsed.

Fighting the urge to retch, Holland secured the key and sprinted back to the cages. But before he could reach Elowen, a shout split the air.

“INTRUDERS!”

The remaining guards turned as one. Magic crackled to life—fire, water, earth surging toward them as Elowen nocked another arrow.

“We need to protect the children!” she called, water and wind weaving into shields around the cages. Her bow sang, each arrow finding its mark with deadly precision.

Holland ducked under a fireball, closing the distance with his sword. “This might be bad timing,” he called between strikes, “but I should mention—I don’t have magical powers.”

“You WHAT?” Elowen’s voice cracked as she loosed another arrow. “How in Auredor’s name did you win Selection Day without Enera?” She yanked an arrow from a fallen guard, spun, and buried it in another’s chest. “No, wait—tell me later. Just don’t die!”

Holland parried a sword strike, his blade finding the gap in his attacker’s defense. “I should have mentioned it earlier. But I have an idea—use your magic to shield us while I get close with my sword.”

Their makeshift strategy worked at first. Elowen’s water and wind magic kept the worst of the attacks at bay while

Holland closed the distance, his sword finding targets with lethal precision. But as the battle wore on, Holland saw her movements growing sluggish. Her quiver was nearly empty, and sweat beaded on her brow from maintaining the magical shields.

They found themselves backed against the barracks wall, surrounded by advancing guards. Elowen's breath came in ragged gasps. "Now would be a perfect time for you to join the fight, brother!"

As if summoned by her words, a figure dropped from above, crashing into the guards with devastating force. Thalen rose from the chaos, his blue bandanna askew and a grin on his face.

"Miss me?"

"Typical," Elowen shot back, but relief colored her voice. "Showing up when most of the work's done."

With Thalen's arrival turning the tide, they made quick work of the remaining guards. Holland sprinted toward the cages, key clutched tight—

Something slammed into him from nowhere, sending him sprawling. He blinked, scanning the darkness but seeing nothing. A low voice seemed to come from the air itself.

"You've done it now, kid. Messed with the wrong people."

A kick caught Holland's ribs, sending him skidding back toward the twins.

"What's happening?" Thalen's voice was tense.

"There's someone here," Holland gasped. "We can't see him, but he can see us." The realization hit like ice water. "This is how he's been taking the children. Cloaking magic—that's why no one ever saw anything."

They formed a circle, backs together, but it didn't help. Elowen went down first, her bow clattering away. Thalen

unleashed blasts of wind magic, but a brutal strike caught him in the jaw before he could land a hit.

Holland stepped back, panic rising—then something strange happened. A calm washed over him, like a whisper in his mind telling him to focus. He closed his eyes, letting his other senses expand.

“Stay back,” he called to the twins. “Get clear!”

When he opened his eyes again, everything was sharper. Clearer. He didn’t need to see his enemy. He could track him, just like he’d tracked Abigail’s scent. His head turned, following a trail only he could sense.

“There you are,” he muttered, and lunged.

Steel met steel with a resounding clash. The invisible attacker staggered back, his shock evident in his voice. “How—? You shouldn’t be able to see me!”

“I don’t need to see you,” Holland said, tracking the man’s movements through scent alone. “I can smell where you are.”

“Smell me?” The voice dripped with disbelief. “Only advanced trackers with the Hunter’s Blessing can do such things. You’re not old enough to be that skilled.”

Holland’s gaze caught on stacked crates nearby, bags of flour perched on top—likely supplies for the camp’s kitchen. A plan formed in his mind.

“Elowen,” he called, not taking his focus off the lingering scent trail. “Make your next shot count. You’ll know when.”

“What’s he talking about?” Thalen whispered.

“No idea,” Elowen replied, but she picked up her bow and nocked an arrow anyway, trusting Holland’s judgment.

Holland sprinted for the crates. In one fluid motion, he drove his sword into the ground and heaved a flour bag skyward. At its peak, Elowen’s arrow struck true. The bag exploded, sending

white powder raining down in a thick cloud.

And there, outlined in flour like a ghost given form, stood their attacker.

Holland yanked his sword free and struck. The man, disoriented by his sudden visibility, barely managed to parry. Their blades met in a series of sharp clangs as Holland pressed forward, not giving his opponent time to recover or fade from view again.

The man thrust desperately, but Holland had already stepped aside. His leg swept out, catching the attacker's ankles. As the man stumbled, Holland's sword came down in a precise arc.

The invisible man's blade clattered to the ground. He fell to his knees, flour-covered shoulders heaving. Holland kicked the fallen weapon away, his own sword steady at the man's throat.

"It's over."

The man's head bowed in defeat as Elowen and Thalen moved in to bind him. Holland shook flour from his hair and turned toward the cages. The key felt warm in his palm as he approached the locks.

The moment the doors swung open, children poured out like a flood breaking through a dam. Small arms wrapped around him, faces buried in his tunic. Their sobs were muffled but their trembling bodies spoke volumes. Holland held them close, feeling their fear gradually give way to relief.

"Abigail?" he called softly. "Is Abigail here?"

A small voice answered. "Yes, sir." A girl stepped forward, her eyes bright with unshed tears.

Holland knelt down to her level, smiling gently. "Your mother sent me," he whispered. "She misses you very much."

Abigail threw her arms around his neck, and Holland felt his own eyes grow damp.

A rustle from the woods made Holland tense. He pulled Abigail closer, hand tightening on his sword hilt. But when Captain Vattik emerged through the trees leading a contingent of the town watch, Holland's grip loosened—though his wariness remained.

"Holland!" Vattik's relief seemed genuine. "Thank Aarendor we found you. My lieutenant told me a young man matching your description came with news of the kidnappings, but you'd vanished by the time I returned." His weathered face creased with concern. "The gate guard mentioned seeing you leave with two elves. We followed your trail here as fast as we could." His eyes swept over the freed children, the bound kidnappers. "Though it seems you three had things well in hand."

Vattik extended his hand, but Holland stepped back, keeping himself between the captain and the children.

"Something troubles you?" Vattik's brow furrowed.

"Two of your men," Holland said, voice hard. "I heard them planning to let these criminals pass through the checkpoint this morning. Your own men, Captain, working with child-slavers."

The color drained from Vattik's face. For a moment he looked like a man struck in the gut. Then anger blazed in his eyes.

"Sergeant!" His voice cracked like thunder. "The names of the men assigned to river checkpoint duty. Now."

"Pelson and Rubert, sir."

"Strip them of rank and uniform. Place them under arrest." Vattik turned back to Holland, then did something unexpected. He knelt, humbling himself before the younger man. "I failed to see treachery in my own ranks. The fault is mine. But I swear to you, they'll face justice alongside these other criminals."

Holland studied him for a long moment, then reached down to help the captain up. "I'll hold you to that."

As the town watch rounded up the prisoners, Rathbourne began shouting about the Frey twins' involvement. Holland silenced him by stuffing a cloth in his mouth.

"Nobody wants to hear from you," he said with a grim smile. "Especially when you smell like a chamber pot."

Vattik approached them again, his expression lighter. "There's a five-hundred auren reward for capturing these kidnappers. You three have more than earned it."

"Incredible." Thalen's eyes lit up as he glanced at his sister.

"Come by headquarters later to handle the paperwork," Vattik said. "And... thank you. These children will see their families again because of what you did here. Some were taken from villages beyond Watford—this news will bring relief to many."

"We did it!" Elowen's eyes sparkled with familiar excitement. "That was incredible! We should do this again sometime."

Holland shot her a concerned look.

"Yeah," Thalen said dryly. "She's like this. Bit of an adrenaline fiend. Rather annoying, really."

"The reward comes to about one hundred sixty-six auren each," Holland calculated aloud.

"No," Thalen shook his head. "El and I share everything. Always have."

"Fifty-fifty split," Elowen agreed with an easy smile.

"You don't have to—" Holland started.

"We want to," they said in unison.

Holland felt warmth spread through his chest. He shifted awkwardly. "Can I ask you something? Would you... would you both be interested in traveling to Valoria together? Since we're all heading to the academy, I just... well, I hate traveling alone."

Before he could finish, the twins had wrapped him in an

enthusiastic embrace.

“Shoot, we came this far,” Thalen grinned. “Might as well keep going.”

“Yeah,” Elowen added with a mischievous glint in her eye. “Who knows? Maybe we’ll find more kidnappers to fight along the way.”

“Aurendor help us,” Thalen muttered, but he was smiling too.

The Valadent Academy

The Shirebrook caught the morning sun like hammered silver, its waters churning beneath their vessel as water mages at the stern guided them upstream. Holland leaned against the rail, watching the endless dance of current against hull. From here, he could see how the river carved through the land like a merchant's knife through silk—not the longest in Eldorien, but no less vital for its modest length.

“Quite a sight, isn't it?” Finn Sawyer appeared beside him, pipe smoke curling around his words. The traveling troubadour had joined their ship at Argentvale, his lutar as much a part of him as the easy smile he wore. “This river's seen more stories than any bard could sing in a lifetime.”

Holland nodded, watching the water mages work. Their movements were subtle, almost graceful, as they bent the river to their will. Years of training showed in their economy of motion—no energy wasted, no power squandered.

“The Greywind peaks feed her,” Finn continued, gesturing north with his pipe. “Snowmelt becomes stream becomes river, all the way down to the Anduin Sea at Krestfell. Every merchant

worth their salt knows these waters. It's the kingdom's lifeblood, you might say."

Before Holland could respond, Thalen's voice cut through the morning air.

"I still can't fathom it," he said, shaking his head. "Leading us into that rescue without a shred of Enera. How did you manage it?"

Holland shifted uncomfortably, his gaze still fixed on the river. "Living without magic... it's just been my life. Mentioning it always feels strange."

"It's not just that," Elowen said, moving to join them at the rail. "You moved through their attacks like they were children swatting at flies. It was incredible to watch." She paused, silver hair catching the morning light. "Even if you did forget to mention the whole 'no magic' thing until we were in the middle of a fight."

"I'm not angry," Thalen added quickly, adjusting his bandanna. "Just trying to understand. You said you've never trained with a master swordsman, barely have any combat experience, and yet you fought like—"

"Like someone who's had years of training," Finn cut in, tapping his pipe against the rail. His eyes twinkled as smoke wreathed his face. "Reminds me of the old tales—the ones about ordinary folk who rise to do extraordinary things."

"I had help," Holland said, nodding to Elowen. "Your magic gave me the openings I needed."

"And there you go again," Finn chuckled, "deflecting praise like it's an arrow aimed at your heart." The bard straightened, reaching for his lutar. "You know, that reminds me of something..."

His fingers found the strings, and a melody sprang to life—

hopeful and defiant all at once. The tune seemed to catch the river's rhythm, as natural as the current flowing beneath them.

"When the road seems long and the path unclear, And fortune's wheel keeps spinning round, Remember the tales of those who came before, Who rose from dust to claim their crown!"

Finn's voice carried across the deck, drawing other passengers closer. Even the water mages turned their heads, though their hands never stopped their subtle dance with the river.

"So raise your voice to greet the dawn, Let hope light up the way! Though shadows try to hold us down, We'll rise to meet the day!"

The chorus caught something in Holland's chest—a truth he hadn't been able to put into words. Around him, feet began to tap, heads nodded in time with the music.

"Through storm and strife we make our way, Past walls of stone and pride, The river teaches as we go: There's strength in how we rise!"

Elowen's eyes shone as she listened. Even Thalen's usual skepticism had melted into a smile.

"When nobles scoff and cast their shame, Remember what we know is true: That greatness lives in every heart, No matter high or low born you are!"

As Finn led the gathered crowd through one final chorus, Holland felt something loosen in his chest—a tension he hadn't realized he'd been carrying since the rescue. The song spoke to everything they'd faced, everything they still had to overcome.

"VALORIA AHEAD!" The captain's cry cut through the last notes.

Holland's heart leaped as he and the twins rushed to the bow. There, rising from the plains like a dream made solid, stood the White Pearl of the Plains. Saltcryst walls caught the morning sun, turning the entire city into a beacon of blinding light.

“Incredible,” Thalen breathed, and for once, Holland had to agree.

The Shirebrook’s waters churned beneath their vessel as they sailed past Valoria’s imposing walls. The city sprawled before them in stark contrast—to the left, the noble districts gleamed in pristine white Saltcryst stone, while the right bank hummed with the controlled chaos of the River District and commoner’s quarter.

“Well, my friends,” Finn said, carefully stowing his lutar, “this is where our paths diverge.” He tapped his pipe against the rail one last time, watching the ashes scatter on the wind. “The river of music calls, and I must follow where she leads.”

Holland couldn’t help but smile at the bard’s flowery farewell. “Safe travels, Finn.”

The boat glided to a gentle stop at one of the River District’s many docks. As they disembarked, Holland took in their surroundings. Unlike Krestfell’s sprawling port, the River District had an intimate energy—merchants haggling over fresh catches, porters weaving between crates with practiced efficiency, and fishermen calling their wares directly from their boats.

“We can’t linger,” Thalen said, adjusting his blue bandanna. “We need to reach the Academy and complete our registration.”

“I’ll ask for directions,” Elowen volunteered, moving toward a cluster of merchants.

She returned moments later. “There’s a gate just ahead that leads into the noble quarter. The Academy’s beyond that.”

They made their way through the bustling River District, where life flowed as steadily as the river itself. Cobblestones, worn smooth by countless feet, led them past shops with brightly painted signs and stalls overflowing with goods from

across the kingdom.

The gate loomed before them, a formidable barrier marking the boundary between common and noble worlds. A tall guard stood watch. “State your purpose.” The guard’s deep voice matched his imposing presence—tall, dark-skinned, with a steel helm that revealed only a well-groomed beard.

Elowen stepped forward, every movement carrying the practiced grace of nobility. “Kind sir, my brother and I hail from the Belfane District.” She touched the seal at her throat, its surface catching the morning light. “We seek entry to register at the Academy.”

The guard’s gaze lingered on their seals, then flicked to their silver hair and pointed ears before nodding. “Very well, my lord and lady.” His attention shifted to Holland, eyes narrowing beneath his helm. “And you?”

“Holland Blackthorn.” Holland met the guard’s scrutiny without flinching. “Selectee from Coralhelm District.” He held out his medal, its surface gleaming.

“A commoner?” The guard’s skepticism dripped from each word. “There hasn’t been a commoner winner in three centuries. You must be jibbing with me.”

“No jibes. The church’s seal is on the reverse—verify it yourself.”

The guard turned the medal over in his hands. Though it appeared genuine, doubt still creased his brow. “Looks authentic enough, but appearances can be deceiving.”

“Perhaps you could accompany us to the Academy?” Holland suggested. “They can verify it themselves.”

The guard’s hesitation spoke volumes. “Seems like a lot of trouble.” His meaningful glance carried an unspoken price. “And my pay isn’t exactly generous.”

Behind Holland, Elowen gave a soft whistle. When he turned, she mimed rubbing coins together, her meaning clear.

“Ah.” Holland turned back to the guard. “Perhaps we could compensate you for your trouble, my lord—”

“I stand not among the nobility,” the guard cut in, pride straightening his spine. “I am a Citizen of Thalassar.”

“My apologies. Would ten aurens ease your concerns?”

“Twenty.”

“Fifteen.”

A pause, then a nod. “Agreed. But if that medal proves false, you’ll keep your appointment with the stockade, and I’ll keep the coin.”

“Fair enough.”

The guard turned his duties over to another and fell into step beside them. As they walked, he gestured to a stately manor of white Saltcryst stone. “There stands the home of Ainsworth Musgrove, Eldorien’s greatest poet.” Pride colored his voice. “His descendants still walk those halls.”

They passed a winding street, where shadows from overhanging balconies danced across the cobblestones. “And here—” A hint of amusement crept into the guard’s tone. “Prince Rotham and Duke Hargrove once dueled for the hand of Lady Edith Marbury. Neither won. They ended up drinking themselves into a stupor instead.” He chuckled. “Lady Edith chose the prince anyway. Their son now sits on the throne as King Sylas.”

“Holland,” Thalen muttered, “seems your fifteen aurens bought us a historian, not just a guard.”

“You seem to know a great deal about the city’s history,” Elowen said. “Might we know your name, and how you came by such knowledge?”

The guard’s posture softened slightly. “Perrin. And as for

the history—” His hand brushed the hilt of his sword, a gesture more habit than threat. “I served a nobleman in my youth, a professor of Eldorien history. He taught me to read and write, filled my head with tales of Valoria’s past. It was he who petitioned for my Citizenship.”

“Why aren’t you a historian yourself?” Holland asked. “You clearly have the knowledge for it.”

Perrin’s laugh held no humor. “Some doors remain closed, even to Citizens. History belongs to the nobles—” He cut off as shouts erupted from a nearby square. A crowd had gathered, their attention fixed on something Holland couldn’t see.

“We should go around,” Perrin said, but a booming voice froze them in place.

“Today, we try this commoner, Frederick Parson, for treason against the noble class!”

The crowd parted enough to reveal a gallows. Nobles watched with detached interest while scattered servants kept their eyes lowered. A young man, bruised and bloodied, was being led to the noose.

“Perrin,” Elowen’s voice shook. “What’s happening? What did he do?”

“He accused a nobleman’s son of violating his sister.” Perrin’s voice was flat, empty. “Without a noble witness, his word meant nothing. When he tried to shame the family publicly...” He shrugged. “The law called it treason.”

The lever creaked. Holland couldn’t look away, even as Elowen and Thalen turned their backs. Perrin stood like stone, unmoved.

“How?” Holland’s voice cracked. “How can you watch this? He was one of us—a commoner—and they’re killing him like he’s nothing.”

“I am not a commoner anymore.” Perrin’s words cut like ice. “I am a Citizen. The sooner you learn to look after your own interests, the longer you’ll survive.”

Memories flooded Holland’s mind from when he was a child—an old woman, a scuffed boot, a nobleman’s cane falling again and again while the crowd watched in silence. His stomach churned.

A warm hand slipped into his. Elowen squeezed gently, and Holland clung to that small comfort as they turned down an alley, leaving the square behind.

They walked in silence until Thalen spoke. “Perrin, I have to ask—you didn’t seem surprised by our...” He gestured to his pointed ears.

“Should I be?” Perrin’s eyebrow rose. “This is Valoria. We see all kinds here, especially since the Eldorien Concord.”

“The Eldorien Concord?” Thalen and Elowen exchanged puzzled glances.

“Signed by King Sylas three years ago,” Perrin said, leading them past a row of pristine townhouses. “Opened the Academy’s doors to students from Dunehold, the Greenhaven Empire, Crimsonhelm, even Brynmere. In exchange for yearly tribute, of course.”

“What?” Elowen’s silver hair caught the light as she turned sharply. “We’re half-elves born to nobility, yet for the past three years, we’ve faced nothing but prejudice in Belfane. How have we never heard of this?”

Perrin glanced around before lowering his voice. “The agreement isn’t common knowledge outside the capital. Noble society prefers to keep it... contained.”

“Why?” Holland asked.

“Think, lad. What happens if word spreads that the King of

Thalassar—the very pinnacle of noble society—is welcoming those the nobility has long scorned?” Perrin’s eyes hardened. “The noble elites fear it could spark ideas among the commoners. Ideas about equality, about change.”

“So they keep it quiet to avoid riots in the outer districts,” Thalen said slowly.

“Precisely.” Perrin nodded. “The nobles know, but they’ve been ordered to keep silent.”

“But surely people write letters?” Elowen’s brow furrowed. “Word must spread somehow.”

“The Courier’s Guild inspects all correspondence leaving the capital.” Perrin’s voice dropped further. “Any mention of the Concord is destroyed. And the writer...” He drew a finger across his throat.

“By Auredor,” Elowen breathed. “The whole system is rotten.”

“Perrin,” Thalen’s eyes narrowed. “You’re a captain of the city watch. Why tell us these secrets?”

A knowing smile touched Perrin’s lips. “Secrets? My lord, this is common knowledge among the nobility here in Valoria. I’m merely sharing what any noble who bothered to ask would learn.”

“That explains telling us,” Elowen gestured between herself and Thalen. “But Holland isn’t noble. Why risk sharing this with him?”

“Ah.” Perrin’s eyes twinkled. “Well, I can hardly control who overhears my conversation with two noble students, can I?”

* * *

The city fell away like a receding tide.

Where cramped buildings had pressed in moments before, an endless stretch of emerald lawn now rolled out before them. The Valadent Academy rose from this sea of green like a dream made solid—no longer a royal castle, but something grander still. Sunlight caught the ancient stone, turning windows into diamonds and casting long shadows across perfectly maintained gardens.

Noble families dotted the grounds like wildflowers, their laughter carried on the breeze. Children chased each other between picnic blankets while their parents reclined in the warmth, as if the execution they'd witnessed belonged to another world entirely.

"Incredible," Thalen breathed, silver hair catching the light as he craned his neck back. "The stories didn't do it justice."

Holland could only nod. He'd seen drawings of the Academy, sketched in books he wasn't supposed to touch, but nothing had prepared him for this. Five centuries ago, kings had walked these halls. Now scholars and mages filled the countless classrooms, their debates echoing through corridors where royal proclamations had once rung out.

The grand gates stood open, wrought iron and ancient stone forming an arch that seemed to pierce the sky. Beyond, a bridge spanned waters so clear they mirrored the clouds above. And there, in the heart of it all, lay the courtyard.

It pulsed with life. Registration week had drawn hundreds of students—new faces wide with wonder, second-years moving with practiced confidence through the crowd. Stalls lined the edges, their banners snapping in the wind as upperclassmen called out to recruit for countless clubs and activities.

At the center, a fountain caught the morning light. A griffin perched atop an open book, sword in one talon, orb in the

other—the Academy’s symbol rendered in eternal stone. Water trickled from the orb and cascaded from the sword’s edge, each droplet catching light like fallen stars before joining the pool below.

“It’s beautiful,” Elowen whispered. For once, even she seemed overwhelmed.

Perrin’s voice cut through their wonder. “Come. The registration tables won’t wait forever.”

The registration tables formed neat rows around the fountain, clerks bent over parchment as they recorded names in careful script. Lines of students waited their turn, some shifting nervously, others standing with practiced noble poise.

Perrin cut through the crowd like a ship through waves, his presence parting the line. “City business,” he said, voice carrying the weight of authority. He approached a thin man in scholar’s robes who peered at them through round spectacles. “This medal needs authentication.”

Holland’s medal caught the light as Perrin placed it on the table. The scholar lifted it with careful fingers, nose wrinkling as he studied the markings.

“Yes, yes, quite genuine.” He adjusted his spectacles. “See here? The Church of Harmony’s seal, applied before Selection Day. Quite impossible to forge—” His eyes flicked up from the medal to Holland, and his words died in his throat. The scholar’s gaze moved from Holland’s common clothes to his calloused hands, understanding dawning like a storm cloud across his features.

“A commoner?” The word dripped with disdain. “Absolutely not. The Academy maintains certain standards—”

“Sir.” Perrin’s voice held an edge. “You’ve just confirmed the medal’s authenticity. Are you now refusing to honor it?”

“Indeed, I am.” The scholar drew himself up, puffing out his chest. “This institution—”

“Has standards, yes.” A new voice cut through the tension, deep and resonant. “Though perhaps not the ones you imagine, Professor Laric.”

A tall figure approached, his dark blue robes adorned with intricate golden lattice that caught the sun. His bald head gleamed, offset by a bushy, curled mustache where a long pipe rested. Smoke curled around his words as he spoke.

“Dean Branok!” The scholar’s spine stiffened. “I was just explaining to this... person... that—”

“That you were about to violate both law and sacred decree?” Dean Branok removed his pipe, using its stem to emphasize each word. “Tell me, Professor Laric, when did Auredor himself descend to make you arbiter of who may enter these halls?”

Laric seemed to shrink with each word. “No, Dean Branok, forgive me. I overstepped—”

“See that it doesn’t happen again.” The Dean’s voice could have frozen flame. “Or we may need to discuss your continued employment.”

Laric bowed so low Holland wondered if his spine might snap.

The Dean turned to Holland, his stern expression melting into something warmer. “You must be the young man from Krestfell that Father Caelan mentioned.”

Holland blinked. “You know Father Caelan?”

A rich chuckle escaped the Dean’s lips. “We were students here together, though that was... well, more years ago than I care to count. These days we meet often, sharing tales of our glory days over a good pipe.” He gestured to the twins. “And

these would be?”

“My friends,” Holland said quickly. “Thalen and Elowen Frey from Belfane. Their grandmother pre-paid their tuition, but Elowen’s also a Selectee, so they’re here to register and inquire about the refund.”

“Of course, of course.” Dean Branok’s eyes twinkled. “Professor Laric will be happy to assist with that, won’t you, Professor?”

“Y-yes, absolutely.” Laric’s quill trembled as he reached for fresh parchment.

“Excellent.” The Dean took a long pull from his pipe. “I must see to other matters, but I’m certain our paths will cross again. Good day.”

As the Dean strode away, Laric’s demeanor transformed. Fear had made him efficient, and he processed their paperwork with remarkable speed. Meanwhile, Perrin drew Holland aside.

“Mr. Blackthorn,” he said quietly, “I must return to my duties, but first—I owe you an apology for my earlier skepticism. A commoner winning Selection Day seemed beyond belief, yet here you stand.” He pressed the fifteen aurens back into Holland’s hand. “May Aurendor light your path.”

“Perrin,” Holland said, catching the guard’s arm. “I owe you an apology too. What I said at the square... I understand now you couldn’t have changed that man’s fate. I came here to earn my Citizenship, to build a better future for my family back in Krestfell. You’ve already achieved what so many of us dream of. Whether you know it or not, you’re a hero to countless people who hope for a better life.”

Something shifted in Perrin’s eyes, as if seeing his own journey anew through Holland’s words. He nodded once, squeezed Holland’s shoulder, then disappeared into the crowd.

“Holland!” Thalen called. “Time to see our new home.”

Before Holland could move, a new figure approached their group. He stood tall, fiery red hair framing features that seemed carved from living flame. Pointed ears marked him as non-human, but more striking was the intricate pattern that began at his right brow and flowed down his face and neck, red in color. Golden-orange eyes sparkled with warmth as he smiled.

“Welcome, fellow students,” he said, his voice carrying both authority and genuine welcome. “I am Drakarion Flamehelm, second year at Valadent Academy.”

Another young man stood at Drakarion’s shoulder, similar in appearance but with burgundy hair and orange eyes. His own pattern began beneath his left eye, trailing straight down his neck before disappearing beneath his academy jacket. Round glasses perched on his nose, and despite his scholarly appearance, his build suggested considerable strength.

“Master, allow me to handle this mundane task,” the second man said. “It’s beneath your station.”

“No, Sinder,” Drakarion replied firmly. “Dean Branok entrusted this to me personally. Besides, as guests in Thalassar, we must remain approachable.”

“I’ve never seen your kind before,” Thalen blurted. “What are you?”

“Thay!” Elowen jabbed her brother with an elbow. “Could you be any ruder?”

“Not at all,” Drakarion laughed, the sound warm and genuine. “It’s a natural question. Sinder and I are Solarians from the Crimsonhelm Dominion. We’re here as representatives of our homeland to study at the Academy.”

Thalen, still bristling from Elowen’s jab, focused on Sinder. “What did four-eyes mean about it being ‘beneath your station?’”

Sinder’s expression darkened behind his glasses, but Drakar-

ion stepped in smoothly. “Sinder can be... overprotective. He meant no offense. Isn’t that right, Sinder?”

“Of course,” Sinder said stiffly. “Forgive my presumption.”

Holland stepped forward, hoping to ease the tension. “I’m Holland Blackthorn,” he said, then gestured to the twins. “And these are Thalen and Elowen Frey. Please excuse Thalen’s directness—he hasn’t quite mastered the art of tact.”

“Excellent!” Drakarion’s smile returned full force. “Shall we begin the tour? There’s much to see before sunset.”

He led them through the Academy’s sprawling grounds, Sinder a constant shadow at his shoulder. Drakarion pointed out classrooms, training fields, and gathering spaces, his knowledge seemingly endless. But it was his explanation of the Academy’s structure that caught Holland’s attention.

“First and second-year students share most classes,” Drakarion explained as they walked. “It creates a natural mentorship—second-years guide the first-years through their adjustment period. When those second-years advance to their final year, the cycle begins again with the new class.”

They reached the dormitories as the sun began its descent. After ensuring Elowen found her quarters in the women’s wing, Drakarion led Holland and Thalen to their assigned room.

“Before we go in,” Holland said, curiosity getting the better of him, “may I ask you something, Drakarion?”

“Of course.”

“Are you nobility? Or perhaps...” Holland hesitated. “Something more?”

Drakarion’s eyebrows rose. “What makes you think that?”

“The way you carry yourself,” Holland said carefully. “Not in an arrogant way, but there’s something... noble about it. And Sinder calling you ‘master,’ guarding you so closely...”

A slight smile tugged at Drakarion's lips. "I must say, Holland, your observation skills are impressive. Though I suspect Sinder's formality gave more away than I would have liked." He sighed, casting a fond but exasperated glance at his companion. "Yes, I am of royal blood. My uncle is King Vermillion Flamehelm of the Crimsonhelm Dominion. My father is his younger brother."

Holland froze, his mind racing through every interaction they'd had, searching frantically for any offense he might have given. The mere thought of being in the presence of foreign royalty made his stomach clench. One wrong word could—

Thalen's hand slapped Holland's back with casual disregard. "Don't worry about it, Holland. He's just a prince from another country. He doesn't have any authority here."

Holland's face contorted in horror at Thalen's bluntness, but Drakarion's laughter rang out like bells, a tear of mirth rolling down his cheek.

"He's absolutely right, you know." Drakarion wiped his eye, still chuckling. "My authority here is as substantial as a wisp of smoke. We are guests in this institution, nothing more. And even if I did hold power, I have no taste for petty retribution over imagined slights."

"Still," Sinder cut in, pushing his glasses up with one finger, "it wouldn't hurt to show proper respect—"

A swift smack to the back of Sinder's head cut him short. Drakarion's expression had grown stern. "Sinder, how many times must I remind you not to make others uncomfortable? We are here to learn and grow, not to lord over anyone. Show some kindness."

Sinder rubbed his head, bowing slightly. "Yes, Master. My apologies."

With the tension broken, Drakarion pushed open the door to their room. Sunlight streamed through a generous window, illuminating polished wooden floors and sturdy stone walls. Two beds stood side by side along one wall, with a third on the opposite side. Each had its own desk and wardrobe chest for personal belongings.

“Three beds?” Thalen asked, eyeing the layout.

Drakarion hesitated, choosing his words carefully. “Ah, yes. You’ll be sharing with Lord Merric Redshield from Helmsedge. He’s... well...”

“He’s a pompous ass,” Sinder stated flatly, adjusting his glasses.

“Sinder, must you be so crude?”

“Master, better they know the truth than be blindsided.”

Drakarion sighed. “I suppose you’re right, but still...” He turned back to Holland and Thalen. “Merric can be... difficult. Rude, inconsiderate, and rather unsuccessful at making friends despite numerous attempts. I suspect this is Professor Laric’s small revenge against you.”

“You’ve heard about that already?” Holland asked.

“I’d be surprised if the entire academy hasn’t by now.” Drakarion’s expression grew serious. “Word travels quickly here, as do rumors. Stay vigilant.”

With that warning, he bid them farewell. “Classes begin at week’s end, and we’ll share some together. Until then.” The door closed behind him with a soft click.

Holland sank onto his bed, the weight of everything finally settling over him. Excitement for the future coursed through him, but questions pressed against his mind. He needed to find Father Caelan, needed answers about his mysterious blessing.

“Now this is something,” Thalen exclaimed, bouncing slightly on his mattress. “Elowen and I haven’t lived anywhere this nice

since grandmother passed. I could get used to this.” He sniffed the freshly laundered sheets appreciatively.

Holland stood, anxiety propelling him forward. “Thalen, I need to step out for a bit. There’s someone in the city I need to see. I should be back before sunset.”

“Want company?”

“Thank you, but this is something I need to do alone.”

Thalen nodded, though concern lingered in his eyes. “Well, you know where to find us if you need anything.”

Holland smiled at his friend’s care, then slipped out the door, determination driving his steps. It was time to get some answers.

The Church Of Harmony

Judgment followed Holland like a shadow through Valoria's royal district. Noble eyes tracked his movements, lingering on his patched clothes and scuffed boots with the same disdain they might show a stray dog. Each step on the pristine cobblestones felt like an intrusion, a reminder that he didn't belong.

Only the Academy brooch on his chest kept the whispers at bay. Dean Branok had pressed it into his hand before he left—a simple token that marked him as Academy business, like the maids and craftsmen who served the grounds. In a world where every commoner needed a noble's permission just to walk these streets, the brooch was both shield and shackle.

The streets grew grander as he walked, buildings reaching toward the sky like giants of white stone. Then the road opened into a diamond-shaped plaza, and Holland's breath caught.

The Church of Harmony dominated one side, its Saltcryst walls gleaming in the afternoon sun. Stained glass windows soared upward, each one telling stories in light and color—Aurendor watching over Eldorien, his divine presence captured in jewel-toned glass.

But even the church's grandeur paled before what stood opposite. The Royal Palace stretched impossibly high, its countless spires seemed to pierce the clouds. Defensive walls ringed the precinct, manned by alert sentinels who watched the plaza with unwavering vigilance.

A small garden welcomed visitors to the church's entrance, a pocket of serenity amid the overwhelming architecture. Beyond it, circular halls embraced a massive worship chamber where twice weekly, nobles and common folk alike could seek Aurendor's blessing—though the nobles, of course, kept to their own sections, unwilling to share even holy ground with those beneath them.

Holland stood frozen, drinking in the celestial beauty, until a gentle voice broke his reverie.

"May I assist you, young man?"

A monk stood nearby, his expression kind despite Holland's obvious common birth.

"Yes, sir," Holland managed, his voice steadier than he felt. "I'm looking for Father Caelan."

"Ah." The monk's smile widened. "I'm Brother Jerome. Finding lost souls is quite literally my purpose here." He gestured toward a corridor lined with towering sculptures. "The grand library isn't far."

As they walked, Holland found himself drawn to the faces watching from their marble perches. Each bore a different expression—some stern, others peaceful, all carrying a weight of ancient wisdom.

"The High Priests," Brother Jerome explained, noting Holland's interest. "Every one who's ever served the Church of Harmony. Their names are there, beneath." He pointed to the elegant script carved into each plinth.

Above them, the vaulted ceiling told its own story. Massive frescos captured moments of creation—Aurendor’s hands shaping mountains, filling oceans, breathing life into the first peoples of Eldorien. The paintings seemed to move in the shifting light, as if the god’s work continued even now.

They passed monks deep in prayer before certain statues, heads bowed in reverence.

“Are they worshiping the statues?” Holland asked before he could stop himself.

Brother Jerome’s laugh was gentle. “No, no. The statues remind us of the virtues these leaders embodied. The monks pray for guidance, hoping to carry forward the wisdom of those who came before.” He paused before a set of towering doors, their carved surface stretching twenty feet high. A smaller, more practical door was set within. “Father Caelan will be inside. If you need anything else...” He bowed slightly and departed.

Holland pushed open the smaller door and forgot how to breathe.

The library soared three stories high, a cathedral of knowledge where towering bookshelves reached toward heaven like prayers made solid. Ancient tomes and scrolls filled every shelf, their spines whispering titles in faded gold. The air itself felt different here—thick with the sweet, musty scent of aged parchment and leather, as if wisdom had a smell all its own.

Marble columns supported creaking balconies where scholars bent over manuscripts, their quills scratching gentle rhythms against silence. Every sound seemed muffled, absorbed by the thousands of books watching from their shelves. The modest library at the Silvermane estate, once the grandest thing Holland had known, now felt like a single drop in this ocean of

knowledge.

“Holland!”

The warm voice cut through his wonder. Father Caelan approached, smile bright beneath his gray-ringed crown. “What an unexpected delight! Have you registered at the academy?”

“It’s good to see you, Father.” Holland clasped the offered hand. “I registered today, but... I bring a message from Father Maelis in Stonehaven. He said it was urgent. Said you’re the only one who can give me answers.”

Something flickered in Caelan’s eyes—concern, perhaps fear. He glanced around the library, suddenly wary. “Come,” he said softly. “Let’s speak privately.”

Caelan led Holland through a maze of towering shelves to a modest office tucked away from prying eyes. Books claimed every surface, stacked in precarious towers that defied gravity. A narrow window offered a sliver of courtyard view, the royal palace’s spires piercing the sky beyond.

“Forgive the chaos,” Caelan said, clearing papers from a chair. “Being Head Librarian tends to generate more books than shelves.” He settled behind a massive desk, its surface a battlefield of open texts and ink-stained parchment. A row of well-worn pipes rested nearby, each one carved with different patterns.

“Now then,” he said, once Holland had taken a seat. “What message does Father Maelis send?”

“During the Blessing Ceremony, I received something... different.” Holland leaned forward. “A sigil no one recognized. When I asked about it, Father Maelis wouldn’t tell me what it meant. He said only you could answer, and that it was dangerous to know.”

Caelan’s fingers drummed against his desk. “What exactly

did he say?"

"He told me to tell you this: 'The king's beacon is lit.'"

The color drained from Caelan's face. His hands gripped the desk edge until his knuckles went white. "The sigil," he said, voice barely a whisper. "Describe it."

"A crown, with a sword and scepter entwined in a circle, like the other blessing marks."

Caelan shot to his feet so quickly his chair nearly toppled. One trembling hand pressed against his mouth as if trying to hold back words that could shatter worlds.

"What does it mean?" Holland's heart hammered against his ribs. "What is this blessing?"

"Listen carefully." Caelan's voice had dropped so low Holland had to strain to hear. "What I'm about to tell you must never leave this room. Your life may depend on it. In fact..." He swallowed hard. "It may already be in danger."

"Father, you're scaring me."

"Good." Caelan sank back into his chair. "You should be scared. What I'm about to share has been buried for centuries, known only to a select few. I belong to a secret order within the Church—the Lorekeepers. Six hundred years ago, our world nearly drowned in darkness. A being called Maleficus gathered armies of shadow, threatening to tear Eldorien apart. We call it the Dark Wars, though you won't find that name in any common history book. Back then, all of Eldorien was united under a single crown."

"What?" Holland shook his head. "That's impossible. I've never heard of any of this."

"Of course not." Bitterness crept into Caelan's voice. "Maleficus didn't just want to conquer—he wanted to erase. When he struck down King Darion the Uniter, he tried to wipe

away every trace that the king had ever existed. But a group of prophets and scholars resisted. They became the first Lorekeepers, gathering every scrap of knowledge they could save before it was destroyed.”

The office seemed to darken as Caelan continued, shadows gathering in the corners like old memories. “When Darion fell, Maleficus turned the races against each other. The War of Ashes raged for a hundred and fifty years, shattering the world into the kingdoms we know today. Then Maleficus vanished, taking even the memory of his existence with him. Only the Lorekeepers, guarding their hidden texts, remembered the truth.”

Holland sat in stunned silence, trying to absorb the weight of what he was hearing. “But what does this have to do with my blessing?”

“Because,” Caelan said softly, “what you received hasn’t been seen since Darion himself. It’s called the King’s Blessing.”

The words fell like stones into still water, sending ripples through Holland’s world. “What... what does that mean?”

“Honestly? We don’t know.” Caelan ran a hand over his face. “Most records were lost. What little we’ve pieced together suggests it was Auredor’s gift to Darion, though its true nature remains a mystery. What we do know is that Maleficus wanted it—wanted to corrupt it for his own ends. And while he may be gone, there are still those who serve his shadow. If they learn what you carry...” He left the threat unspoken.

“I’m already changing,” Holland whispered. The confession spilled out like water from a broken dam. “I’d never held a sword before Selection Day, but now I fight like a master. In Watford, I tracked a kidnapped girl by actually seeing her scent. And these memories, Father—memories that aren’t mine. They

flash through my mind, and suddenly I know things I never learned. But how? The blessing only happened at Stonehaven, yet these... abilities... started over a month before.”

Tears threatened at the corners of his eyes. “What’s happening to me?”

Father Caelan moved swiftly from his chair, wrapping a comforting arm around Holland’s trembling shoulders. “My dear lad,” his voice was gentle but firm, “I won’t pretend to have all the answers. This blessing—if that’s truly what we’re dealing with—fills me with as much uncertainty as it does you. But know this: you are not alone. I’m here, and we’ll face whatever comes together. Do you trust me?”

Holland drew a shaky breath, wiping at his eyes. “Yes, Father. I trust you. I guess you’re all I’ve got.”

“Now, now,” Caelan chuckled softly, “don’t make it sound quite so dire.” His expression grew more serious. “But let’s focus on immediate concerns. The academy knows about your lack of Enera?”

“Yes. I made sure they knew during registration.”

“And what blessing did you list on your forms?”

“The Warrior’s Blessing.” Holland shifted in his chair. “Since I’ve suddenly got these sword skills, and it doesn’t rely on Enera... it seemed the simplest explanation.”

“Clever thinking,” Caelan nodded approvingly. His eyes swept over Holland’s worn clothes. “But what of your other needs? Notebooks? Quills? Proper attire?”

Holland glanced down at his patched shirt, heat rising in his cheeks. “The academy provided uniforms, but the rest... I wouldn’t even know where to start.”

“Ah, that’s easily remedied.” Caelan moved to the door, a slight smile playing at his lips. “There’s someone I’d like you to meet—

my associate librarian and a second-year student. Another Lorekeeper, though I should warn you... he has a rather unique way of expressing himself." He raised his voice. "Layfus! Come here, I need you for an errand."

A moment later, footsteps approached through the stacks. A young man emerged, dark reddish hair falling across his freckled face, thin glasses perched on his nose. Despite his scholarly appearance, he carried himself with an air of casual irreverence that seemed at odds with the library's solemnity.

"I'm coming, I'm coming," he called back, voice dripping with sarcasm. "No need to wake the dead with all that shouting."

"Holland Blackthorn, meet Layfus," Caelan said. "Layfus, take Holland to Daygren's shop. He needs academy supplies and proper clothing."

Layfus gave Holland an appraising look, one eyebrow arched high. "Certainly, my lord. Shall we pick up a mirror while we're at it? Might help our friend here see what he's been walking around in."

Holland wasn't sure whether to laugh or take offense, but Father Caelan just grinned. "Try not to ruffle his feathers too much while you're out."

"No promises." Layfus shrugged, already turning toward the door. "Coming, Blackthorn? Or shall I fetch you a change of rags first?"

Despite his sharp tongue, there was something oddly comforting about Layfus's directness. At least Holland knew exactly where he stood with him.

"Go on," Caelan urged softly. "We'll speak more later. And Holland?" His voice dropped to barely a whisper. "Remember—not a word to anyone about what we discussed. Not even Layfus knows everything yet."

Holland nodded, then hurried to catch up with his acerbic new guide, leaving Father Caelan alone with his ancient tomes and their heavy secrets.

* * *

Valoria's streets glowed golden in the late afternoon sun, shadows stretching like lazy cats across worn cobblestones. The day's commerce was winding down—merchants calling final prices, the scent of roasting meat mingling with fresh herbs, a distant lute weaving melody through the cooling air.

"So," Holland said, dodging a stray dog that darted between his legs, "how long have you known Father Caelan?"

"As long as I can remember." Layfus's usual smirk softened. "He's my uncle."

"Really? He didn't introduce you that way."

"Father Caelan believes people should stand on their own merit, not who they're connected to." Layfus sidestepped a group of children chasing a ball. "Besides, he's not nearly as stiff as he seems when he's off duty."

"You must know him better than anyone."

Something flickered in Layfus's eyes. "He took me in when I was five, after my parents died. Been with him ever since."

"I'm sorry," Holland said quickly. "I didn't mean to—"

"No, it's alright." Layfus's smile was faint but genuine. "I like remembering them. Even when it hurts."

Holland shifted topics, sensing the need for lighter ground. "You certainly speak your mind. Even when it might ruffle feathers."

"Ah, yes. My legendary bluntness." Layfus's eyes gleamed. "A conscious choice, actually. And one I don't plan to change, even

if it lands me in trouble.”

“Why’s that?”

Layfus slowed his steps, as if the memory itself made walking harder. “The day my parents left for their diplomatic mission to Aldoria, I was furious they wouldn’t take me. When they said goodbye, told me they loved me... I wouldn’t even look at them. Just ran and hid.” His voice dropped. “Three days later, bandits killed them near Wildmach. I never saw them again. Never got to say I loved them back.”

He squared his shoulders, pushing the pain away. “So now I say exactly what I’m thinking, when I’m thinking it. No words left unsaid.”

“That takes courage,” Holland said softly. “Your parents would be proud of the man you’ve become.”

“Well, of course they would.” Layfus’s dramatic hand flourish scattered the somber mood. “I’m practically perfect in every way.”

Holland couldn’t help but laugh. “Modesty must be another of your virtues.”

“Oh, modesty is terribly overrated. Though I suppose I could try being humble—just this once.”

They rounded a corner, and Holland stopped short. Daygren’s Mercantile rose before them, its polished mahogany storefront glowing in the afternoon light. Golden script adorned the swinging sign, while the windows displayed leather-bound journals and gleaming quills. Even the potted flowers seemed more elegant than ordinary blooms.

Layfus pushed open the door, but Holland hesitated. Noble shops meant noble customers, and he’d learned that lesson the hard way.

“Don’t worry,” Layfus said, reading his expression. “Mr. Day-

gren welcomes everyone. Even incorrigibly scruffy academy students.”

Inside, the shop felt like stepping into another world. Polished floors creaked softly underfoot, while hanging lamps cast warm light over treasures that seemed to breathe possibility. The air itself was different—rich with leather and aged parchment, touched with honey-sweet beeswax from flickering candles.

Quills lined the shelves, some sleek and practical, others gilded like fallen stars. Ink bottles gleamed in every shade imaginable. Leather-bound journals waited in neat stacks, their covers telling stories even before a single page was filled. In one corner, finely tailored clothes draped wooden mannequins with quiet elegance.

“Ah, Layfus!” A warm voice called from behind the counter. “Your plump presence graces us once again.”

“Mr. Daygren.” Layfus grinned at the older gentleman. “Looking as ancient as ever, I see.”

The shopkeeper’s laugh was as rich as his wares. “What brings you by today?”

“Father Caelan sent us.” Layfus gestured to Holland. “My friend here needs... well, everything.”

“Excellent!” Mr. Daygren’s eyes twinkled. “And what might ‘everything’ entail, young man?”

Holland cleared his throat, fighting the urge to shrink under the merchant’s gaze. “Some new clothes, sir. Shoes. And... supplies for the academy. Quills and such.”

“Consider it done.” Mr. Daygren nodded toward the clothing section. “Browse there while I gather the rest.”

Holland moved through the shop like a man in a dream. His fingers brushed a dark red tunic, and he nearly jerked back at the softness. The fabric was nothing like the rough cloth Ety

pieced together from scraps too small for Carson's mending. He'd never minded those clothes—they were made with love, after all. But this...

His hand fell away. What right did he have to touch something so fine? The blue doublet with silver threading, the cloud-soft leather boots, the wool-lined cloak that promised warmth like summer... they belonged to a different world. His world was patched clothes and scuffed boots, not this fantasy of finery.

"Feeling overwhelmed?" Layfus's voice was gentler than usual.

Holland nodded, unable to find words for the storm in his chest.

"I get it." Layfus stepped closer. "It's easy to feel like you don't belong when everything's new. But listen—clothes don't make the man. Character does. And you, my friend, have character in spades."

"These are too nice for someone like me." The words felt small, like admitting defeat.

"You deserve good things, Holland." Steel crept into Layfus's voice. "Don't ever let yourself think otherwise. You've faced more than most and come out stronger. This is your chance to redefine who you are, what you can become. These clothes? They're just a small part of that. But you should embrace it. You've earned it."

Holland turned to him, brow furrowed. "How can you know anything about my character? We've only just met."

Layfus's smile turned knowing. "Father Caelan hasn't stopped talking about the young man from Krestfell since he returned—the commoner who won Selection Day against all odds." He adjusted his glasses. "And Father Caelan has a gift for seeing the true hearts of people. If he believes you have great character..."

He shrugged. “Well, I’ve learned to trust his judgment.”

Holland let out a breath he hadn’t realized he was holding. Slowly, carefully, he selected a few items—the red tunic, sturdy boots, a simple but elegant cloak. Each choice felt like a step forward, away from who he’d been and toward who he might become.

“Well, well.” Layfus’s grin returned. “Ready to strut about like a proper noble?”

Holland laughed, some of the tension easing from his shoulders. “I think I’ll stick to being just Holland.”

“Wise choice.”

They carried their selections to the counter, where Mr. Daygren nodded approval. “Found what suits you, lad?”

“Yes, sir. I believe I have.”

“Excellent.” The shopkeeper began wrapping their purchases. “Oh, and Layfus?” His eyes twinkled. “Remind Father Caelan to bring extra aurens to our card game. I plan to leave him with nothing but his robe.”

“I’ll pass that on.” Layfus smirked. “Though his luck at cards is as divine as his sermons—don’t say I didn’t warn you.”

* * *

Sunset painted the academy halls in amber and shadow as Holland approached his dorm. Before he could reach for the handle, voices erupted from within—sharp, angry, cutting through the evening quiet like drawn blades.

“Don’t you dare talk about Holland that way!” Thalen’s fury carried clearly through the door. “You don’t even know him. He has just as much right to be here as anyone—”

“I don’t care who he is.” The second voice cracked like ice.

"I'm not sleeping next to some commoner. I want the bed by the wall, and you degenerates will keep your distance. Do that, and we won't have problems."

"Celestarra above." Thalen's laugh held no humor. "That red-headed fellow with the glasses was right—you really are an unbearable arse."

"I don't give a damn what anyone thinks." Something slammed—a book, perhaps, or a fist against wood. "I don't need friends, especially not with that commoner. We're not friends. We never will be."

Holland pushed open the door before things could escalate further. "Hello." He kept his voice steady, neutral. "You must be Merric Redshield."

The young man at the desk didn't bother turning around. Dark hair swept back from his temples, tapering to neat sideburns that emphasized his sharp jawline. A scar cut through his left eyebrow like a badge of past violence. When he finally looked up, his blue eyes were winter-cold, though something flickered beneath the ice—something almost like pain.

"I have little interest in pleasantries." Each word precise, carved from stone.

Holland nodded, letting his offered hand fall back to his side. "Then let's respect each other's boundaries. We don't have to be friends, but we don't need to be enemies. We'll stay out of your way if you stay out of ours. Agreed?"

Merric's gaze raked over him, measuring, calculating. Finally: "Agreed." He turned back to his desk, dismissal clear in every line of his body.

Thalen caught Holland's eye, jerking his head toward their side of the room. "Well," he muttered once they were out of earshot, "they certainly weren't exaggerating about him."

“We’ll manage.” Holland kept his voice low. “We don’t have much choice.”

“Aurendor.” Thalen’s eyes rolled heavenward. “If you’re listening, a swift strike of lightning would be greatly appreciated.”

Interlude

Crystal chandeliers caught the afternoon sun, scattering light like broken diamonds across marble floors. Whispered conversations and clinking china echoed off the café's high ceiling, where delicate plasterwork traced patterns in white and gold. Through arched windows, sunlight painted stripes across tables draped in pristine linens and ringed by velvet chairs the color of midnight.

A servant ghosted between tables, boots silent on polished stone. She kept her eyes down, trained never to meet the gaze of the nobles who pretended she didn't exist until they needed her. Her practiced movements were as much a part of the café's atmosphere as the gilded mirrors and blue silk curtains.

In the shadowed corner, partially concealed by a towering plant's leaves, Lord Eldric's leg bounced beneath fine linen. His teacup sat untouched, growing cold as his eyes snapped to the entrance for the hundredth time. A muscle twitched in his jaw, the only outward sign of the rage he contained.

The host's voice carried across the room. "Right this way, young lord."

Faron Silvermane's entrance drew every eye in the café, though none dared stare openly. His academy uniform—dark blue wool and silver buttons—fit like armor, and he moved with the same predatory grace as his father. Silver hair pulled back from sharp features only emphasized the winter-cold calculation in his dark eyes. He cataloged the room in a single sweep, marking exits, threats, opportunities.

"My apologies for the delay, Father."

"Faron." Ice crystalized in Eldric's voice. "When I summon you—"

"I come. Yes." Faron sank into the opposite chair, straightening his sleeve with deliberate care. "The delay was unavoidable. A matter at the academy required... attention."

"More pressing than my summons?" Eldric's fingers whitened around his cup. "Another of your indulgences?"

A smile curved Faron's mouth, sharp as a blade. "Hardly an indulgence. Let's just say a particularly troublesome peer won't plague our halls next term."

Pride and cruelty mixed in Eldric's answering smile. "That's my son." He leaned forward, voice dropping. "Speaking of the academy, I have another task requiring your... particular talents."

"Anything, Father." Faron's eyes gleamed with eagerness, like a hawk spotting prey.

Eldric's fist clenched on the table, making the china rattle. "A student needs removing from the academy." His voice dropped to a whisper sharp with venom. "I don't care how—expelled, broken, driven out. Just gone."

"Who's earned such special attention?"

"Holland Blackthorn."

A laugh escaped Faron's throat before he could catch it. "The

commoner? Surely you—” The laughter died at his father’s expression.

“Do I look amused?” Eldric’s knuckles whitened further. “That wretched boy won Selection Day despite everything I arranged. Everything.” The last word came out as a hiss.

Faron’s amusement hardened to contempt. “The voidborn? How did a nothing like him best your champion?”

“We suspect interference, though proving it...” Eldric’s jaw clenched. “He slipped through my fingers at Stonehaven’s Blessing Ceremony. Received some blessing no one’s ever seen before, then vanished—with the church’s help, I’d wager.”

“What kind of blessing?”

“The church guards rushed us out before anyone got a proper look. Set the city watch to keep us away.”

“And none could be bought?”

“Not one.” Bitterness twisted Eldric’s mouth. “Stonehaven’s guard serves their faith before their purse.”

A young waitress approached their table, auburn hair neatly tied back. Her hands clasped before her like a shield. “My lords, may I take your orders?”

Faron’s predatory gaze shifted to her, his smile sharpening. “Depends what’s on offer. Surely something sweeter than mere desserts?”

“Faron.” Eldric’s tone dripped disdain. “This commoner filth is beneath—”

“Father.” Faron caught the waitress’s wrist as she tried to step back. “Beauty deserves appreciation, whatever its source. Your name, my dear?”

“Colette, my lord.” Her voice stayed steady even as color drained from her face. “And I’m married. Please, let me serve you properly—your orders?”

“Tea.” Eldric cut in. “Cream and sugar.”

“Coffee.” Faron’s grip tightened before releasing her. “Black, two sugars. For now.”

She retreated swiftly, professional mask hiding her fear. Eldric watched her go with cold indifference.

“Must you indulge so publicly? The nobles will talk.”

Faron waved away his concern. “Let them. We take what we want—it’s our right.” His eyes followed Colette’s path toward the kitchen. “But back to our voidborn problem. You lost him after Stonehaven?”

“The rains ruined the trail. By Watford, the trace was cold.”

“And now you must report to Uncle Sylas.” Faron’s smirk returned. “What will you tell our beloved king?”

“I’ll find someone else to blame. That interfering monk who oversaw Selection Day, perhaps. He dared embarrass me—I’ll deal with him eventually.”

“Holland’s surely registered by now. My informants will learn his schedule soon enough.” Faron’s voice dropped to match his father’s earlier whisper. “Leave him to me.”

Colette returned, hands trembling slightly as she set down their drinks. Faron’s smile widened, all teeth and threat. “Excuse me, Father. A matter requires my... personal attention.”

He rose, following Colette as she hurried toward the storage closet to fetch a fresh tablecloth.

Eldric lifted his tea, still too hot to drink, and turned to the garden beyond the arched windows. Late afternoon sun painted the flowers in shades of gold and amber, each bloom perfectly placed, meticulously tended. A gentle breeze stirred petals of deepest blue and purest white, nature arranged to match the café’s refined aesthetic.

But his eyes caught on the edges where perfection frayed.

Weeds crept in through cracks in the stone border—stubborn, ugly things that refused to know their place. Like that commoner boy, they dared intrude where they didn't belong. Yet something in their persistence nagged at him. Perhaps because he recognized in them a reflection of himself—not the carefully cultivated beauty, but the choking force that grew in shadow, strangling what stood in its way.

Time stretched like cooling honey. Eldric watched a particularly bold weed push up through the carefully laid gravel path. The gardeners would cut it down tomorrow, no doubt, but its seeds would remain, waiting. Just as he and Faron worked in the shadows of proper society, spreading their own kind of corruption through Valoria's pristine façade.

The thought almost made him smile. Let the noble families pretend at refinement with their delicate teacups and perfectly arranged gardens. He knew the truth—that power grew best in dark places, fed by roots that dug deep and spread wide, unseen until it was too late.

His tea reached the perfect temperature just as the closet door creaked open. Faron emerged, adjusting his clothes with the same casual arrogance he did everything else. Satisfaction radiated from him as he closed the door on Colette's muffled sounds of grief, another "weed" crushed beneath noble boots.

II

The Flame

Academic Troubles

Morning light slanted through tall windows, casting Holland's shadow across his desk. His fingers tangled in his hair as he stared at Professor Nealy's diagrams from yesterday—swirling patterns of energy that seemed to mock him from the chalkboard. Two months at Valadent Academy, and still the simplest spells eluded his grasp.

The classroom buzzed with the usual pre-lecture energy as students filtered in, claiming their seats throughout the tiered rows. Quiet conversations and the rustle of papers filled the air, creating that familiar morning atmosphere of a university lecture hall. Soon these polished desks would fill with students who could summon flame with a thought, who had been born with Enera flowing through their veins like blood. While he... he had only Dean Branok's arcstones, crystal trinkets that held a shadow of true power. Each one drained too quickly, leaving him with nothing but failure and the weight of watching eyes that said he didn't belong.

He traced a finger along his desk's worn surface, following the initials carved by students long gone. Generations of mages

had sat here, learning to weave magic as naturally as breathing. The podium at the room's heart bore similar marks of history—delicate vines etched into dark wood, weathered smooth by time and touch.

Thalen and Elowen slipped into the seats beside him, their faces pinched with familiar concern. Around them, the lecture hall continued to fill, chairs scraping against wood as more students settled in for the morning's lesson.

"You're early," Elowen said, forcing brightness into her voice.

Holland dropped his hands from his hair. "Couldn't sleep."

"Let me guess," Thalen's eyes narrowed. "Up all night with those arcstones again?"

His silence answered for him.

"Holland." Elowen leaned closer, her voice gentle but firm beneath the growing classroom chatter. "Have you considered asking Professor Nealy for help? She's offered—"

"I've told him that a hundred times," Thalen cut in. "But our friend here thinks he has to conquer the world alone."

Holland straightened, jaw tight. "The moment I start asking professors for special help is the moment every noble here gets proven right. I need to do this myself."

"We know you're under pressure." Elowen's hand hovered near his arm but didn't touch. "But we're here. Whatever you need."

The door creaked open, and the lecture hall fell quiet. Professor Nealy entered, her presence immediately commanding attention despite her small youthful frame. Round glasses perched on her button nose, and her striking blue eyes held depths of quiet wisdom. Even her flame-red hair seemed to emphasize the controlled power she radiated.

She set a stack of leather-bound books on her desk and turned

to face the now-silent room, offering a warm smile that made even Holland's tension ease slightly.

"Six," called out a student from the back row.

"Correct." Professor Nealy nodded, her chalk scratching elegant diagrams across the board. "Fire, water, earth, air, light, and shadow. Each affinity shapes our world in its own way. But beneath them all flows something more fundamental—Enera."

She set down her chalk and gestured to the window. Outside, a bird soared past on a thermal. "Look there. That sparrow isn't just riding the wind—it's instinctively sensing and using Enera currents in the air. The same force that lets us cast spells flows through every living thing." Her hand traced the air, and suddenly the classroom could see it—gossamer streams of energy swirling around them like invisible rivers. "Some creatures, like dragons, even though endangered brim with it. Others have just enough to sustain life."

Holland watched, transfixed, as she revealed the hidden flows of power that had always been beyond his sight. The visualization spell showed Enera streaming through the walls, pooling in corners, dancing around his classmates like luminous auras. But around him... nothing. Just an empty space, a void in the swirling tapestry of energy. He shifted uncomfortably in his seat, feeling more exposed than ever.

"Eldorien itself is veined with Enera," she continued, adjusting her glasses. "There are places where it wells up from the world's core—springs of pure magical energy. The capital itself was built near such a confluence." She smiled as several students straightened, suddenly aware of the power flowing beneath their feet. "It's why spells come more easily here than in other locations."

Her visualization expanded, showing how different students'

Enera signatures resonated with different elements. “Your affinity—whether fire, water, or another element—determines which aspects of Enera you can most easily channel. Most mages have one, maybe two alignments. But there are rare exceptions...”

She paused, and the class leaned forward eagerly. They’d all heard whispers about their professor’s unique abilities. Three elemental affinities—fire, air, and light—a combination that had earned her rapid advancement through the Royal Mage Corps before she chose to return to teaching.

“And then,” she continued, her voice softening with wonder, “there was the rarest affinity of all. Spatial magic. The ability to manipulate space itself, to fold distance like paper. But no one has manifested this gift in centuries.”

A hand shot up. “Professor, is it true you served in the Royal Mage Corps?”

Her smile turned wistful. “I did. But I found my true calling here, helping others understand these fundamental forces.” She let the visualization fade.

“Now, watch carefully,” she said, returning to her diagram. “The key to channeling Enera lies in understanding its flow. Whether you’re casting or canceling a spell, control is paramount.”

Holland’s fingers brushed against the arcstone in his pocket as he took careful notes. Around him, students were already practicing small castings—tiny flames dancing between fingers, drops of water spinning in mid-air, pebbles floating above desks. The soft hum of dozens of spells filled the room like a magical chorus, one in which he could only pretend to sing.

“For your examination,” Professor Nealy’s voice cut through his thoughts, “you’ll need to demonstrate not just spell-casting,

but understanding. Show me how Enera flows, how you guide it, how you maintain control..."

"Before we end today's lesson," Professor Nealy said, setting down her chalk, "let's discuss how we actually channel Enera." She moved to the center of the room, her hands raised before her. "Watch carefully."

She began a series of fluid movements, her fingers tracing invisible patterns in the air. "For novice mages, physical movement is crucial. Your body becomes a compass, directing Enera's flow." A small flame appeared between her palms, following the dance of her hands. "The gestures aren't arbitrary—each one maps to specific energy pathways within you."

Holland scribbled frantically, trying to capture every detail. Around him, students mimicked her movements with varying degrees of success.

"Incantations serve a similar purpose," she continued, her voice taking on a rhythmic quality. "*Ignis luminare.*" The flame brightened. "*Aqua fluere.*" The fire transformed into a sphere of water. "The words themselves don't hold power—they're tools to focus your intent, to help your mind shape the Enera."

She gestured to the spellbooks on students' desks. "These texts contain centuries of refined techniques, but they're guides, not rules. As you advance, you'll find your own ways to direct energy." The water sphere split into droplets that danced through the air. "Some prefer singing to traditional incantations. Others use mathematical formulas. The method matters less than the mental discipline behind it."

Professor Nealy let the water evaporate, then created a more complex illusion—a butterfly made of light. "But casting is only half the equation. Watch carefully." She began another set of movements, these ones more intricate. "To cancel a spell, you

must understand its essence. Feel how the energy wants to flow, then guide it back—like rewinding a thread onto its spool.”

The butterfly didn’t simply vanish—it unmade itself, light flowing back into her hands in reverse of its creation. “Notice how these gestures mirror the casting movements, but with subtle differences. One wrong motion...” She demonstrated with a slight flick of her wrist, causing the energy to disperse in a harmless flash. “And the spell unravels chaotically.”

Holland felt the arcstone pulse in his pocket as she spoke. Even without natural Enera, he could sense the truth in her words. The stone’s energy always fought him, wanting to rush out all at once rather than flow smoothly.

“Remember,” she said, meeting each student’s eyes in turn, “magic is ninety percent mental. These physical tools—gestures, words, movements—they’re training wheels. With enough practice, enough understanding...” She closed her eyes, and the air around her shimmered with pure energy. “Spell-casting becomes as natural as thought.”

She opened her eyes, and the energy settled. “That’s why masters can cast without movement or words. But don’t rush to that stage. Even I still use physical aids for complex spells. Better to cast slowly and correctly than quickly and recklessly.”

Holland looked down at his hands, wondering if he’d ever reach that level of mastery with his borrowed power. The arcstone felt both heavier and more precious.

“The examination will test more than your ability to channel Enera,” Professor Nealy concluded. “Show me your understanding of these principles. Whether you prefer gestures, incantations, or other methods, demonstrate control. That’s what matters most.”

As students began packing their things, a sharp voice cut

through the shuffle.

“Professor Nealy.” A hand shot up from the back row. “What about those who rely on... alternative methods?” The words dripped with disdain, and several heads turned toward Holland.

Professor Nealy’s expression didn’t change, but something in her eyes hardened. “An excellent question, Mr. Landers. Magic manifests in many forms. Some of our greatest innovations have come from those who found... alternative paths.” She adjusted her glasses, light glinting off the lenses. “After all, arcstones themselves were invented by a mage seeking to help those with limited Enera access healing magic.”

Holland kept his eyes fixed on his notes, pretending not to notice the whispers around him. His fingers clenched around the arcstone in his pocket, its smooth surface both a comfort and a reminder of his difference.

“In fact,” Professor Nealy continued, her tone carrying a subtle edge, “understanding how to work with arcstones requires exceptional precision and control. Much like learning to drive a racing horse rather than merely riding one you’ve raised from a foal.” She smiled, but it didn’t reach her eyes. “Perhaps, Mr. Lockwood, you’d care to demonstrate the cancellation technique I just showed us?”

The whispers died. Lander’s face flushed as he stood, his own Enera flickering uncertainly around him. He raised his hands, attempting to mirror the professor’s earlier movements. The simple light spell he cast wavered, then scattered chaotically instead of reversing properly. Several students ducked as sparks showered the back row.

“You see?” Professor Nealy’s voice remained pleasant. “Control matters more than the source of one’s power. Class dismissed.”

Holland gathered his books slowly, waiting for the room to clear. But before he could leave, Professor Nealy called out.

“Mr. Blackthorn? A moment, please.”

Holland hesitated, one hand still gripping his worn satchel. Behind him, the last few students filed out, their footsteps echoing in the suddenly too-quiet room. Through the windows, afternoon sunlight painted long shadows across the floor, and somewhere outside, a bell tolled the hour.

Professor Nealy wasn't looking at him. Instead, she stood at her desk, carefully arranging her books, giving him space to either approach or leave. Her fire-red hair caught the light, reminding him of the flames she'd so effortlessly controlled minutes before.

“I'm not going to force you to accept help, Holland,” she said quietly, still not looking up. “But I want to show you something.” Now she did turn, and her eyes held none of the pity he'd grown to hate. Only understanding, and something else—a fierce sort of determination.

She held out her hand, palm up. “May I see your arcstone?”

Holland's fingers tightened instinctively around the crystal in his pocket. The stone was more than just a magical tool—it was his only link to a world that should have been beyond his reach. But Professor Nealy waited patiently, her hand steady.

Slowly, reluctantly, he withdrew the stone. In the afternoon light, its surface gleamed with trapped energy, like fire frozen in crystal. As he placed it in her palm, he noticed something he hadn't before—a thin crack running along one edge, barely visible but growing.

“Ah,” she said softly, turning the stone in her hands. “You're pushing too hard. Forcing the energy instead of guiding it.” She held the stone up to the light, and suddenly Holland could

see the Enera inside, not just as a vague glow but as intricate patterns of power. “Arcstones aren’t just containers, Holland. They’re instruments, as delicate and complex as any musical device. And like any instrument, they respond best to a gentle touch.”

She handed the stone back, but not before doing something that made the crack seal itself, the crystal becoming whole again. “Your determination is admirable, but you’re fighting against yourself. You treat each spell like a battle to be won, when it should be more like...”

She paused, considering her words carefully. “Like learning to dance. You don’t master dancing by forcing each step. You learn the rhythm, feel the flow, let the music guide you.”

“Thank you, Professor,” Holland said quietly, pocketing the repaired arcstone. His mind churned with questions about control and flow, but they stayed locked behind his pride. She was right about the stone—about everything, probably—but admitting that felt too much like admitting defeat.

Professor Nealy’s expression softened, as if reading his internal struggle. “My door is always open, Holland. Remember that.” She turned back to her books, allowing him a graceful exit.

The corridor outside was mostly empty now, afternoon classes already in session. Holland kept his gaze fixed on the stone floor as he walked, mind replaying Professor Nealy’s words about rhythm and flow. So lost in thought, he rounded a corner without looking and collided with something solid. His books scattered across the polished floor with a thunderous clatter.

“Apologies, Holland,” came a calm, measured voice. “I must have been walking too fast around the corner.”

Looking up, Holland found himself face to face with Drakarion. The older student was already kneeling to help gather the fallen books, his movements precise and efficient.

“No, the fault’s mine,” Holland muttered, dropping to his knees to help. “Wasn’t watching where I was going.”

“How are your classes progressing?” Drakarion asked, handing him a recovered notebook. His tone was casual, but something in his eyes suggested the question wasn’t.

Heat crept up Holland’s neck. “Fine,” he lied, forcing a smile. “No complaints.”

Drakarion paused, a textbook on elemental theory balanced in his hands. “Professor Nealy asked me to speak with you,” he said gently. “She’s concerned about your progress, especially with spellcasting. She thought perhaps I could offer some assistance.”

Something snapped inside Holland. All the frustration from class, all the whispers and stares, all his failures with the arcstone—it boiled over in an instant.

“I’m tired of everyone thinking I need help!” The words burst out louder than he’d intended, echoing off the corridor’s stone walls. “I’m not stupid, and I’m not less than every other student here just because I wasn’t born with Enera flowing through my veins. I wish everyone would just—” He caught himself, hands clenched into fists around his recovered books. “Just leave me alone. I can figure this out myself.”

Drakarion didn’t flinch at the outburst. Instead, he carefully placed the last fallen book in Holland’s arms, his movements deliberate and calm. “Forgive me, Holland.” His voice remained steady, but there was something in it—not pity, but understanding. “I didn’t mean to imply you were any of those things. The academy challenges everyone, each in their own

way.” He straightened his uniform, a habit Holland had noticed he did when choosing his words carefully. “Not everyone here is against you.”

The anger drained from Holland as quickly as it had come, leaving behind a hollow shame. Drakarion had only tried to help, just like Professor Nealy, just like his friends. And he’d thrown it back in their faces, letting his pride and fear speak instead of his sense.

But before he could form an apology, the words stuck in his throat like thorns. Instead, he turned and walked away, the weight of his books nothing compared to the burden of his embarrassment.

Behind him, Drakarion’s presence lingered like a quiet reminder of another bridge possibly burned in his determination to succeed alone.

* * *

The clock’s ticking filled Holland’s dorm room like a hammer on anvil. Each beat matched his pulse, driving deeper into his skull as he gripped his hair, elbows pressed against the scarred wooden desk. Drakarion’s gentle offer of help echoed in his mind, now twisted by shame into something darker.

Just leave me alone. I can figure this out myself.

His own words mocked him now. The clock struck another beat, and suddenly it wasn’t just marking time—it was every sneer, every whispered “commoner,” every failed spell with his borrowed arcstone.

With a snarl, Holland snatched his notebook and hurled it at the clock. The impact sent both crashing to the floor in an explosion of glass and twisted metal. Silence rushed in,

somehow louder than the ticking had been.

His chest heaved as he stared at the wreckage. The broken clock face stared back, its hands frozen at half-past four, like accusing fingers pointing at his failure. The walls of his small room pressed closer, suffocating him with the weight of expectations he could never meet.

Holland grabbed his academy coat, the fabric heavy across his shoulders. He needed to move, to breathe, to find somewhere he could silence the storm in his head. The door slammed behind him with a finality that echoed down the empty hallway.

At least in Professor Bolton's combat class, he had a chance. Here, skill mattered more than magical ability—just him, his blade, and whatever strength he could find within himself. But today's sparring match would be against Merric Redshield, his roommate, whose every perfect stance and polished technique seemed designed to remind Holland of his own inadequacy.

Holland's steps quickened, his mind already in the training yard. He'd show them all what he could do with a sword in his hand. He'd prove that—

A boot appeared from nowhere. Holland's world tilted, then slammed hard against cold stone. Through watering eyes, he looked up to find Faron Silvermane's smirking face, backed by four hulking shadows.

"You really should watch where you're going, Holland." Faron's voice dripped false concern. "Not paying attention can be dangerous. Right, lads?"

"Yeah, why don't you learn to walk, idiot?" One of Faron's thugs sneered, his academy uniform pristine despite his gutter speech.

Holland pushed himself up, every muscle coiled tight. The sight of Faron—with his perfect silver hair and practiced sneer—

made his blood boil. The same Faron who'd stolen his victory at Selection Day through his father's corruption.

"It's been some time, Holland." Faron examined his manicured nails. "Not since I won the tournament last year. Glad to see your face healed up." His lips curled into something that wasn't quite a smile.

"Not long enough." Holland's voice came out rough. "The only thing you won was your father's coin purse buying your victory."

The corridor temperature seemed to drop. Faron's eyes went sharp as glass. "Careful now. Slander against my family is a serious offense." He stepped closer, voice dropping to a whisper. "I could have you arrested. Or better yet—" his finger traced a line across his own throat, "—have that commoner tongue removed."

"You'd have to pay someone to do that too," Holland spat. "Can't do anything yourself, can you?"

The slap cracked through the air like lightning. Before Holland could recover, a fist drove into his gut. He doubled over, then kicks and punches rained down. Through the assault, he caught glimpses of Faron standing back, watching with casual interest, like a man observing insects.

Finally, Faron raised a hand. The beating stopped. He knelt beside Holland, close enough that expensive perfume cut through the smell of blood. "Listen closely." His whisper carried the weight of old money and darker threats. "I'm going to make your life hell here. My advice? Leave. Before I make you regret staying."

Warm spit landed on Holland's cheek. Footsteps echoed away, followed by rough laughter that faded into distance.

Holland pushed himself up slowly, using the wall for support.

Each breath sent daggers through his ribs. He limped to the nearest privy, where cold water stung his split lip. His reflection showed an angry red handprint blazing across his cheek, Faron's last mark of contempt.

I hate nobles. All of them. Vile creatures playing their games while we bleed.

The thought carried him out to the sparring grounds, where stone bleachers rose in concentric circles around a wooden combat stage. The late afternoon light caught the worn boards, highlighting years of sword strikes and shuffling feet. Already, students filled the seats, their excited chatter carrying on the wind.

"Holland, over here!" Thalen waved from the third row, then his face fell. "Gods above, what happened to you—"

"Don't." Holland dropped onto the bench. "Just... don't."

Thalen's mouth worked silently, concern warring with respect for his friend's pride. Finally, he nodded, though worry still creased his brow.

Professor Bolton moved across the combat stage with measured grace, each step born of years of military discipline. Sunlight caught the hilt of Stormbane at his hip, sending ribbons of light dancing across the bleachers. The Arkanblade's surface rippled with barely contained energy—Eneragite metal that seemed to breathe with its own life, forged in the heart of volcanic eruptions where excess Enera had fused with molten steel.

"Professor," a student called out, "is it true you served in the Wildmach District?"

Bolton's hand unconsciously brushed the scar on his right cheek, a remnant of those darker days. "Four years," he answered, his voice carrying notes of steel beneath its usual

warmth. “Hunting bandits in the borderlands.” He left unsaid what had come after—his time in the capital, leading a unit that had started as peacekeepers but became something else entirely.

Holland had heard the whispers, how Bolton had walked away from a prestigious military career when he discovered his unit’s true purpose: silencing commoner dissent against the nobility. Some students still spat “Mudblood Keeper” behind his back, as if caring for commoners was a sin worse than corruption.

“But today isn’t about my past,” Bolton continued, drawing Stormbane in one fluid motion. The blade caught the morning light, its Eneragite surface swimming with patterns like heat ripples over summer stone. “It’s about your future.”

He demonstrated a basic stance, the Arkanblade moving like liquid silver in his hands. The weapon was more than mere steel—it was his family’s legacy, passed down through generations of firstborn sons. In Bolton’s grip, it became an extension of his will, responding to his earth and light magic with an eagerness that made the air hum.

“Remember,” he said, sheathing the blade with practiced precision, “a true warrior’s worth isn’t measured by their birth or their blade, but by their character.” His eyes met Holland’s briefly, and in that moment, Holland understood why Bolton had chosen to teach rather than command. Some battles weren’t fought with swords at all.

“Today’s matches will be fought with wooden swords and shields,” Bolton announced, gesturing to the rack of practice weapons. “Though they won’t kill you, I promise they’ll hurt like hell if you drop your guard. No elemental magic allowed—this is about pure swordcraft.”

The first matches passed in a blur of clashing wood and grunting competitors. Coins changed hands in the bleachers

as students wagered on each bout, their whispers a constant undercurrent beneath the sound of combat. Holland barely noticed, his mind already racing ahead to his own match.

He and Merric were scheduled last—Bolton’s deliberate choice, Holland knew. They were his best students, though they’d come to their skill through vastly different paths. Merric with his years of formal training, his noble tutors and daily drills. And Holland... Holland with his inexplicable gift, movements that felt as natural as breathing, though he’d never had a proper teacher.

“Final match,” Bolton called out. “Holland Blackthorn and Merric Redshield.”

The crowd’s chatter died to a whisper. Even the wind seemed to hold its breath as Holland rose from his seat. His ribs protested every movement, a sharp reminder of Faron’s welcome earlier. Beside him, Thalen gripped his shoulder.

“Try not to kill each other,” Thalen muttered, but his attempt at humor fell flat.

Holland descended the stone steps to the weapon rack, each footfall echoing in the sudden quiet. He lifted a practice sword, testing its weight. The wood was smooth from countless hands before his, worn to a polish. Nearby, Merric donned his practice armor with practiced efficiency, his movements precise and controlled.

“Nervous, commoner?” Merric’s voice carried just far enough for Holland to hear, his proper accent dripping with its usual condescension.

Holland said nothing, focusing instead on the familiar grip of the sword, the way it balanced in his hand. All his frustrations—the failed spells, Faron’s ambush, years of noble disdain—seemed to flow down his arm and into the wooden blade. Here,

at least, he could speak with actions instead of words.

They took their positions on opposite ends of the stage. The wooden boards creaked beneath their feet, a sound as familiar as a heartbeat. Bolton stood between them, his expression unreadable.

“Remember,” he said, looking at each in turn, “this is about skill, not spite. Begin!”

The word had barely left his lips before Merric charged, his wooden blade whistling through the air. Holland met him at center stage with a clash that sent splinters flying. The impact jarred his already bruised ribs, but something else rose up through the pain—a clarity, a focus that made the rest of the world fall away.

There was only this: the dance of blades, the rhythm of combat, the pure language of sword against sword.

Their blades met again and again, each clash echoing across the suddenly silent grounds. Merric’s technique was flawless—every strike and parry exactly as the masters taught, refined by years of expensive tutoring. But Holland moved like water, each motion flowing into the next with an instinct that defied training.

Holland caught a pattern in Merric’s attacks—a slight tell before each combination, a habit born of drilling the same sequences countless times. He took a half-step back, letting his guard drop just enough. Merric’s eyes widened at the apparent opening, exactly as Holland had planned.

The noble lunged forward, wooden blade sweeping down in what should have been a finishing blow. Instead, Holland surged inside his guard, driving his shoulder into Merric’s chest. The impact sent Merric staggering backward, his perfect stance shattered, gasping as the air rushed from his lungs.

A ripple of excitement passed through the crowd. No one had ever seen Merric so thoroughly disrupted.

“Getting sloppy,” Holland said, unable to keep the satisfaction from his voice. The handprint on his cheek seemed to burn hotter.

Merric’s face flushed red. He raised his practice sword, pointing it at Holland with trembling fury. “Don’t get cocky, commoner. This match isn’t over.”

Something shifted in Merric’s stance—a deadly grace replacing his textbook precision. He launched forward with frightening speed, his attacks no longer following predictable patterns. Each strike flowed into the next like lightning, forcing Holland back step by step.

Holland’s arms shook with the effort of blocking, the impact of each blow traveling through wood and into his bones. His earlier satisfaction crumbled as Merric pressed his advantage. One strike slipped through, then another, wooden blade stinging against Holland’s ribs, his shoulder, his thigh.

Confidence made him sloppy. Merric caught Holland’s blade with a twist, sending it wide. Before Holland could recover, Merric’s elbow cracked against his jaw, reopening his split lip from earlier.

The taste of copper filled Holland’s mouth. He wiped his lip with the back of his hand, staring at the fresh blood. The sight of it triggered something—every humiliation, every beating, every sneering noble face crashed over him like a wave. The practice sword grew heavier in his hands, and the world took on a red tinge.

His next attack came with savage force. The sound of clashing wood changed from sharp cracks to dull thuds as Holland abandoned technique for pure brutality. Merric’s eyes widened

as he gave ground, his perfect form crumbling before Holland's onslaught.

The noble's smug expression vanished, replaced by something close to fear as he barely managed to parry Holland's strikes. Each impact sent shocks through Merric's arms until his fingers began to go numb.

Holland fainted high, and when Merric moved to block, he swept low instead. The wooden blade crashed into Merric's knee with a sickening crack. Merric screamed, his leg buckling as his practice sword clattered across the stage.

The match was over. Merric was disarmed. But Holland couldn't stop.

He threw aside his own weapon and lunged forward, his fist connecting with Merric's face. Then again. And again. Years of pent-up rage poured out through his knuckles as he drove Merric to the ground.

The world narrowed to the sound of impact and his own ragged breathing, until strong arms wrapped around his waist, hauling him backward.

"ENOUGH!" Professor Bolton's voice cut through the haze of violence. "What are you doing? He was disarmed! The match was over!"

Reality crashed back like ice water. Holland blinked, looking down at Merric's bloodied face, at his own bruised knuckles. The silence from the bleachers pressed against him like a physical weight. Even Thalen stared at him with horror, as if seeing a stranger wearing his friend's face.

"Merric..." Holland's voice cracked. "I'm... I'm sorry, I didn't—"

"Leave." Bolton's tone could have frozen flame. "We will discuss this later."

Holland stumbled backward, the magnitude of what he'd done hitting him harder than any blow. He turned and fled the sparring grounds, leaving behind a wake of shocked whispers and the bitter taste of shame.

* * *

Evening painted the creek in amber and shadow, the late spring sun hanging low like a copper coin about to drop behind Valoria's walls. The oak's leaves whispered overhead, catching the last golden light as if holding onto the day's warmth. Holland sat beneath its spreading branches, where the sounds of the city's dinner hour faded to a distant hum.

Salt stung his eyes, tears falling to darken the dry grass beneath him. The creek's voice seemed different at this hour—quieter, more intimate, as if sharing secrets meant only for him. He'd found this place weeks ago, fleeing the echo of failed spells and pitying glances. But today, not even this sanctuary could quiet the storm in his mind.

Merric's bloodied face. The horror in Thalen's eyes. The crack of bone beneath his fists.

A cool breeze carried the scent of blooming dogwood and the first hint of night's chill. Somewhere in the distance, the academy's evening bells tolled, marking the hour. The memory clung to him like a second shadow. His knuckles ached, each throb a reminder of what he'd become. Was this who he truly was? No better than the nobles who looked down on him, who used their power to—

Footsteps rustled through grass turned golden in the dying light. Holland kept his gaze fixed downward, unwilling to face another's disappointment. The soft thump of someone sitting

beside him, then:

“Are you stupid or something?”

Holland’s head jerked up. Layfus sat cross-legged in his monk’s robes, adjusting his thin-framed glasses.

“You must be,” Layfus continued, “Only explanation I can think of.”

“I guess I am,” Holland whispered.

“No doubt about it.” Layfus picked up a stone, turning it over in his hands. “You’d have to be, to ignore everyone trying to help you. What are you proving, exactly? That you can suffer better than anyone else?” He snorted. “That’s not strength, Holland. That’s just being a stubborn ass.”

The creek babbled on, filling the silence between them. A nightjar’s song floated through the cooling air.

“Think about it,” Layfus said, skipping the stone across the water. “Father Maelis got you out of Stonehaven. Magnus helped you reach Watford. The Frey twins stood by you when everyone else walked away. Dean Branok gave you those arcstones.” His voice softened. “None of them had to help. They chose to. What more proof do you need that you’re worth it?”

Fresh tears spilled down Holland’s cheeks. “That’s why I had to prove myself,” he managed. “To show them they weren’t wrong about me. That I was worth their effort.”

Layfus turned to him, all pretense of casualness gone. His expression held something ancient and wise, so at odds with his youth. “Holland, they already knew you were worth it. That’s *why* they helped. You don’t need to prove anything to people who already care about you.”

The words hit Holland like a physical blow, cracking something deep inside that had been frozen for too long. He buried

his face in his hands, shoulders shaking.

“Well,” Layfus stood, brushing grass from his robes, “I’ve got plenty more wisdom if you need it. But let’s start with the basics—like asking for help before you snap and beat someone half to death.” His voice carried a hint of his usual sarcasm, but gentler now.

A wet laugh escaped Holland. “I’ll work on it.”

“Good.” Layfus gestured toward the path. “Because there are some people waiting to help right now.”

There stood Thalen and Elowen, their presence as familiar as his own heartbeat. The sight of them made Holland’s chest ache with shame and gratitude.

“Thalen, I’m sorry. What I did today—”

“Save it.” Thalen gripped his shoulder. “Just... talk to us next time. Before it gets this bad.”

Slowly, haltingly, Holland told them everything. Faron’s ambush. The constant pressure. The fear of failure that haunted his every spell attempt. With each word, the burden grew lighter.

Elowen’s eyes flashed. “That noble bastard doesn’t know what he’s started. He wants to threaten you? He’ll answer to all of us.”

“We’ve got your back,” Thalen said firmly.

Layfus smirked from the sidelines. “See? A whole army of friends, just waiting for you to stop being an idiot.”

For the first time that day, Holland’s smile reached his eyes. The creek sang behind them, its voice clearer now, as if it too understood that something broken had begun to heal.

“Come on,” Thalen said, clapping Holland’s shoulder. “The dining hall’s still open. When’s the last time you ate anything?”

Holland’s stomach answered with an embarrassing growl,

drawing laughs from his friends. As they turned toward the city, the evening breeze carried away the last of his tears, leaving behind something lighter, something like hope.

* * *

The arcstone felt different in Holland's hand now, its energy no longer fighting his touch. Three days of training with Drakarion had changed everything—starting with a stumbling apology in the academy courtyard.

“About time you asked,” Drakarion had said that first day, a knowing smile crossing his face. No judgment, no lecture. Just acceptance, and then work.

Hours spent learning to feel the pulse of stored magic, to understand its rhythms. “Fire isn't about force,” Drakarion would say, conjuring a flame that danced between his fingers. “It's about partnership. The energy wants to flow—you just have to guide it.”

The work paid off. That morning, Holland had stood before Professor Nealy's class and summoned fire with a confidence he'd never felt before. Her slight nod of approval meant more than any formal grade.

But this progress only highlighted the weight still pressing on his conscience. The harder task lay ahead.

Evening found him outside his dorm room, hand hovering over the doorknob. Behind that door sat Merric—and all the guilt Holland had been carrying since the sparring match. He took a deep breath and entered.

Merric sat at his desk, quill scratching against parchment. Bandages still wrapped his head, and bruises painted his cheek in shades of purple and yellow. Each mark was an accusation

Holland couldn't deny.

"Merric." Holland's voice came out smaller than he'd intended. He perched on the edge of his bed, fingers twisting in his lap. "I know you probably hate me right now. And I don't blame you. But... just hear me out."

The scratching stopped. Merric's back remained turned, rigid as stone.

"What I did was wrong," Holland continued, the words tumbling out now. "I've been drowning here—failing classes, being called 'voidborn' at every turn, watching everyone else succeed while I barely scrape by. And then there's someone from home trying to drive me out..." He swallowed hard. "But none of that excuses what I did to you. I lost control. Made you pay for everyone else's cruelty. I'll accept whatever punishment you think is right. Even expulsion."

Silence stretched between them, broken only by the soft hiss of the oil lamp. Then Merric spoke, his voice low and bitter as winter wind.

"Eight years ago, my father was a Royal Knight." The quill settled onto the desk with a soft click. "He was escorting the king through the city when a commoner boy tripped into the street. Spooked the king's horse." Merric's shoulders tensed. "The king fell. Into the mud. People laughed."

Holland's stomach clenched, already dreading what came next.

"The king demanded my father kill the boy on the spot. Called it attempted assassination." Merric's voice cracked. "My father refused. Wouldn't murder a child for a bloody accident. So the king—" His fist clenched. "The king took my father's sword and did it himself. Then had my father imprisoned for treason."

The lamp flame wavered, casting uncertain shadows on the

wall between them.

“For eight years, we’ve been shunned. The same nobles who used to dine at our table now whisper ‘mudblood lovers’ behind our backs.” Merric’s laugh held no warmth. “My friends stopped coming around. Started throwing...” He paused, something dark and wounded flickering across his face. “...mud instead of playing catch.”

The hesitation in his voice, the way his shoulders tensed at the word ‘mud,’ told Holland there was more to that story—something uglier, more humiliating. But Merric pressed on, leaving that wound carefully covered.

“All because my father wouldn’t kill an innocent child.”

Holland sat very still, the weight of Merric’s words pressing against his chest.

“I came here to prove something,” Merric continued, his voice hardening. “To become the best swordsman in Eldorien. Join the Royal Knights. Use my one request to free my father from Brant Mor Prison.” He shook his head. “When they said I’d room with a commoner, everything from that day came rushing back. I couldn’t—” He stopped, shoulders sagging. “I don’t trust people anymore. Friends don’t last.”

“We’re more alike than we thought,” Holland said quietly. “Both fighting the world alone, thinking we had to prove something. But I learned recently—we can’t do it all ourselves. We need friends, Merric. Life’s too lonely without them.”

A soft, humorless chuckle escaped Merric. “Maybe.” He paused. “I know what your punishment should be.”

Holland braced himself. “What is it?”

“You’ll spar with me. Every week. Teach me those techniques you used.” Finally, Merric turned to face him. Despite the bruises, a hint of his old fire showed in his eyes. “Until I can

beat you fair and square.”

“You’re not going to have me expelled?”

“And admit a commoner with no training bested me?” Merric’s lip twitched. “Besides, academy rules protect students from severe punishment during sanctioned matches. They expect things to get heated.”

“There’s a rulebook?”

“Fifteen hundred pages in the library. I’ve read it all.”

“Of course you have.” Holland felt a smile tugging at his mouth. “So... does this mean you forgive me?”

Merric’s expression softened, but his voice stayed cautious. “I accept your apology. But don’t get any ideas. We’re not friends.”

“How about acquaintances?”

After a long moment, Merric nodded. “I can agree to that.”

The lamp flame steadied, and something in the room’s atmosphere shifted. Not friendship, not yet. But perhaps the beginning of understanding.

Machi-Ketto

The candle flickered, casting light across ancient spines. Holland's eyes burned from hours of reading, but he couldn't stop. Not when each page might hold the answer he sought. Around him, the library's silence pressed close, broken only by the whisper of turning pages and the occasional creak of settling shelves.

Five months of searching since he came to the academy, and still nothing about King Darion or the mysterious blessing that marked Holland's fate. He closed another useless tome, adding it to the tower beside him. Father Caelan's words echoed in his mind: *The true history has been buried deep, preserved only in the most guarded Lorekeeper records.*

A yawn ambushed him. How many nights had he spent here now, while other students slept? The library had become his refuge—a habit born from those early days with Lily, when she'd taught him his letters in secret. Now those stolen lessons let him chase answers through centuries of forgotten knowledge.

Just one more, he told himself, reaching for a worn journal. The binding crackled as he opened it, different from the others.

Older. His fingers found an inconsistency—a thickness in the back cover that shouldn't be there. Heart pounding, Holland probed the spine, discovering a hidden seam.

The compartment opened with a soft snap. A single yellowed page fell out, covered in delicate script that seemed to pulse with significance:

*In the heart of the commoner, the Dawnbringer shall find his kin,
Void of Enera, yet master of elements, from end to end.*

Holland's breath caught. His hands trembled as he read on:
*Above the fray of hatred, his spirit shall soar, He will rise as King,
the Blessing he bears, freedom's anthem he'll restore.*

The words blurred before his eyes. This was it—a prophecy about the King's Blessing, hidden away for centuries. His heart hammered against his ribs as he read the final lines:

*For where shadows loom, there shall be his might, Guiding the
way, banishing the night.*

"Father Caelan needs to see this," he whispered, but exhaustion pulled at him like lead weights. The candle had burned dangerously low, wax pooling at its base. Even revelations would have to wait for morning.

Holland carefully tucked the page into his inner pocket, close to his heart. As he snuffed out the candle, darkness swept through the library. But for the first time in months, he felt like he was walking toward light rather than shadow.

* * *

"Mr. Blackthorn."

Holland jerked upright. Professor Deaus stood at her massive oak desk, one eyebrow raised. Behind her, tapestries of mythical beasts seemed to watch him with judgment in their

woven eyes.

“Might we have your attention?” Her voice carried that particular tone teachers reserve for wandering minds. “I trust this classroom deserves as much focus as your... other scholarly pursuits?”

Heat crept up Holland’s neck. The prophecy page burned in his pocket, where it had lived since his discovery in the library three nights ago. With Father Caelan and Layfus away, its secrets had consumed his thoughts.

“Yes, ma’am. My apologies.”

“Very well.” Something in her expression softened. “Perhaps you would do us the honor of reading from chapter thirty-eight?”

Holland lifted the heavy tome, its leather binding cool against his palms. *“Those endowed with elemental affinities, under certain conditions, have the potential to amplify their own Enera. This amplification is achievable through a rite known as the Harmony Bond, a spiritual communion with beings referred to as Aetherials. These animal-like creatures are spirits of pure Enera residing in the mystical realm of Eldorien, and embody the essence of infinite energy. A successful invocation of the Harmony Bond melds the Aetherial’s boundless Enera with that of the mortal, forging an elemental spirit link. Such a union bestows upon the individual access to the Aetherial’s limitless Enera and its inherent powers.”*

His voice trailed off as the implications hit him. The words seemed to leap from the page, connecting to something deep within his mind.

“Professor?” His hand shot up before he could stop himself. “If someone forms a Harmony Bond with an Aetherial, they gain access to that spirit’s elemental Enera, correct?”

Professor Deaus nodded, her rings catching the colored light

from the stained glass windows. “The Enera would merge, yes.”

“Then...” Holland’s mouth went dry. “Could someone without any Enera—someone completely void of it—form such a bond? Would they gain both the Enera and the elemental abilities?”

Silence fell over the classroom. Even the scratching of quills ceased. Professor Deaus studied him with eyes that had seen decades of magical theory proved and disproved.

“In theory,” she said finally, each word carefully chosen, “yes. But it would be unprecedented. The strength of will required, the purity of connection needed...” She shook her head. “No recorded case exists.”

But Holland barely heard her caution. His mind raced with possibilities. No more dependency on arcstones. No more borrowed power. If he could find an Aetherial, if he could form a Harmony Bond...

He gripped his quill tighter, trying to hide the trembling in his hands. For the first time since discovering the prophecy, hope felt like more than just a distant dream.

* * *

Holland made his way to the dining hall. His mind still raced with possibilities from Professor Deaus’s lesson, but the corridors’ usual bustle pulled him from his thoughts.

A group of Areodain students glided past, their silver wings folded precisely against their academy uniforms. Holland had grown used to their presence over the months, though the sight still awed him—the way their delicate eye-feathers caught the light, cascading from brow to ear in elegant arcs. They moved with that distinctive Areodain precision, every gesture

calculated, every step measured. Even their combat training reflected this exactness; Holland had learned that firsthand in sparring sessions, where their disciplined strikes carried the weight of ancient honor.

The corridor opened into the grand courtyard, where dwarven students gathered around their latest stonework. Their annual Arûnkarun festival approached, and the sound of careful chiseling filled the air. Holland paused to watch. Despite their small stature, the dwarves of Dunehold radiated strength as they worked, transforming rough stone into intricate family tributes. Each strike was a prayer to Aurendor, the Divine Stonecarver—their dedication evident in every precise cut and gentle tap.

Near the courtyard's flowering arch—where Greenhaven elves had coaxed impossible blooms from winter stone—a morning meditation circle was dispersing. The elves moved with fluid grace, their connection to nature evident in more than just the plants they tended. Holland spotted several students admiring Thalen and Elowen's silver hair from afar—a mark of reverence among their kind. His friends had found unexpected acceptance among the elven students, their mixed heritage celebrated rather than shunned.

A flash of crimson caught his eye. By the practice rings, a Solari student demonstrated fire techniques, their hair shifting like living embers as flames danced between their fingers. The glowing patterns on their skin pulsed with each controlled burst—so different from the aggressive reputation their people carried. Holland thought of Drakarion, how his serene mastery of fire had changed everything Holland thought he knew about the Crimsonhelm Dominion.

Five kingdoms' worth of knowledge and culture flowed

through these halls, Holland reflected. The recent treaty signed by King Sylas had transformed Valadent from a jealously guarded Thalassian institution into this—a place where ancient barriers meant little, where even a commoner could find his path.

The dining hall's doors stood open ahead, the mingled scents of delicious cuisines drawing students of every race and rank. Somewhere inside, Thalen and Elowen would be waiting. Holland smiled, thinking how far they'd all come since registration day.

Life here was different from Coralhelm, where hierarchy reigned supreme and commoners knew their place. Here, while many noble students still clung to their parents' beliefs about class and station, others rejected those ancient prejudices entirely. Holland had watched over the months as sons and daughters of prestigious houses shared tables with him, formed friendships with foreign students, and questioned the very foundations their families had built on.

It was no wonder some of King Sylas's advisors had urged him to reconsider the Eldorien Concord treaty. The academy's melting pot of cultures bred dangerous ideas—equality over hierarchy, merit over bloodline. Such thoughts terrified the old guard of Thalassar. Yet the king, for all his shared beliefs in noble superiority, wouldn't dare cancel agreements that filled the royal treasury with foreign gold. The irony wasn't lost on Holland; greed had opened doors that compassion never could.

His stomach growled, reminding him that philosophical reflections could wait. After all, he had friends to meet, and the kitchen's fresh bread waited for no one—not even a contemplative commoner.

The dining hall's vaulted ceiling trapped a symphony of

aromas—Professor Morgan Tamsey’s legendary sirloin, roasted root vegetables, fresh-baked bread still steaming. Holland’s mouth watered as he crossed the threshold. Even after months at the academy, the abundance still amazed him. Back home, Ety had worked miracles with her Chef’s Blessing and simple ingredients. Here, blessed students trained under Tamsey himself, former Royal Chef, turning meals into masterpieces.

He found Thalen and Elowen at their usual table, the excitement of his discovery from Professor Deaus’s class still burning in his chest. He sat, but before he could speak, a crash silenced the hall.

Faron Silvermane’s thugs surrounded a thin boy with red hair and oversized glasses. Holland recognized him from combat class—always struggling, always alone.

“That sirloin was a feast fit for kings,” Faron drawled, his cronies laughing on cue. “So much so, I find myself craving seconds.”

The red-haired boy clutched his untouched plate. “I’ve already given you my breakfast. Please, I’m starving...”

“Would you dare deny Lord Faron?” One of the thugs stepped forward, towering over the boy. “His uncle is King Syllas himself. Imagine the trouble your parents would face.”

The boy’s shoulders slumped. He surrendered his plate, only to have a carrot crushed into his hair. “Lord Faron doesn’t care for carrots.”

Holland’s chair scraped back before he realized he’d stood. “Enough.”

The thug turned, sneering. “Did you hear that? A voidborn giving orders. How rich.”

Thalen and Elowen rose beside him, but the bully, Fannen, was already in Holland’s face. Hot breath reeked of expensive

wine as he spat, "Outside these walls, I'd see you lashed for this."

"Titles have no meaning here," Holland's voice cut through the tension. "Inside the academy, all are equal under its laws. Return what is his."

Fannen's response was to spit in Holland's face.

A hand gripped Holland's shoulder before he could strike. Merric's steady voice broke through the red haze of anger: "Settle this properly. Through Machi-Ketto, the academy's duel of honor."

Fannen's mouth twisted into an ugly grin. "I accept. I have no fear of a voidborn." His eyes locked onto Holland's. "Prepare yourself. In the arena, I'll show no restraint."

"And I will meet you there."

As Faron's group slunk away, Fannen's laughter echoing behind them, Thalen rounded on Merric. "Why did you step in?"

"Because," Merric's voice carried the weight of someone who'd learned academy rules the hard way, "without my intervention, Holland would be facing expulsion right now." He turned to Holland. "That's what they wanted, isn't it? For you to throw the first punch?"

Holland's clenched jaw answered for him.

"One strike outside sanctioned combat," Merric continued, "and you'd be before the Academy Council. Expulsion would be the least of your worries. Machi-Ketto gives you a fair fight—one they can't twist against you."

"Since when do you care what happens to Holland?" Thalen's eyes narrowed. "Last I checked, you were still bitter about losing that duel."

A ghost of a smile touched Merric's lips. "Don't mistake this for charity. I intend to be one of the greatest swordsmen in the

Royal Knights. Until I surpass Holland, I can't let anyone rob me of that challenge. Especially not expulsion."

Holland met Merric's gaze. "Still. You saved me from my own anger. Thank you."

"Save it," Merric waved him off. "I did what needed doing, nothing more."

The red-haired boy still sat alone, carrots matted in his hair, shoulders trembling. Holland approached quietly. "Will you be all right?"

"Not particularly," the boy's laugh held no humor, "but that's life, isn't it?"

"I've seen you in class, but I don't know your name."

"Hubert," he glanced up, surprise flickering across his face at Holland's gentle tone. "Hubert Haversham."

"I know who you are," Hubert added quickly. "People talk. They say you're one of the best with a sword—a master, even at your age."

Holland shook his head. "Mastery's a long way off. Whatever skill I have comes from practice and Professor Bolton's patience."

"I wish I had half your skill." Hubert's voice dropped to barely a whisper. "Maybe then I wouldn't be such an easy target."

Something in that defeated tone struck Holland deep. He'd seen that look before, felt that helplessness. "What if I helped you train during class? Worked with you on your stance, taught you a few things that might give you more confidence?"

"Really?" Hope crept into Hubert's voice like sunrise after a long night. "You'd do that?"

"It would be my pleasure." Holland smiled. "But first, let's get you a fresh meal. Training starts tomorrow."

Relief washed over Hubert's face—as if, for the first time in

ages, someone had offered him more than just empty sympathy.

* * *

A cool breeze rustled through the Church of Harmony's garden, carrying the sweet melody of birdsong. Holland sat on a stone bench, reading ETTY and CARSON's letter for the third time. The familiar ink and parchment brought home closer, if only for a moment. Roderic was delivering new shoes for the horses now. The simple news made Holland smile, even as it tugged at the homesickness in his chest.

Beneath ETTY's letter lay another, its edges worn from repeated reading. Lily's handwriting flowed across the page, each word a secret rebellion against her father's hatred. Father Caelan's messenger network had become their lifeline, carrying memories of starlit moments in Stonehaven across the miles that separated them.

Wheels rattled on cobblestones. Holland looked up to see Father Caelan guiding a horse-drawn wagon into the courtyard, his weathered face breaking into a smile.

"Holland! A sight for sore eyes, lad!"

"Father, where's Layfus? Wasn't he with you?"

A weak hand waved from the wagon bed. "I'm here," Layfus moaned, sprawled dramatically across the wooden planks. "Though I fear I am not long for this world. My spirit yearns for Celestarra, where Aurendor's embrace may free me from this suffering."

Father Caelan chuckled. "Don't fret over him. Wagon sickness. The fool left his remedies in Willowbranch Village."

"From now on," Layfus groaned, "those remedies never leave my side."

“One shudders to think how you’d fare at sea,” Holland said. A weak smile crossed Layfus’s pale face. “Oddly enough, the sea’s waves trouble me not. It’s these cursed roads.”

Father Caelan’s expression darkened. “You’ll never catch me on water,” he said, voice tight. “The sea and I aren’t on good terms.”

“Why’s that, Father?”

“That’s a story for another time.” Something haunted flickered behind his eyes. “But know this—no force in Eldorien will get me aboard a ship. I’d rather walk for days than trust my fate to the sea.”

“Holland,” Layfus reached out, his voice still weak, “would you kindly help me from this infernal contraption? But please, be gentle.”

Holland hid his smile and helped Layfus down, supporting him as they made their way to Father Caelan’s office. Inside, Caelan busied himself brewing ginger tea, the spicy aroma filling the room as Holland settled Layfus into a cushioned chair.

“Well, Holland,” Caelan began, measuring tea leaves with practiced hands, “you haven’t come all this way to watch me play apothecary. What brings you here?”

“Not what you might think,” Holland replied, his voice steady despite the weight of his next words. “Though I am bound to a duel of Machi-Ketto this evening—against one of the academy’s noble fools.”

Caelan arched a brow, a sharp grin tugging at his mouth. “Ah, making friends already, I see.”

“And is that why you sought us out?” Layfus asked, color slowly returning to his face.

Holland shook his head. “No, there’s something else.” He

reached into his satchel and pulled out a worn journal. “I found something hidden in the binding of this book from the academy’s library. A song, or perhaps a hymn, about the King’s Blessing.”

Father Caelan’s hands froze over the teapot, his eyes sharpening. “The King’s Blessing? But how? After King Darion’s fall, Maleficus ensured every scrap of his legacy was purged from history. That anything remains—especially in a forgotten journal—is nothing short of miraculous.”

“It was cleverly hidden,” Holland said, passing the journal over. Father Caelan handled it with reverence, examining the cover before carefully flipping through the initial pages.

“Is there a name?” Caelan asked, voice tight with anticipation. “Any hint of who wrote this?”

“None that I could find,” Holland admitted, watching as Caelan revealed the hidden parchment and began to read.

The only sound was the gentle clink of Layfus’s teacup against its saucer as Caelan’s eyes widened, moving line by line across the page.

“By Aurendor’s light,” he whispered.

Layfus leaned forward, wincing at the movement. “Father, don’t leave us in suspense. What does it say?”

Caelan looked up from the parchment, his face grave. “This is no mere hymn, Holland. It’s a prophecy—the Prophecy of the Dawnbringer, written by Alamond the Pious during the Dark Wars. To find a third surviving copy...” He shook his head in wonder.

“Who was Alamond the Pious?” Holland asked. “What gave him the authority to write such prophecies?”

Layfus straightened in his chair, scholar’s excitement momentarily overwhelming his nausea. “Alamond was the first

High Priest of the Church of Harmony. During the Dark Wars, when King Darion stood against the tide of darkness, Alamond traveled across Eldorien, preaching faith and uniting those who still believed in the old ways. After Darion's fall, when Maleficus swept through the land, Alamond formed the Lorekeepers to preserve our history before it could be destroyed. In his final years, blessed with divine vision, he foresaw the coming of the Dawnbringer—a savior in the kingdom's darkest hour."

"The prophecy is remarkable," Holland said, "but it doesn't explain the King's Blessing. What is its true power? How does it connect to all of this?"

Father Caelan reached for his pipe, summoning a small flame to light it. Smoke curled upward as he gathered his thoughts. Holland's stomach tightened—not from anticipation, but from a growing unease. Whatever Caelan was about to reveal, Holland had a feeling his life was about to become far more complicated than he wanted.

Father Caelan drew a long breath from his pipe, the smoke wreathing his bald head. "Holland," he began, his voice heavy with the weight of secrets, "what I am about to tell you may shatter everything you believe about yourself. It may bring anger, perhaps even despair. But the truth must be told."

Holland's hands clenched involuntarily. He didn't want prophecies or destiny—he had enough troubles managing his current life.

"On the night of his death," Caelan continued, "Alamond the Pious gathered the Lorekeepers. He passed to them not just his written prophecy, but its true meaning. He spoke of Auredor's will to appoint a new sovereign, one forged in King Darion's image, who would rise against the darkness Maleficus has sown in this world. This Dawnbringer would restore the shattered

realm of Eldorien.”

“Father—” Holland started, already dreading where this was heading.

“You, Holland, are the Dawnbringer. The prophecy speaks of you.”

The words hit like a physical blow. Holland shot to his feet, his chair scraping against the floor. “No. Absolutely not.”

“The prophecy is clear,” Layfus said gently. “It speaks of a commoner without Enera, marked by the King’s Blessing—”

“A prophecy built on vague coincidences doesn’t make me a king!” Holland snapped, pacing the small office. “There are countless commoners across the realm. The King’s Blessing is a mystery to everyone. And this prophecy speaks of some pure-hearted hero, not someone who can barely contain his anger at half the nobility he meets!”

“Holland—” Father Caelan started.

“No!” Holland raked his fingers through his hair. “I didn’t come here for this. I don’t want prophecies or crowns or destinies. I just wanted to understand the King’s Blessing, to know why I’m different. That’s all.”

Layfus leaned forward, his earlier nausea forgotten. “None of us choose the path Auredor sets before us. Your doubt, your fear—they’re natural responses to something this overwhelming.”

“This isn’t about fear,” Holland said, his voice sharp. “You see a hero in me that doesn’t exist. You speak of crowns and kingdoms that lie beyond my reach. Your faith is misplaced.”

Father Caelan’s voice cut through Holland’s protests, calm but firm. “Whether you believe it matters little, Holland. Doubt shadows every great truth. But heed this warning: this revelation must remain secret. The moment this truth slips

beyond our circle, you will no longer be safe. None of us will be.”

Holland’s shoulders slumped. “The journal goes back to its hiding place in the library. The prophecy stays locked away with the Lorekeepers. I want no part of it.” He took a breath, steadying himself. “But there is something else I need to ask you about, Father.”

Layfus, trying to lighten the mood, grinned weakly. “What is it now, your majesty?”

Holland’s glare could have frozen flame.

“Too soon?” Layfus asked, still grinning.

Father Caelan shot Layfus a warning look before turning back to Holland. “What troubles you?”

“It concerns Aetherials,” Holland said quietly, glad to turn the conversation away from unwanted prophecies.

* * *

Heat shimmered off the training yard’s packed earth. Merric wiped sweat from his brow, wooden sword steady despite the midday sun beating down on them. Across from him, Holland waited, still as stone.

Merric struck first, a quick slash at Holland’s right flank. Holland ghosted away from the blade like smoke.

“Ready for the Machi-Ketto?” Merric asked between breaths.

“As ready as I can be.” Holland’s eyes tracked Merric’s movements, reading the subtle shifts of weight and balance. “Fannen’s blade work is sloppy, but his earth magic makes up for it.”

“Better not lose.” Merric lunged, speaking through gritted teeth. “Half the academy’s bet their coin on you.”

Holland's parry flowed into a sweep. Before Merric could blink, he was on his back, wooden sword at his throat.

"How?" Merric gasped. "It's like you're in my head, reading my moves before—"

"You're improving," Holland offered his hand.

Merric grabbed it, but shook his head. "Spare me. We both know better." He brushed dirt from his clothes. "But one day, I'll stand as your equal."

A crash drew their attention. Across the yard, a gangly boy with glasses sprawled in the dirt, his training dummy toppled beside him.

"Your charity case?" Merric asked.

"Hubert," Holland corrected, already moving to help.

"He's got no talent. Might be kinder to tell him to quit before he gets hurt."

Holland reached the fallen boy. "In all my years," he said, offering his hand, "I've never seen a training dummy win quite so decisively. This might make the history books."

Hubert adjusted his crooked glasses. "Inelegance is my natural state, it seems."

"Your stance is like a tree in a storm—no roots." Holland demonstrated the proper form. "And you're choking that one-handed sword with both hands. Let's start with basics."

"I appreciate your kindness, but..." Hubert's shoulders slumped. "I'm too far gone. I'll only waste your time."

"Then why take this class? It's not required."

Hubert's eyes fixed on the ground. "My father. He's military—thinks battlefield valor is the only worthy pursuit." His voice dropped lower. "He doesn't understand my passion for alchemy, for creating rather than destroying. This was his compromise—I could study what I love, if I also learned the sword. So here I

am, playing warrior while brewing potions in secret.”

“That takes its own kind of courage,” Holland said quietly. “Following your heart while bearing your father’s expectations.”

“I don’t see it that way.” Hubert fumbled with his sword. “But if you’re willing to teach someone as hopeless as me... Professor Bolton’s lessons might as well be in another language.”

“My friend—” Holland started.

Hubert blinked. “Friend?” The word came out soft, surprised. “No one’s ever called me that before.”

“Then let’s begin.” Holland smiled. “Not as teacher and student, but as friends.”

* * *

Evening shadows stretched across the pathway as Holland walked toward the practice arena, his friends flanking him like an honor guard. Ahead, the amphitheater nestled into the hillside, its stone tiers descending like ripples in a pond. Already the voices of gathered students echoed up from the bowl-shaped arena.

“You sure you don’t want to tag team this?” Elowen grinned, silver hair catching the fading light. “I’d love to give Fannen a go myself.” Her voice dropped to a conspiratorial whisper. “If you want, I could make sure he limps his way to the arena.”

“Wait, is she serious?” Merric’s eyes widened.

“Don’t put it past her,” Thalen said, shooting his sister a knowing look.

Holland shook his head. “I appreciate the offer, but this is something I need to face alone. If no one stands up to Faron and his thugs, they’ll keep terrorizing anyone they please.”

They crested the hill, and Holland’s steps faltered. The

crowd was massive—nearly the entire student body filled the descending stone tiers. Even professors dotted the stands, their faces a mix of curiosity and solemnity as they looked down at the circular combat stage set deep in the arena’s heart.

Elowen clapped Holland’s shoulder. “Good luck.” Her grin turned fierce. “Go kick his teeth in.” She grabbed Thalen’s arm. “Come on, let’s get good seats.”

As they disappeared down the stone steps into the crowd, Merric stepped closer. “How many arcstones do you have?”

“Three.”

“Good. Don’t burn through them too quickly.” Merric’s eyes swept over the sunken arena. “Though I have to wonder—why does the academy even allow this? Why don’t professors stop bullies like Faron?”

“Simple,” Merric said. “We are adults. They trust we can handle our problems, only stepping in when things get truly dangerous. Their way of reinforcing responsibility.” His mouth quirked. “Just don’t make them step in today. And try not to break him too badly.”

With a final pat on Holland’s shoulder, Merric vanished into the stands.

Holland descended the steps toward the combat stage, the polished granite circle gleaming in the evening light. As he reached the arena floor, movement caught his eye. By the opposite entrance, Faron leaned close to a shadowed figure, speaking in hushed tones. When the man turned, Holland’s stomach clenched.

Professor Laric. The Potion Master’s presence hit like a physical blow. Every snide comment, every rigged assignment, every moment of quiet torment in his class flashed through Holland’s mind.

“Students and Faculty.” Laric’s voice carried up the stone tiers. “We gather for the Machi-Ketto between Holland Blackthorn and Sir Fannen Lockwood. As the challenged party, Sir Fannen has chosen me as Battle Warden.”

Laric’s voice echoed off the stone tiers, sharp and commanding. “Three rules govern this contest.” He raised his hand, marking each point with deliberate precision. “First, the safety of our spectators is paramount. The protective spell barriers around the combat stage are not to be breached. Second, the taking of life is forbidden. Finally, the Rule of Yielding—should an opponent declare ‘yield,’ all combat ceases immediately. Any violation means expulsion.” His cold eyes swept between Holland and Fannen. “Do you both agree?”

They nodded, and Laric stepped back to the edge of the stage. “Begin!”

The crowd erupted, Holland’s name rising in unexpected chants. Fannen’s face twisted. “They may cheer now, but I’ll be the one standing at the end, you common, voidborn filth!” He spat the words like poison. “This place wasn’t built for your kind.”

“Let’s fight,” Holland said. “You talk too much.”

Fannen’s response came in a wave of earth magic. Jagged shards of rock tore from the ground, hurtling through the air with deadly precision. Holland moved like water, his wooden shield catching the brunt of the assault. Each impact shook his arm, the sound of stone on wood echoing up the amphitheater’s tiers.

Holland pressed forward, closing the distance step by step. Fannen retreated, desperately trying to maintain the gap, but in his backward dance, he left his left flank exposed. Holland surged forward, wooden sword ready to strike—

His foot slipped.

The crowd gasped as Holland tumbled, rolling dangerously close to Fannen. He scrambled to his knees just as another volley of stone rained down. His shield shot up, barely deflecting the assault. Then came the boulder—massive and inevitable. It crashed into his shield with devastating force, shattering wood into splinters.

The impact threw Holland backward. Blood trickled down his arm as he fought for breath.

“This commoner is no match for noble blood!” Fannen’s voice rang across the arena. “Nothing more than a worthless dog!”

Holland pressed his hands against the ground, every muscle screaming as he pushed himself up. The crowd’s roar swelled as he rose, first to his knees, then to his feet. He discarded the ruined shield, its fragments scattering across the granite stage.

Without the shield’s weight, Holland felt lighter, more agile. His hand found the arcstones in his pocket. Time to change tactics.

Fannen summoned another barrage, the rocks now larger, more menacing. But Holland moved differently, weaving through the assault like smoke. Each projectile missed its mark as he danced closer, his movements fluid and precise.

Mid-attack, Holland drew the crystals. Fire bloomed in his palm, and he hurled it at Fannen in quick succession. The noble raised an earthen wall against the first blast, but Holland’s second wave came too fast. Flames scattered Fannen’s defenses, forcing him backward.

Holland pressed his advantage. Each fiery assault left Fannen less room to recover, his earth magic crumbling under the pressure. One more fireball struck home, sending Fannen stumbling.

In a desperate retreat, Fannen threw himself backward. Holland, seizing the moment, gathered flames into his left hand. The fire pulsed, ready to end this fight—

His foot slipped again.

Holland crashed to the ground, the impact jarring through his bones. But this time, as he moved to stand, something caught his eye—a faint shimmer beneath his boots. Ice. A small patch that shouldn't exist in this weather, glinting in the evening light.

His gaze snapped to Professor Laric. The Battle Warden stood at the arena's edge, a slight smile playing at his lips. As Holland watched, Laric's wrist moved in a subtle gesture, dispelling the remnants of his icy trap.

The truth hit harder than any boulder. This duel had been rigged from the start. Laric and Faron's alliance, the carefully laid trap—it all made sense now. He had no proof, no way to call out this treachery without seeming a sore loser. But the knowledge itself was like fuel to a fire.

Holland rose slowly, dusting himself off. If they wanted to play dirty, fine. He'd overcome their schemes just like he'd overcome everything else they'd thrown at him.

Fannen, emboldened by Holland's fall, launched into a desperate assault. Massive rocks, more jagged than before, tore through the air. But Holland moved with new purpose, each step calculated, watching not just Fannen but Laric's subtle movements at the edge of his vision.

With his final arcstone humming in his grip, Holland formulated his last gambit. He sent a blast of fire toward Fannen—not to strike, but to blind. The explosion filled the arena with smoke and light, momentarily blocking Laric's view.

In that instant of confusion, Holland channeled the crystal's remaining power into his feet. Flames erupted beneath him,

launching him skyward. He soared above the smoke like a blazing arrow, wooden sword raised high.

As the smoke cleared, Holland descended with devastating precision. His sword swept down in an unstoppable arc, catching Fannen across the face with a resounding crack. The noble crumpled, magical defenses shattering as he hit the ground.

Holland pressed the wooden blade to Fannen's throat. The arena fell silent, every breath held in anticipation.

"Yield! Yield! Yield!" Fannen's desperate cry echoed off the stone tiers.

Holland lowered his sword and stepped back, honoring the ancient traditions of Machi-Ketto. The amphitheater erupted, cheers rolling down the stone tiers like thunder. He raised his fist, acknowledging the hard-fought victory.

The sound of shifting stone cut through the roar.

Holland turned just as Fannen, face twisted with humiliation, hurled a massive boulder at his exposed back. The impact was devastating. It caught him square between the shoulders, launching him from the combat stage. His body hit the ground below with a sickening thud.

Pain exploded through him. His lungs refused to work, vision blurring as darkness crept at the edges. Through the ringing in his ears, he heard the crowd's jubilation turn to horror. Gasps gave way to boos and shouts of outrage.

Thalen and Elowen rushed forward, but Laric's voice cut through the chaos like a blade. "No outside help is permitted, or Holland Blackthorn will be disqualified."

"What do you mean?" Thalen shouted, fury burning in his voice. "Fannen yielded! The match was over. He attacked Holland from behind! He broke the rules!"

Laric's response came smooth as silk. "Fannen did not yield the match." His gaze locked with Thalen's. "I was there. I heard Lord Lockwood offer Mr. Blackthorn the chance to yield, showing him undeserved mercy. Isn't that correct, Lord Fannen?"

Fannen hesitated, then nodded quickly. "Uh, yes... that's correct, Professor."

The crowd's murmurs turned dark, disbelief and anger rippling through the stands. Even some professors shifted uncomfortably, but none spoke up.

"Since Mr. Blackthorn is unable to continue," Laric declared, raising Fannen's hand, "I hereby declare Lord Fannen Lockwood the victor of this Machi-Ketto."

Silence fell over the amphitheater, heavy as a tomb. Then, like a wave building force, whispers of dissent spread through the crowd. Students and professors alike stared down at the scene, watching justice die in the sunset, powerless to stop it.

* * *

"Go."

The whisper drifted through darkness, sourceless yet everywhere. "The Veilwood," it breathed, urgent as wind through dead leaves.

Holland sat in black water that lapped at his thighs, neither warm nor cold. A strange light bathed him, though he couldn't find its source in the surrounding void. The water held no reflection, deep as midnight.

He stood, ripples spreading into nothing. Smoke tendrils curled toward him, dancing like living things.

"Go to the Veilwood." The voice wound through the smoke.

“Find the Flamaris. Bond with him.”

The whispers grew insistent, pulling him forward. “Go, to the Veilwood. Find the Flamaris, bond in harmony.”

Other voices joined, distant echoes calling his name. The whispers twisted together, urgent now. “Holland... Go... Veilwood... Flamaris... Bond...”

“Holland!”

His eyes snapped open to familiar faces—Layfus, Thalen, and Elowen hovering above him, their expressions tight with worry.

“Where am I?” The words felt thick in his mouth.

“The ward,” Elowen said softly. “How do you feel?”

“Head’s splitting.” He winced as pain throbbed behind his eyes.

“Let me help.” Elowen’s hands moved in practiced patterns, weaving green light that settled cool against his forehead. The pain ebbed away under her touch.

“The pain’s gone.” Holland relaxed as the throbbing faded. “You’ve really mastered healing magic, Elly.”

A faint blush touched Elowen’s cheeks. “The Healer’s Blessing does most of the work.”

“A blessing is only as powerful as the one who wields it,” Layfus said, his usual sarcasm giving way to genuine respect.

Elowen ducked her head, silver hair falling forward to hide her deepening flush. Holland pushed himself up against the pillows. “How long was I out?”

“Three days,” Thalen said around a mouthful of apple. Juice dripped down his chin.

“Three days?” Holland’s hands clenched in the sheets. “What happened? I remember Fannen yielding, raising my fist, then... nothing.”

Thalen wiped his chin, all humor gone. “That snake attacked

you from behind. And Laric?” He spat the name like poison. “He twisted everything. Claimed Fannen was demanding your surrender, not yielding himself.”

“If it helps,” Elowen leaned forward, “no one’s buying it. The whole thing’s backfired on Faron. Even the noble families are talking—a commoner winning Machi-Ketto’s caused quite the stir.”

“Fannen’s been cast out,” Layfus added. “Faron won’t even look at him now.”

“Which means you should watch your back,” Elowen’s voice hardened. “Fannen’s not the type to let this go.”

Thalen grinned, trying to lighten the mood. “Some combat genius you are, tripping all over yourself out there.”

Holland met his friend’s eyes. “I didn’t trip. I slid. On ice—Laric’s ice.” The ward grew quiet. “He was subtle, but I saw him cast it. The only reason I landed that final strike was because I used the fire to block his view.”

Thalen’s grin died. “So Laric rigged it from the start? No wonder he declared Fannen the winner.”

“You weren’t alone, you know,” Elowen said softly. “We visited. Even Merric stayed the first day and a half.” Her lips curved. “He’d deny it, but the nurses told us everything.”

A warmth spread through Holland’s chest. Beneath all that noble pride, Merric was proving a true friend.

“We’ll let you rest,” Thalen stood, stretching. “Elly and I will check in tomorrow.”

As the twins left, Layfus stayed, shuffling through papers. “Father Caelan sends his prayers.” He pulled out a document. “I found something about those Aetherials you asked after. King Darion did bond with one—the Arbiter. But,” he frowned, “we couldn’t confirm what kind of elemental magic it used. Just

rumors, nothing solid.”

Holland sighed. “More riddles than answers.”

“Welcome to a Lorekeeper’s life.” Layfus’s mouth quirked. “Did you need anything else?”

“Have you ever heard of a Flamaris?”

Layfus’s brow furrowed. “No. Why?”

“I had a dream. Or a vision. It’s strange.” Holland described the dark water, the whispers urging him to the Veilwood.

“That’s not strange at all,” Layfus deadpanned. “Actually, that sounds incredibly creepy and horrifying.”

“Where’s the Veilwood?”

“Helmsedge district, two days’ ride.” Layfus’s humor vanished. “It’s an ancient place, with elven ruins. And dark tales. People go in and don’t come out the same—if they come out at all. I wouldn’t follow advice from voices in your head.”

Holland leaned forward. “If this Flamaris is an Aetherial I can bond with, I have to try. What’s the harm?”

“Death. That’s the harm.”

“Will you come with me?”

Layfus sighed deeply. “Holland, you are my best friend.” He paused, then grinned. “But absolutely not. It’s been a pleasure knowing you.”

Journey To The Veilwood

Sunlight speared through towering windows, turning Valadent's great hall into a cathedral of gold. The vaulted ceiling soared overhead, its sweeping arches gathering whispers and anticipation from the crowd below. Through the glass, the academy gardens sprawled in sculpted perfection—a testament to the Greenhaven students' devotion.

Holland barely noticed the beauty. His mind churned with darker thoughts: Laric's treachery at the duel, the mysterious vision of the Veilwood, the constant dance of survival in a world that wanted him gone.

Merric slipped into the seat before him, offering a curt nod. Holland returned it with a slight smile, recognizing the familiar dance they played. Despite Merric's insistence that he preferred to stand alone, that friendship was a luxury he couldn't afford, his actions spoke differently. He might deny it, might wrap himself in that cloak of noble independence, but he always seemed to find his way to Holland's side. Like now—plenty of empty seats in the hall, yet here he was.

The shadow of his father's disgrace—cast out for choosing

mercy over a king's cruel command—had taught Merric to guard himself, to trust in his own strength alone. But Holland saw through the armor, recognized the ally beneath. Sometimes friendship formed despite our best efforts to prevent it.

Thalen and Elowen threaded through the crowd, claiming empty seats beside them. Elowen's eyes sparkled with mischief as she settled next to Merric. "Ah, Merric, always a pleasure. Funny how you always end up near Holland."

Color crept up Merric's neck. "What? This was the only seat left." The lie came easily, though his eyes darted away from Holland's knowing look.

"Of course." Elowen's smile widened. "How are those sparring matches going?"

Merric's shoulders slumped. "Haven't won once. He's on another level entirely."

"Nonsense." Warmth replaced her teasing. "I've seen you fight. You're better than you think. You'll best him someday."

"Thanks... I guess." The words came grudgingly, but Holland caught the slight straightening of Merric's spine, the way he sat a little taller at the praise.

"You know what?" She leaned closer, silver hair catching the light. "You and I should spar. Nothing better than a good fight."

"Uh, sure." Merric shifted in his seat. "But don't expect me to go easy on you just because you're a—uh, a Lady."

Elowen pinched his cheek. "A *Lady*, am I? How sweet."

Thalen, never one to miss an opportunity for mischief, leaned over and tapped Merric's shoulder. "Hey, Merric," he said, voice dripping with mock menace. "You're not trying to make a move on my sister, are you?"

Merric's usual composure shattered. "I wasn't— I wouldn't— no, I didn't—"

Elowen's laughter rang out, drawing glances from nearby students. "Oh, Merric. You make this far too easy."

Holland watched the exchange with quiet amusement. These moments, these small victories where Merric forgot to maintain his walls, were becoming more frequent. For someone who claimed to prefer solitude, he'd grown surprisingly comfortable in their circle.

The hall fell silent as Dean Branok took the stage, his figure casting a long shadow in the golden light. His presence commanded attention without effort, his voice rich and warm as it filled the chamber.

"Thank you, and welcome!" The Dean's words embraced the assembly. "We stand at a moment both of culmination and anticipation here at Valadent. In two weeks, you will face your final exams before a short summer dismissal."

A ripple of murmurs swept through the crowd. Branok pressed on, his voice growing fervent. "And after that period of well-earned rest, you will return to prepare for one of the most celebrated traditions of this academy—the Valadent Battle Royale Tournament."

Holland felt Merric stiffen in front of him. This was it—the chance his friend had been waiting for, his shot at catching the Royal Knights' attention.

"This tournament," Branok continued, "is not merely a competition. It is a stage where the finest among you will demonstrate your skill, your resolve, and your mettle to the world. Nobles, guildmasters, and faction leaders alike will be watching—many seeking the next great talent."

The Dean's gaze swept the hall, seeming to meet each student's eyes. "For those bold enough to enlist, you will test your prowess against your fellow students in combat, each bout a

crucible of strategy and skill. And for the one who rises above the rest, a grand prize awaits—fit for a champion, yes, but more than that, the title of Valadent Battle Royale Victor.”

His voice lowered with gravity. “This is more than a tournament. It is a chance to show who you truly are.”

Thalen leaned toward Holland, eyes bright with excitement. “This is it. The perfect chance to show these nobles that a commoner can outshine them. Are you going to sign up?”

Holland’s face darkened. The memory of Fannen’s duel, of Laric’s ice beneath his feet, pressed cold against his thoughts. “I’m not sure. After the Machi-Ketto, I doubt I’ll get a fair shot. They’d rig it, just like last time.”

Merric turned in his seat, and for once, his voice carried no pretense of distance. “Thalen’s right.” He glanced around before lowering his voice. “Not all nobility despise commoners, Holland. Some of the highest-ranking nobles actually favor expanding commoner rights. Win this, and you could earn more than citizenship—you could secure a real future after graduation.”

He paused, then added with unusual openness, “I’m entering. The Royal Knights always attend, and I intend to catch their eye.” The admission of his ambition, shared so freely, spoke volumes about how far their friendship had truly come.

Holland rarely let himself dream beyond Valadent’s walls. Three years of study stretched ahead, each day a tightrope walk under Faron’s shadow. Since the Machi-Ketto, Faron’s schemes had grown more desperate—false accusations whispered in professors’ ears, forged letters claiming treachery, training equipment that mysteriously failed during practice. Yet each plot had crumbled against the wall of truth his friends helped maintain.

Professor Bolton's words echoed in his mind: "One of the finest swordsmen the academy has seen." The praise should have bolstered his confidence, but it only reminded him of what he lacked. Around him, students wielded both blade and spell, their combat a dance of steel and elements. Even with Arcstones, Holland fought at a disadvantage—like trying to write with one hand bound.

Yet as he watched Merric's shoulders set with determination, something shifted in his mind. Maybe this tournament wasn't just another trap. Maybe it was a chance to prove that skill alone could triumph over magic and privilege combined.

"Thalen, Elowen," he said quietly, the words carrying a weight that made them both lean closer. "Meet me in the library this evening. There's something I need to discuss."

Thalen's eyebrows shot up, a familiar grin spreading across his face. "What's this about?"

Holland glanced around the crowded hall before answering. "I'm planning a trip." He met their eyes in turn. "And I want you both to come with me."

* * *

Sunset painted warm colors across the library's towering shelves. The air hung thick with leather and parchment, broken only by the whispers of students cramming for finals. Holland sat at a corner table beneath a high window, chosen for its privacy. The light was failing, but his mind was sharp with purpose.

Soft footfalls on carpet announced Thalen and Elowen. With typical grace, Elowen perched on the table's edge like a cat claiming territory. "So," her eyes gleamed, "this mysterious

trip?”

Holland leaned forward, voice low. “Remember Professor Deaus’s lesson on Harmony Bonds?”

“The Aetherial thing?” Thalen’s brow furrowed.

“I’ve found a lead. Something real.” Holland watched their faces carefully. “It might be nothing, but if I’m right, this could be the breakthrough I’ve been searching for.”

“Where exactly are you thinking of going?” Elowen tilted her head, curiosity dancing in her eyes.

Holland hesitated for a heartbeat. “A place called Veilwood Forest.”

A thunderous crash shattered the library’s peace. Books cascaded around a corner shelf, followed by a pained groan.

“Ouch.”

They rounded the shelf to find Hubert sprawled beneath an avalanche of leather-bound volumes, adjusting his crooked glasses.

“Hubert?” Holland fought back a smile. “What are you doing?”

“Oh, hello.” Hubert’s laugh was sheepish. “I was reaching for *Vixar’s Science of Potion Craft*. For Professor Laric’s final—” He stopped short at Holland’s expression. “I’m sorry, I didn’t mean to mention—”

“It’s fine.” Holland’s smile was tight but genuine. He helped gather the fallen books.

“I’m glad Dean Branok transferred you to different classes,” Hubert said quietly. “After what Laric did in the duel... though I miss having a friend there.”

“We still have swordsmanship.” Holland stacked another tome. “You’re improving.”

Color touched Hubert’s cheeks. “Thanks to you. I’m not

much for fighting, but those techniques you showed me—I'm getting stronger."

"Wait!" Thalen's eyes lit with recognition. "You're the guy Faron's thugs stole the sirloin dinner from! That's how this whole thing with Fannen and Holland started!"

Elowen jabbed her brother's ribs. "Do you ever think before you speak?"

Hubert's shoulders slumped. "If I'd had the courage to stand up for myself, none of this would have happened." His voice dropped to barely a whisper. "Holland wouldn't have had to intervene. I feel responsible for everything that followed."

"You don't owe me an apology," Holland said firmly, gripping Hubert's shoulder. "Faron's thugs wouldn't have stopped with just you. If you'd tried to face them alone, you would've been hurt." His jaw tightened. "I've known Faron since we were kids in Krestfell. He doesn't care who he tramples as long as he gets what he wants."

Hubert nodded, though guilt still shadowed his eyes. "Thank you, Holland." He gathered the last of his books, offering a weak smile. "I should get back to my dorm. This book won't read itself."

They watched him disappear into the darkening stacks.

"That guy really does have it rough," Thalen mused, usual brashness softening.

"He does," Holland agreed. "But he's getting stronger. His swordsmanship improves every day. With that will come confidence."

"You two have gotten close," Elowen observed.

Holland's voice quieted. "He doesn't have many friends here." The words carried the weight of someone who knew that loneliness too well.

“He sticks to you like a baby duck follows its mother,” Thalen grinned.

Elowen punched his arm. “Ouch!” He rubbed the spot. “Why do you always hit me?”

“Because you always say stupid things,” she shot back, though affection warmed her mock irritation. “It’s practically a reflex now.”

Holland shifted in his chair, drawing them back to their discussion. “When summer break comes, I’m making that trip to the Veilwood. I’m still not sure what I’m searching for, but...” He met their eyes. “I won’t pressure either of you to come. This isn’t a small thing I’m asking.”

Thalen clapped his shoulder. “Holland, you’re family now.” His smile was warm and certain. “Besides, what else are we going to do during break? We’ll come with you. And when we get back, we’ll start training for the tournament. Elly and I have already decided to join. What about you?”

A small smile tugged at Holland’s mouth. “Yes,” he said, the decision settling like a sword finding its balance. “I’ve decided to participate.”

“You could use the Arcstones Dean Branok gave you,” Elowen suggested. “Level the playing field.”

Holland shook his head. “No. If I fight in this tournament, I want to do it under my own power. I can’t always count on having Arcstones, especially after graduation.” His voice hardened with resolve. “Better to rely on what I know I can control—my own skills.”

* * *

Summer break emptied Valadent’s halls, leaving behind only

those too far from home for a quick visit. Holland counted thirty aurens into the livery master's hand—enough for three horses. The sum made him wince, even knowing part would be returned. His leather pouch, Magnus's parting gift, felt lighter than he'd like.

The capital's spires shrank behind them as hooves marked steady rhythm on packed earth. Wind whispered through roadside trees, carrying the scent of wild roses.

"Beats walking," Thalen said, shifting in his saddle.

Holland nodded, grateful for the gentle sway beneath him.

"You didn't have to rent the horses," Elowen said. "We could've managed."

"I invited you both. Felt right to handle the arrangements."

Thalen cast his sister a sidelong glance. "Lucky we're not heading south. Those districts aren't kind to half-elves these days—bandits, unrest. It's a miracle we survived Belfane as long as we did."

Elowen's jaw tightened. "The further from the capital, the more dangerous it gets for anyone different."

"Speaking of survival," Thalen's eyes sparked with mischief, "remember that troubadour on the boat to Valoria? What was his name?"

"Finn Sawyer!" Elowen brightened. "His songs felt like magic."

"Why don't we sing like Finn did?" Elowen suggested. "Make the journey feel shorter."

"Holland should start," Thalen grinned. "Show us what you've got."

"Me?" Holland laughed. "I'm no Finn Sawyer."

"Sing something from home," Elowen urged. "One of ETTY's lullabies."

Holland's smile softened at the memory. "All right, but don't say I didn't warn you." He cleared his throat, voice low at first but growing stronger with each line of the old highland melody:

"In the gentle folds of twilight's plaid, O'er hills and streams, my bonnie lad, The heather blooms in soft repose, Where the Elden river flows.

Sleep now 'neath the rowan's grace, Dream of stars in the night's embrace, Moonlight dances on the glen, Till the dawn returns again.

Hush, the pipes are calling clear, Songs of highlands, far yet near, In your dreams may stags abound, In forests deep, where myths are found.

Rest ye, where the thistles grow, Guarded by the mountain's snow, Slumber in the highland's keep, In the land of dreams so deep.

So close your eyes, my child, sleep well, Let the hills their ancient stories tell, For you are home, where heart beats free, In the embrace of family's lee."

The melody carried hints of bagpipes and rolling hills, of misty mornings and ancient stone. Each verse painted pictures of the Dalemark highlands—the rowan trees believed to ward off evil, the proud stags in mythical forests, the thistles that dotted the mountainsides. It was a song of home and hearth, of the fierce love of family that defined the highland folk.

As the final note faded into the afternoon air, Thalen shook his head.

"I thought you said you couldn't sing."

"I don't think—"

"You're about as bad at singing as you are with a sword," Thalen smirked. "Which means you're a liar."

Thalen attempted to match the tune, his voice cracking wildly off-key. His horse bucked, clearly offended by the attempt. He barely kept his seat, eyes wide with surprise as the reins slipped

through his fingers.

Holland and Elowen's laughter rang across the empty road.

"Your horse is a critic," Holland managed between chuckles.

"Where did Etty learn that song?" Elowen asked once their mirth settled.

"She and Carson are both from Dalemark. Different towns, but when she came to work at the estate..." Holland smiled, remembering the story Carson loved to tell. "She was applying for the baker's position, and Carson was leading her to the kitchens. When he found out she was from near his hometown of Farthing—" Holland chuckled. "He took the longest possible route through the estate, just to keep talking to her. The song's an old highland lullaby her mother taught her."

The sun dipped lower, painting the sky in amber and crimson. They made camp off the road, two tents rising as Holland gathered firewood. They began setting up camp—Holland arranged stones for the fire pit, Thalen struggled with tent poles while Elowen corrected his mistakes with exaggerated sighs.

Just as the flames caught, Elowen's head snapped up.

"Rider coming," she said quietly. "Keep your weapons close."

They watched the approaching figure, hands never far from their blades. The tension eased as the silhouette became clear in the dying light. Merric.

Elowen's eyes danced. "Did you follow me out here for that sparring match?"

Merric's face flushed crimson. "No! I'm heading to my family's estate at Lake Crestwood. I didn't even know you'd left the capital."

"Well, it'll be dark soon," Holland said, gesturing to the fire. "Better camp together."

Merric dismounted with a grateful nod, leading his horse to where the others grazed. After settling his mount, he joined them by the fire, the flames casting flickering shadows across his face.

“So,” he asked, accepting a cup of water from Elowen, “what brings you this far from Valoria?”

“We’re heading to Veilwood Forest,” Elowen said casually, as if announcing a trip to the market.

Merric choked on his water. “The Veilwood? The *haunted* forest?”

Thalen shot upright, nearly toppling backward off his saddle-turned-seat. “Haunted?” His voice cracked. “Holland, you didn’t say anything about haunted!”

Holland’s lips twitched. “Did I forget to mention that? It’s only *reported* as haunted.”

“Well, that makes me feel—”

“Except,” Merric cut in, firelight dancing in his eyes, “all the people who *didn’t* make it out never had the chance to confirm or deny it, did they?”

Thalen’s face drained of color. “That’s it!” He jumped to his feet. “I’m heading back to Valoria. I don’t do ghosts.”

“Oh, stop being such a baby.” Elowen rolled her eyes. “I’m going, which means you’re going.”

Thalen slumped back down, hugging his knees. “Fine. But if I see anything even *resembling* a ghost, I’m out.”

Merric wiped sweat from his brow, taking another sip of water. The evening chill was settling in, making the fire’s warmth welcome.

“How many homes do you have, anyway?” Thalen blurted.

“Thalen!” Elowen’s elbow found his ribs.

“It’s fine.” Merric’s smile didn’t quite reach his eyes. “Two

estates—one in the capital, one at Lake Crestwood. But since my father’s sentence...” He stared into the flames. “We stay at Crestwood mostly. The capital holds too many memories.”

“That must have been difficult,” Elowen said softly.

“Mother couldn’t bear the whispers, the stares. But out here, there’s peace at least.” He shrugged, forcing lightness into his voice. “What’s this about the Veilwood? Research project?”

“Exactly,” Holland said, perhaps too quickly.

“Research project?” Thalen frowned. “I thought we were—”

“Yes, investigating old elven ruins,” Elowen cut in smoothly, her heel finding Thalen’s toe. “Given our heritage.”

Merric raised his hands. “Say no more. Not my business.” He paused, considering. “Our estate’s just a few hours from the Veilwood. You should stay there before heading into the forest. Better than camping on its edge.”

“That’s very kind,” Elowen said, but Holland tensed.

“Are you sure? I’m...” Holland hesitated. “I don’t want to cause trouble for your family.”

“Because you’re a commoner?” Merric’s laugh held no mockery. “Holland, my father was imprisoned for showing mercy to commoners. Trust me, you won’t be the one bringing trouble.”

The fire popped, sending sparks dancing into the darkening sky. Merric’s gaze drifted toward the road they’d traveled, his expression thoughtful.

“We should take shifts tonight,” he said. “Nothing usually happens out here, but...” He shrugged. “Better prepared than sorry.”

“I’ll take first watch with you,” Elowen said, her tone leaving no room for argument.

Color crept up Merric’s neck. “You don’t have to—”

"I insist." Her smile held a hint of mischief.

"Well," Thalen drawled, eyeing his sister, "if you're staying up—"

"Thay, go to bed before I make you." Elowen's voice was sweet as honey, but her eyes promised retribution.

Thalen muttered something about bossy sisters as he ducked into his tent.

Once the others had retired, Merric and Elowen sat in comfortable silence, the fire crackling between them. Finally, Merric spoke.

"Do you often travel through haunted forests?" His attempt at casual conversation made Elowen smile.

"Only on special occasions." She studied his profile in the firelight. "Tell me about your family at Crestwood. You mentioned siblings?"

Merric's face softened. "A sister and brother, both younger. And my grandmother—father's mother." His voice warmed. "She writes me constantly, reminding me of the strength in our blood. She..." He paused, choosing his words. "She took father's sentence harder than anyone, but never broke. Just lifted her chin and carried on."

"She sounds remarkable."

"She is." Merric poked at the fire. "When father was sentenced, many nobles turned their backs on us. But grandmother? She stood in the great hall with the king present and told them all that mercy wasn't a crime, that any house too proud to show compassion didn't deserve their noble status." Pride colored his voice. "The other nobles might whisper behind our backs, but none dare do it to her face."

"She is." Merric poked at the fire. "When father was sentenced, many nobles turned their backs on us. But grandmother? She

stood in the great hall and told them all that mercy wasn't a crime, that any house too proud to show compassion didn't deserve their noble status." Pride colored his voice. "The other nobles might whisper behind our backs, but none dare do it to her face."

Elowen shifted closer, her shoulder brushing his. "Your grandmother sounds as brave as you."

Merric nearly dropped the stick he'd been using to prod the fire. "I'm not—I mean, I wouldn't say—"

"No?" She tilted her head, moonlight catching in her eyes. "The way you stood up to Faron's group seemed pretty brave to me. Not many nobles would risk their reputation defending commoners."

"That was different," he mumbled, suddenly fascinated by the flames. "It was the right thing to do."

"Exactly." Her smile widened as color crept up his neck. "Brave *and* honorable. No wonder all the noble ladies at the academy sigh when you walk past."

Merric's face went from pink to scarlet. "They don't—that's not—"

"Though personally," she leaned closer, her voice dropping to a playful whisper, "I prefer a man who can actually finish a sentence."

Merric made a strangled sound somewhere between a cough and a laugh, nearly toppling backward off his seat. Elowen caught his arm, steadying him, her laughter soft and warm in the night air.

"You're terrible," he managed finally, though he couldn't quite hide his smile.

"I know." She settled back, looking entirely too pleased with herself. "But you make it so easy."

Above them, the stars wheeled slowly across the sky, and the fire crackled peacefully between them, neither feeling the need to break the comfortable silence that followed.

* * *

The road curved beneath towering pines, their branches weaving a cathedral of shadow overhead. Pine and earth scented the air. When they emerged, Redshield Manor rose before them like something from a dream—stone walls flecked with quartz that caught the summer sun, sending diamond-bright reflections dancing across the grounds. Iron balconies curled like vines against the facade, their shadows stark against the pale stone.

Lake Crestwood stretched behind it, a mirror of endless blue, its surface broken only by the occasional leap of fish. Wildflowers painted the shore in defiant splashes of color, swaying in the midday breeze.

“Look at that view,” Elowen breathed.

“Incredible,” Thalen whispered.

Holland nodded, understanding now why Merric’s family chose exile here over the capital’s cold shoulders.

They dismounted at the livery, a modest building that somehow managed to look both practical and refined. As they unsaddled their horses, footsteps approached.

“Master Redshield, I see you’ve brought guests.”

The steward’s every movement spoke of years of dignified service. His smile was genuine, if reserved.

“Mr. Bently,” Merric nodded. “Please prepare three rooms. They’ll be staying the night.”

“Of course, Master Redshield.” Bently bowed slightly. “Your

mother awaits you on the back veranda.”

“Thank you, Bently.”

As the steward departed, Elowen’s eyes danced. “Master Redshield, how kind of you to invite us to your humble abode.”

Color touched Merric’s cheeks. “I’ve told him a hundred times to stop calling me master. My father is the one in charge, not me.”

Elowen flicked his forehead. “Learn to take a joke, Lord Redshield.”

Merric led them through doors carved with the Redshield crest, into a hall that made Holland pause. A sweeping staircase dominated the space, its polished steps gleaming beneath crystal chandeliers. Stern-faced ancestors watched from gilded frames, their painted eyes following each step.

The grandeur wasn’t entirely foreign to Holland—he’d spent his life working in the Silvermane estate, after all. But where Lord Eldric’s home projected power and intimidation, cold marble and sharp edges designed to remind visitors of their place, Redshield Manor felt... different. The luxury here was softer somehow, more lived-in. The wood gleamed with generations of careful polishing rather than daily demands for perfection. Even the portraits seemed less severe than the Silvermanes’, as if these ancestors watched over their descendants rather than judging them.

“Library,” Merric gestured to double doors of dark wood. “Music room. Sitting rooms.” Each doorway revealed another glimpse of refined beauty—leather-bound books stretching to the ceiling, a grand piano catching sunlight, furniture that rivaled anything in Coralhelm. Yet Holland found himself relaxing. Perhaps because here, unlike in the Silvermane estate, he walked as a guest rather than a servant.

The back sunroom opened to a view that stole Holland's breath. Glass walls soared upward, framing Lake Crestwood's expanse. Wildflowers mingled with carefully tended beds, the lake's wild beauty perfectly complementing the manor's refinement.

A lone figure sat near the edge of the adjoining veranda—a woman in yellow silk, teacup balanced delicately in her hands as she gazed across the water.

"Mother," Merric called softly. "I've returned."

Lady Astra set her cup down with a clatter, yellow silk billowing as she sprang from her seat. All noble composure vanished as she rushed toward her son.

"My sweet boy!" She enveloped Merric in an embrace that made him flush. "I've missed you terribly! How are you, dear? Tell me everything."

Her joy spilled over as she noticed the others. "And who might these fine young people be?"

"Mother," Merric extracted himself carefully, "these are my classmates. Holland Blackthorn and Thalen Frey are my roommates, and this is Thalen's sister, Lady Elowen Frey."

Holland dropped to one knee, while Thalen and Elowen bowed their heads.

"Oh, no need for that. Please, rise." Lady Astra's eyes sparkled with genuine warmth. "I'm just so pleased Merry has made such wonderful friends. He has never brought guests home before."

"Mother, please." Merric's voice strained. "I'm not a child."

"Merry, is it?" Elowen's grin could have lit the capital.

Holland and Thalen exchanged glances, shoulders shaking with suppressed laughter.

"Isn't it the sweetest name?" Lady Astra clasped her hands. "When he was little, he'd march around saying, 'Merry's my

name, and cheers my game!' It was the most adorable thing."

"That's enough, Mother." Merric's face blazed. "They've had a long journey. I'll show them to their rooms." He gestured frantically for them to follow.

As they escaped, Thalen sidled closer. "Thank you for escorting us, *Merry*. You truly are the perfect host."

Merric's sideways glance promised retribution. "Call me that again, and I'll have Bently prepare your room in the barn."

Holland's assigned room left him momentarily stunned in the doorway. A crystal chandelier scattered light across walls dressed in silk damask, their soft gold hue complementing dark, polished furniture. The four-poster bed dominated the space, its burgundy velvet curtains hanging in perfect folds, white linens crisp enough to cut paper.

He kicked off his boots, not daring to step on the intricate rug with dusty soles. His travel pack looked almost comical on the delicate side table—road-worn leather against polished mahogany. Through the window, Lake Crestwood sparkled under the afternoon sun, fish occasionally breaking the surface in silver flashes.

A knock at his door preceded Mr. Bently's precise voice. "Master Holland, Lady Astra requests that guests dress formally for dinner. I've taken the liberty of laying out appropriate attire."

Holland turned to find clothing spread across the bed—a tailored velvet coat, silk waistcoat, knee breeches, white stockings, polished black boots, and a lace cravat. He ran his fingers over the fabric, marveling at its softness.

After washing away the road's dust, Holland stood before the mirror, fumbling with the cravat. He'd seen noble clothing up close before, but wearing it was another matter entirely. Just as

he was about to admit defeat, another knock came.

“Having trouble?” Merric leaned against the doorframe, already dressed in deep blue formal wear. “Here, let me help before you strangle yourself.”

As Merric adjusted the cravat with practiced ease, Holland caught his friend’s expression in the mirror. “What?”

“Nothing.” Merric stepped back, admiring his work. “Just thinking you clean up surprisingly well for someone who spent the morning covered in road dust.”

“Unlike some of us, I wasn’t born knowing how to tie these death traps.”

“Glad to help.” Merric grinned. “Come on, let’s collect Thalen before he tries to wear his boots over the stockings.”

They found Thalen in the hallway, mercifully properly dressed, and made their way to the waiting room. “Where’s Elowen?” Holland asked, noticing her absence.

As if summoned by her name, Elowen’s voice floated down from above. “Here I am, sorry for the delay.”

She descended the stairs in flowing white, embroidered with delicate blue flowers. The dress transformed her usual grace into something almost ethereal. Merric, always composed, suddenly found his eloquence deserting him.

“You look... stunning,” he blurted, then immediately flushed crimson.

Elowen’s smile could have outshone the chandelier. “Thank you for allowing me to wear this dress for dinner.”

“Well,” Thalen grinned, “that dress certainly makes you look like a real Lady.”

Elowen’s withering look could have curdled milk, though her eyes danced with amusement.

“Shall we head to the dining room?” Merric suggested quickly,

desperate to move past his moment of unguarded honesty.

“Isn’t it proper to escort a young lady to dinner, Lord Redshield?” Elowen tilted her head, voice sweet as honey but sharp as a blade.

“Ah, yes, forgive me.” Merric offered his arm, which she took with exaggerated grace. As they moved toward the dining room, he leaned closer. “Lady Elowen, is it your mission in life to make me feel bashful at every opportunity?”

“Whatever do you mean?” Her eyes sparkled with mischief. “I haven’t even started my mission yet.”

The dining hall stretched before them, its grandeur taking Holland’s breath away. Frescoes adorned towering ceilings, their delicate brushstrokes telling ancient tales. Rich tapestries draped the walls between stern portraits, their subjects seeming to watch the newcomers with painted curiosity.

A massive table dominated the room, its polished surface sat beneath a crystal chandelier. Places were set for twelve, though only half would be filled—each setting a work of art in itself, with porcelain plates, gleaming silver, and linen napkins folded into shapes Holland couldn’t begin to understand.

Merric guided Elowen to her chair with practiced grace. Holland felt sweat prickle at his brow as he took his own seat, hyperaware of his every movement.

“If you could see your face right now, you’d get a good laugh out of it,” Thalen whispered, settling beside him.

“I’ve never done this before,” Holland admitted under his breath. “I’m completely out of my depth.”

“Funny how you can stand firm in a duel with blades coming at you, but sit you at a formal dinner and you’re undone.”

Merric, catching their exchange, chuckled. “There’s no need to worry, Holland. You’re among friends. My mother has a

more relaxed view of these things, despite the setting.”

Before Holland could respond, the doors swung open. Lady Astra entered, followed by two younger figures—a girl of about fourteen in a simple white gown, and a boy no more than eight who could have been Merric in miniature, save for the roundness of youth in his cheeks.

Holland started to rise for another bow, but Lady Astra’s warm voice stopped him. “Oh, please, Holland. We’ve done enough of that. Here, we set aside such formalities. Be at ease.”

“Brother!” The young girl—Ella, Holland remembered Merric mentioning—brightened. “It’s so good to see you home! Who are your friends?”

As Merric made introductions again, the youngest Redshield, Frederick, tugged at his brother’s sleeve. “Did you bring me a gift from the capital?”

“I brought gifts for everyone,” Merric laughed. “You’ll get yours after dinner.”

Mr. Bently and other attendants glided in with the first course. Holland froze at the array of utensils before him. A subtle kick under the table drew his attention to Merric, who discreetly indicated the proper spoon for the soup. Holland nodded thanks, following his friend’s lead.

“Mother,” Merric asked as they ate, “where’s Grandmother? I was hoping to see her this evening.”

Lady Astra sighed fondly. “She’s gone to visit her sister in Timberlyn. She should return within a couple of days.”

Her gaze turned to their guests. “So, Holland, Merric tells me you’re venturing into The Veilwood. What exactly do you hope to find there?”

Holland shifted in his chair, meeting Lady Astra’s curious gaze. “I’m not entirely sure, my Lady. I’m seeking answers to

some questions that have been troubling me. As for Thalen and Elowen, the elven ruins there are of great interest to them, given their heritage.”

Frederick, who had been following the conversation with bright eyes, suddenly beamed at the twins. “I like your pointy ears!”

Laughter rippled around the table. Elowen responded with a warm smile. “Thank you, Frederick. I happen to be quite fond of them too.” Her eyes flickered to Merric. “And you know, you’re as handsome as your older brother.”

Merric nearly choked on his wine, face flushing as he cleared his throat. “I did warn them about the stories of The Veilwood,” he said quickly, desperate to change the subject.

Lady Astra waved a dismissive hand. “Oh, most of those tales are exaggerated. Though The Veilwood is certainly... unusual.”

“Unusual how?” Thalen leaned forward, worry creeping into his voice.

Lady Astra’s eyes sparkled with intrigue. “Well, the forest has a way of guarding its secrets. Some say the fog that rolls through it isn’t natural. It appears without warning, and many believe it’s the forest itself protecting something. Perhaps those old elven ruins.” She paused, studying their reactions. “So, regardless, be sure not to enter that forest with any ill intent.”

“We’re not going in with any ill intent, are we?” Thalen’s voice had risen slightly, earning him an amused look from his sister.

Holland smiled reassuringly. “No, we’re just looking for answers. Nothing more.”

Lady Astra nodded, her expression softening. “Then I wish you all the best. Just be careful, my dears.”

The meal progressed through courses that would have made even the finest chefs in Valoria proud—from delicate stuffed

figs to perfectly roasted pheasant, each dish more exquisite than the last. As plates were cleared and replaced, conversation flowed as freely as the wine, punctuated by Frederick's eager questions and Ella's quiet observations.

As the evening wound down, Thalen excused himself with an exaggerated yawn. Elowen caught Merric's eye, a smile playing at her lips. "Would my Lord be kind enough to escort me to my room?"

Merric's cheeks colored, but he stood with practiced grace. "Of course, my Lady."

Frederick tugged at his brother's sleeve. "Can I come too?"

"Time for bed, little one," Lady Astra interjected smoothly. "Ella, would you see your brother to his room?"

As the others filtered out, Holland rose to follow, but Lady Astra's voice stopped him. "Holland, may I have a word with you in the study?"

His stomach clenched. Had he committed some breach of etiquette? He followed her into a room lined with books, their leather spines well-worn with use. Moonlight spilled through a large window, painting the lake in silver. Lady Astra gestured to a plush chair and settled herself on a couch opposite.

She poured tea from a silver pot, the scent of lavender filling the air. "Would you like some? It's my favorite after a large meal. Helps me sleep."

The kindness in her tone only heightened his anxiety. "My Lady, I'm sorry," he blurted. "I should have mentioned earlier that I'm not of noble birth. I'm just a commoner. Whatever punishment you deem fit—"

Lady Astra's laugh, warm and genuine, cut through his apology. "Oh, Holland," she wiped a tear of mirth from her eye. "I've known that since before you arrived. Merric told me

all about you in his letters. You've nothing to fear from me."

Relief flooded through him. "He didn't tell me he'd mentioned that."

"Yes, he does have a mischievous side when it comes to those he cares about." Her expression softened. "That's actually why I wanted to speak with you. To thank you."

"Thank me?" Holland blinked.

Lady Astra's eyes filled with a mother's sorrow. "Since his father's imprisonment, Merric has carried such a burden. Losing his father was devastating enough, but when his friends turned their backs on him..." She paused, gathering herself. "He built walls around his heart. Became distant. I feared he would never let anyone close again."

Holland listened in silence as she continued. "Then I began receiving his letters about you. He would never admit this aloud—might not even realize it himself—but you've become important to him. You've given him something I feared he'd lost forever: a true friend."

Holland's throat tightened. "When I first met Merric, we didn't exactly get along. He had this... front. This arrogance." He paused, choosing his words carefully. "But I realized it wasn't really arrogance at all. It was armor. And I know about that kind of armor because I've worn it myself—being seen as less than others for not having noble blood." He met Lady Astra's gaze. "Merric's disdain wasn't hatred. It was pain. He was angry at the world for what it had taken from him."

Lady Astra's eyes brimmed with tears. "That's exactly it. He's been so angry, so hurt, for so long. And you've shown him that not everyone will turn away." She reached across and placed her hand gently on Holland's. "For that, I can't thank you enough."

"Merric might not say it, but I consider him a friend as well."

Holland smiled. “He’s a good person, deep down. He just needed someone to see it.”

“You’ve brought my son back to life in ways I feared were lost.” Lady Astra squeezed his hand before releasing it. “For that, I am forever in your debt.”

Moonlight painted silver paths across the study floor as they sat in comfortable silence. The scent of lavender tea wrapped around them like a warm blanket, and Holland felt the last of his tension ease away. Here, in this quiet moment, titles and birth didn’t matter. They were just two people who cared about someone important to them both.

Into The Fog

Dawn painted the sky in pale gold as they prepared to leave Redshield Manor. Mr. Bently packed their provisions while Merric hovered nearby, clearly torn between duty to his family and desire for adventure.

“Stay,” Holland said quietly. “Your family’s missed you.”

Merric’s shoulders relaxed, though his eyes still held worry. “Be careful in there. The Veilwood... it’s not like other forests.”

Lady Astra insisted they return once their exploration was complete, her warm invitation a stark contrast to the chill morning air.

The cultivated beauty of Redshield grounds gave way to wilder terrain as they rode. Ancient trees loomed ahead, their branches twisted into strange shapes that seemed to watch their approach. When fog rolled in, thick and silent as a ghost’s breath, Thalen’s horse shifted nervously beneath him.

“Are you sure we can’t just turn around?” His laugh was forced.

“Scared of a little mist?” Elowen teased, but her fingers tightened on her reins. “You faced down kidnappers without

flinching.”

“I can see kidnappers. Can’t see ghosts.”

Holland studied the thickening fog. “Navigation’s going to be difficult.” He pulled out a weathered map. “The elven ruins should be near the river. If we follow it, we’ll have a guide through this soup.”

They found a natural alcove formed by ancient rocks near the river—perfect shelter for the horses. After securing their mounts with feed and water, they pressed into the forest on foot. The fog clung like wet silk, hot and thick, reducing the world to muted shadows. Each step felt heavier in the unnatural silence, river stones slick beneath their boots.

The deeper they ventured into the Veilwood, the more the forest seemed to breathe around them. Thick fog rolled in without warning, wrapping around tree trunks like ghostly fingers before dissipating just as suddenly, leaving the air unnaturally clear. Then, minutes later, it would return, as if playing some ancient game of hide and seek.

“This isn’t natural,” Thalen muttered, keeping close to the riverbank. “Fog doesn’t just appear and vanish like that.”

Holland stepped carefully over slick stones. “Lady Astra mentioned something about the forest protecting itself.”

“Yes, thank you for reminding me,” Thalen’s voice cracked. “That makes me feel so much better about being here.”

Elowen wiped sweat from her brow—the fog brought an unnatural heat with it. “At least the river’s a constant guide. We can’t get lost as long as we—” The words died in her throat as another wave of fog swept in, so thick they could barely see each other.

“You were saying?” Thalen’s voice came from somewhere to her left.

“Everyone stop,” Holland called. “Link hands. No point risking a fall on these rocks when we can’t see.”

They halted, their breathing oddly muffled in the dense mist. Minutes crawled by, marked only by the river’s gurgle and the occasional snap of branches in the unseen canopy above.

When the fog finally lifted, they found themselves in a small clearing near the riverbank. The afternoon sun, breaking through the leaves, created dappled patterns on the forest floor.

“We should rest here,” Holland suggested, setting down his pack. “Catch our breath before pushing on.”

Elowen nodded, already scanning their surroundings. “I’ll keep watch.”

Holland leaned back against a tree, letting the rough bark press into his spine. Despite the Veilwood’s reputation, their resting spot held an unexpected tranquility. The rustling leaves whispered soothing secrets while the river’s gentle song created a lullaby that tugged at his consciousness.

After some time a sharp, distressed chirp cut through his drifting thoughts.

Holland’s eyes snapped open. The sound came again, from a nearby thicket. Pushing aside branches, he found a cardinal trapped in a blueberry bush, its wing caught in the tangled twigs. The bird’s red feathers stood out like drops of blood against the green leaves.

With gentle hands, Holland worked to free the small creature. The cardinal stilled in his palm, trembling but no longer fighting. The wing wasn’t broken, just sprained.

“Looks like you’ve made a new friend,” Thalen said, crouching beside him. “What are you going to do with him? He won’t survive out here with that wing.”

“I’ll take care of him until he heals,” Holland stroked the bird’s

head softly. “Just needs rest and food.”

“You’re starting to sound like Elly with your need to rescue things,” Thalen teased, but approval warmed his voice.

Elowen stretched as she joined them, her sharp gaze still scanning the area. “Looks like the fog is starting to lift,” she noted, watching as the thick mist slowly began to unravel, revealing more of the forest.

“Finally,” Thalen exhaled, visibly relieved. “I was starting to feel like we were walking through a dream—or a nightmare, depending on how you look at it.”

Elowen smirked and nudged him playfully. “We couldn’t tell, Thay. You’ve been a bundle of courage since we entered the forest.”

Refreshed by the break, they gathered their belongings and resumed their journey along the riverbank. Holland had named the cardinal Berry after finding him in the blueberry bush, and the bird seemed content perched on his shoulder. When the terrain required careful climbing over slick rocks, Holland gently tucked Berry into his tunic pocket, ensuring the little creature’s safety.

The fog’s strange pattern continued as they walked—rolling in thick and oppressive, then vanishing as if it had never been. Each time it cleared, the forest looked subtly different, as if the mist rearranged things when they couldn’t see. Only the river remained constant, its steady flow their lifeline in this shifting maze.

By mid-afternoon, the steady rhythm of their trek came to an abrupt halt. A waterfall thundered before them, its waters cascading down five stories of sheer rock face. The mist it threw into the air mingled with the Veilwood’s strange fog, creating a wall of white that seemed to mock their progress.

“We can’t climb that,” Elowen said, studying the slick rocks. “One wrong step and...” She let the words hang.

Holland nodded, tucking Berry more securely into his tunic pocket. “We’ll have to go around. Follow the cliff line until we find a way up.”

“Wonderful,” Thalen muttered. “Because wandering deeper into a haunted forest is exactly what I wanted to do today.”

They turned away from the river—their faithful guide since morning—and pressed into denser forest. The going was slow. Thick undergrowth caught at their legs, and fallen logs forced long detours. The fog rolled in and out as they walked, each appearance leaving them more disoriented than the last.

Hours passed. The sun, when visible through the canopy, tracked west across the sky. Their water skins grew lighter, and their legs heavier. Still, the cliff face stretched endlessly to their right, offering no path upward.

During one of the fog’s retreats, Holland stopped so suddenly that Thalen walked into him.

“What now?” Thalen grumbled, rubbing his nose.

But Holland didn’t answer. Something tugged at his mind—a memory that wasn’t his own, yet felt more real than the ground beneath his feet. Without thinking, he knelt and brushed away leaves and dirt from the forest floor. His fingers found something solid beneath the debris.

“This is a road,” he said, wonder threading through his voice.

Thalen squinted down at what appeared to be just another patch of forest floor. “A road? Here? Holland, I think the fog’s getting to you.”

But Elowen was already crouching beside Holland, her fingers working to clear away more debris. As she dug, weathered stone emerged—cracked and ancient, but unmistakably crafted

by hands long ago.

“Well, I’ll be damned,” Thalen whispered, previous skepticism forgotten. “How did you know this was here?”

Holland stared at his dirt-covered hands, unable to explain the certainty that had guided them. “I don’t know,” he admitted. “I just... sensed it. Like I’d walked this path before.”

Berry chirped from his pocket, as if in agreement.

“This has to lead somewhere,” Elowen said, already clearing more of the ancient stonework. “Roads like this weren’t built without purpose.”

Holland nodded, that strange certainty still pulling at him. “We should follow it. Whatever it leads to, it has to be better than wandering blind.”

The ancient road wound through the forest like a secret finally revealed. Each step they cleared showed more of the weathered stonework, its surface etched with patterns that had survived centuries of neglect. The fog, as if curious about their discovery, swirled around their ankles but never grew thick enough to obscure their path.

“Look at these markings,” Elowen said, brushing her fingers across a partially exposed design. “These aren’t just decorative. They’re elven script, though too worn to read.”

Holland felt Berry shift on his shoulder, the cardinal’s movements becoming more animated as they progressed. Something about this path resonated with both of them, though Holland couldn’t explain why. Each step felt more certain than the last, as if his feet remembered a journey his mind had forgotten.

After another hour of following the stone path, the trees began to thin. The fog pulled back like a curtain drawing aside, revealing what lay ahead. Collective gasps escaped them as they took in the sight.

A stone bridge spanned a deep gorge, its ancient arch somehow still intact despite the centuries. Below, the same river they'd been following thundered past, having carved its way through the cliff they'd been trying to circumvent. Beyond the bridge, partially shrouded in vines and moss, stood what they'd been searching for—the ruins of what must have once been an magnificent elven complex.

The main structure rose like a sleeping giant, its weathered stone walls still proud despite their age. Four smaller buildings surrounded it, each in various states of decay, yet still bearing traces of their former glory. Intricate carvings adorned their walls, telling stories in a language long forgotten.

"Incredible," Thalen breathed, previous fears forgotten in his awe.

"Remarkable," Holland agreed, though the word felt inadequate.

They approached the bridge cautiously. Up close, the stonework was even more impressive—each block fitted so perfectly that even after centuries, a blade couldn't pass between them.

"Let's just hope this bridge doesn't collapse while we're crossing," Holland said with a forced smile, though his eyes studied the ancient structure with genuine concern.

Thalen, suddenly remembering his fear of heights, peered over the edge. The river churned four stories below, its waters dark and angry. "Why," he muttered, "did I come on this trip?"

The bridge creaked beneath their feet, ancient stone protesting each step. Elowen surveyed the sprawling ruins ahead, her eyes bright with curiosity despite their exhaustion. "This place is massive. If we want to cover it all, we'll have to split up."

Thalen's face paled further. "I don't like that idea. At all."

"We'll stick close to the ruins," Holland assured him, though his eyes were drawn to the main structure. Something about it pulled at him, like a half-remembered dream. "That way we won't get lost. I'll take the main building. Thalen, you check the one to the left, and Elowen, you take the right."

Elowen was already moving, eager to explore. "Got it."

"I don't get a say in this?" Thalen called after them, his protest weak but resigned. "Fine, but if I die, I'm haunting both of you."

Holland climbed the weathered steps to the main structure, pushing aside thick curtains of vines. Berry's talons gripped his shoulder tighter, the bird's usual cheerful chirps replaced by an odd silence. As they entered what must have once been a grand hall, Holland felt the weight of centuries press down on them. Soaring arches still held their grace, though time had stripped away their splendor. Light filtered through cracks in the ceiling, casting odd shadows on the debris-strewn floor.

Nature had begun its slow reclamation; roots crawled along walls, and patches of moss clung to stone like a second skin. It was beautiful, in a melancholic way—a shell of something once magnificent.

Moving deeper into the ruin, Holland searched for anything that might hint at the Flamaris's presence. But the carvings were too eroded to decipher, and whatever relics might have existed here had long since vanished. Frustration gnawed at him as he stepped onto a large veranda, looking out over what had likely been a courtyard.

He sat on the steps, the weight of disappointment settling over him. Berry hopped from his shoulder to his finger, tilting his head as if in question.

"I guess this was a waste of time, wasn't it?" Holland muttered. "Maybe there's no Flamaris after all."

As if in response, Berry suddenly took flight, wings beating with unexpected strength as he darted toward one of the other buildings. “Berry, wait!” Holland called, scrambling to his feet. But the bird disappeared through a narrow crack in the ancient wall, leaving Holland staring after him in disbelief.

Panic surged through Holland as he watched Berry vanish into the building. He’d grown attached to the small cardinal, and the thought of losing him in these ruins twisted his gut. He sprinted across the courtyard, heart pounding—only to collide headlong into Thalen. The impact sent them both sprawling to the ground in a tangle of limbs.

“Ow! What the blazes, Holland?” Thalen groaned, rubbing his head. “Your head is built like a rock!”

“Sorry!” Holland gasped, pulling himself up and offering Thalen a hand. “I was chasing Berry—he flew into that building.”

Thalen accepted the hand with a grunt, still massaging his forehead. “This place gives me the creeps. Let’s find your bird and get out of here.”

Elowen appeared, striding toward them with an amused smile. “You two okay? I was starting to think Thalen got swallowed by a ghost.” Her tone was light, but there was a flicker of genuine concern in her eyes.

“Not yet,” Thalen muttered, still rubbing his head. “Holland’s just trying to knock me out.”

Ignoring Thalen’s complaints, Holland pointed toward the building where Berry had disappeared. “He went in there. We should check it out.”

Thalen spotted a hole in the wall, just large enough for them to slip through. “There’s our way in,” he said, already moving toward it.

The air inside was thick with dampness, a stale scent of

rot and stone hanging in the musty darkness that swallowed them whole. Every sound—whether it was the soft drip of water pooling in the far corners or the echo of their footsteps crunching on old debris—seemed amplified by the oppressive silence.

Elowen rummaged through her pack and produced two short sticks wrapped in fibers. From a small jar, she smeared resin over the linen ends, preparing them for fire.

Holland retrieved an Arcstone from his satchel. With a practiced gesture, he conjured a small, flickering flame that danced atop his fingertips, and with a touch, he lit the torches. The warm glow sprang to life, casting away the creeping shadows that clung to the ancient walls. The flickering light revealed carvings etched in stone—scenes that had endured the centuries, speaking of a time when these halls were filled with life.

Their path sloped downward, the narrow corridor leading them into a vast, circular chamber. The air was cooler here, with the scent of earth and time hanging thick. The walls were covered in intricate elven carvings, scenes of warriors locked in battle, of druids bending nature to their will, and of great beasts that walked beside the elves.

“Berry?” Holland called softly, his voice echoing in the chamber. A familiar chirp answered from somewhere in the darkness ahead.

As their torchlight flickered against the elaborate stonework, Holland’s eyes were drawn to a familiar symbol—one that made his pulse quicken. Among the countless glyphs and scenes of elven lore, one stood out. It was the sigil of the King’s Blessing, the very same symbol that had been burned into his mind during his own Blessing Day.

“Did you find something?” Thalen’s voice broke through his reverie.

Holland hesitated. The truth was too dangerous, too heavy a burden to share. To them, he was simply gifted with the Warrior’s Blessing, a talent that explained his skill with the sword. But the deeper truth, the one that kept him awake at night, was something he had guarded fiercely.

“Maybe,” he said cautiously, forcing calm into his voice. “There’s a carving here. I think I saw it in a book once. Could be important.”

Elowen stepped closer, her torch illuminating more of the glyphs. “These carvings... they’re incredible. It’s like they’ve been frozen in time,” she whispered, tracing the lines with awe.

“What does it mean?” Thalen asked, less impressed with the artistry and more interested in the puzzle before them.

“I’m not sure,” Holland replied, his fingers brushing the rough stone where the King’s Blessing symbol had been carved. “But it’s something significant. I just don’t know what exactly.”

Then, without warning, the air filled with a deep, resonant clank—a sound like a key turning in a giant lock. Dust cascaded from the ceiling, and the wall where Holland had touched the carving began to shift, stones grinding against each other as a hidden passageway revealed itself.

“What kind of sorcery did you just do?” Thalen stepped back, eyes wide.

“I didn’t do anything,” Holland protested. “I just touched the wall!”

Thalen shook his head, equal parts amazed and wary. “My day is never boring when you’re around, you know that?”

Before anyone could argue further, a familiar chirp echoed from the dark passage. Berry’s call, somehow both welcoming

and urgent.

“We should see where it leads,” Elowen said, already moving forward.

“That doesn’t look safe,” Thalen countered, eyeing the darkness with understandable suspicion. “We don’t know what’s down there.”

But Holland was already stepping through the opening, drawn by Berry’s continued chirping. The torch’s glow barely pierced the gloom as they ventured deeper. Cobwebs hung thick and heavy, clinging to every corner, and their small fires crackled as they burned through the tangles of long-forgotten webs.

“Careful,” Holland warned, his voice steady but low. “The spiders around here might not appreciate us tearing through their home.”

A sudden shriek tore through the air. Holland spun around, torch raised, his heart pounding. “Elowen! What happened?”

But Elowen, standing unharmed, smiled mischievously. “That wasn’t me. That was Thalen.”

Thalen stood behind her, his face flushed with embarrassment as he swatted at his arm. “I—I’m sorry, all right?” he stammered, trying to maintain some dignity. “A spider crawled on me. I hate spiders.”

“Well, you certainly sent any creatures fleeing with that scream,” Holland said, fighting a smile. “We might even be safe for the rest of the journey.”

“Very funny,” Thalen muttered. “Can we just keep moving?”

They pressed on, the corridor widening until it opened into a vast, circular chamber. The air inside was thick with dampness, and an acrid smell lingered. Holland noticed a narrow groove carved into the stone floor—a channel filled with some kind of

liquid. He crouched down, cautiously sniffing the air above it.

“Oil,” he said softly, realization dawning. Without hesitation, he lowered his torch to the surface, and in an instant, the oil ignited with a sharp hiss. Flames raced along the channel, lighting up the chamber in a brilliant blaze of golden light.

As the fire illuminated the room, their eyes widened in awe. Above them, the ceiling was adorned with a breathtaking fresco, its colors remarkably vibrant despite the centuries that had passed. The painting depicted a magnificent large bird, its wings aflame, soaring through the sky as elves below offered homage and reverence. The bird’s fierce, noble eyes seemed to meet theirs, and the entire scene was suffused with a sense of ancient power.

“That’s... incredible,” Thalen whispered, barely able to tear his eyes from the artwork.

“It’s a fire spirit,” Elowen said, her voice hushed with awe. “I remember reading about these beings in some of the elvish texts back at the academy.”

Holland’s attention shifted to the wall below the fresco, where elegant elvish script wound its way across the stone, telling a story that had long since been forgotten. “Elowen, can you make out any of this writing?”

Elowen stepped closer, her eyes narrowing as she studied the ancient letters, her torch casting flickering light across the carvings. “I can read most of it,” she said slowly. “It speaks of this temple, built in honor of a great fire spirit—something like a guardian of the elves. The spirit was a protector, revered for its strength and wisdom. But the name... the name is lost to me. Some of these words are too old for my studies.”

“We can figure it out later,” Holland said. “For now, let’s focus on finding any clues about the Flamaris.”

Elowen nodded and began transcribing what she could, her fingers moving quickly over parchment as she copied the ancient text. Thalen, meanwhile, continued to stare up at the fresco, his face a mix of admiration and awe.

“We could be the first people to set foot here in centuries,” Thalen mused aloud, his voice echoing slightly in the chamber. “Imagine what secrets this place holds.”

Suddenly, the ground beneath them shuddered. A deep, ominous rumble echoed through the chamber, sending vibrations through the floor and causing dust to rain down from the ceiling. Elowen stumbled, catching herself against a nearby pillar.

“What was that?” she gasped, looking around in alarm.

Holland’s eyes darted to the entrance of the chamber. A deep red glow was now emanating from the hallway they had entered through, growing brighter with every passing second. “Something’s coming,” he said, his voice tight with urgency. “We need to get out of here, now.”

Thalen’s face paled as he realized what was happening. “That’s... lava! It’s coming this way!” Panic crept into his voice as the red glow intensified, the slow, inevitable advance of molten fire inching closer.

“Spread out!” Holland commanded, his tone sharp with urgency. “There has to be another exit. Find it before the lava reaches us!”

They scrambled, torches in hand, each moving to different parts of the chamber in a frantic search for an escape. The heat from the approaching magma grew stronger, filling the air with the scent of scorched stone.

Pressed against the cold stone, Holland, Thalen, and Elowen could feel the heat of the encroaching magma, its fiery advance

promising a swift and certain end. The air thickened with dread, and Thalen, in a rare display of vulnerability, pulled his sister close. His arms wrapped around her as if they could shield her from the inevitable, a gesture both tender and tragic.

Elowen, wide-eyed with fear, clung to her brother, her gaze darting between the approaching fire and Holland, silently pleading for a miracle. Holland was consumed by guilt. He had led them here, into what seemed to be a fatal trap. His chest tightened, not at the thought of his own demise, but at the unbearable notion that his choices had sealed the fate of his friends.

A sharp, familiar chirp cut through the oppressive tension. Holland's head snapped toward the sound. It was Berry. The small cardinal fluttered just ahead, hopping frantically on the ground as if trying to get Holland's attention. Desperation flaring into hope, Holland ran toward the bird, his fingers brushing against something hard beneath the dust and debris. With frantic hands, he cleared away the dirt, revealing a carved symbol—the King's Blessing.

"Over here!" Holland shouted, his voice cracking with urgency. He pressed his hand against the symbol, and with a deep groan, the wall shifted. Stone scraped against stone as a hidden passage creaked open, revealing a narrow, dark escape route. Holland grabbed Berry and quickly tucked him into his pocket.

Without hesitation, the trio darted through the opening, the heat of the molten magma now just feet behind them. The roar of the inferno was deafening, its oppressive force pushing them forward, each step a desperate attempt to outrun death. Elowen, her heart pounding, spotted something ahead.

"Look!" she cried, her voice hoarse from exertion. "Daylight!"

There's an opening!"

Hope surged through them as they saw the sunlight spilling in from the tunnel's end. But their exit was barred by thick, iron gates. Rusted by centuries but still unyielding, the bars stood between them and the freedom beyond. They found themselves beneath the ancient bridge they had crossed earlier, but now it might as well have been worlds away.

Thalen's panic was palpable. "Now what? We're trapped!" he gasped, fear gnawing at his voice.

Holland's mind raced. "Elowen, Thalen, use your wind magic! Push back the magma! I'll handle the bars!" he commanded.

Without hesitation, the twins extended their hands, channeling their magic. A gust of wind surged forward, meeting the advancing magma with a violent hiss. The wind held the molten fire at bay, but it wouldn't last long. To hold back the surging tide of molten lava demanded more Enera than they had ever wielded in their lives. The effort required was immense, a strain that would sap their reserves at an alarming rate.

Holland summoned all his focus, drawing power from his Arcstone. Flames licked his fingers as he directed the intense heat toward the iron bars. Each bar began to glow red, then white-hot, before slowly bending under the pressure of Enera-infused flames. The metal groaned in protest, but it gave way, inch by inch, under the relentless assault.

"Hurry, Holland!" Elowen's voice was strained, her Enera depleting quickly. Sweat poured down her face as the strain of maintaining the wind barrier took its toll. Thalen, too, was struggling, his knees shaking as the heat from the magma pressed closer.

"I'm going as fast as I can!" Holland growled, his breath coming in ragged gasps as he melted through another bar. The

heat was overwhelming now, searing the air and making it difficult to breathe. Behind him, the roaring magma surged closer, creeping past their wind barrier as the twins' strength faltered.

With one final push, Holland melted the last bar and shouted, "It's done! Let's go!"

Thalen didn't wait. He grabbed Elowen, who was nearly collapsing from exhaustion, and they sprinted toward the opening. Without a second thought, Holland followed, his body propelled by pure survival instinct. "Jump!" he yelled.

They leaped from the tunnel's edge, plunging into the river below just as the molten tide burst from the passage, spilling over the bank in a fiery cascade. The searing heat licked at their heels as they disappeared beneath the cool, dark waters of the river.

The current was fierce, dragging them downstream with a speed that left them disoriented. Holland, his chest tight from the cold shock of the water, surfaced and immediately reached into his tunic. His fingers found Berry, trapped in his soaked pocket. With desperate care, he pulled the bird free and held him high above the churning water, ensuring the tiny creature could breathe.

But there was no time to rest. Thalen's panicked voice cut through the roar of the river. "Look!" he shouted, pointing ahead. Holland's heart sank as he saw the looming waterfall, its thundering edge growing nearer with every second.

"Spread out!" Holland ordered, one arm still holding Berry aloft while the other fought against the current. "When we go over, try not to hit each other!" The command was simple, but in the chaos of the moment, it felt futile.

The current surged, and before they could brace themselves,

they were swept over the precipice. The world spun into chaos as they plummeted into the void, the roar of the waterfall drowning out all thought.

In that split second before the plunge, Holland lifted Berry higher. "Fly," he whispered, releasing the cardinal into the open air just as they tipped over the waterfall's edge. The bird, now free, fluttered upwards into the sky as Holland and his friends plunged into the abyss below.

* * *

Consciousness returned slowly, like waves lapping at a shore. Holland's clothes clung to his skin, heavy with river water. Sunlight filtered through his eyelids, dappled and dancing. He forced them open, finding himself sprawled on a muddy bank, the river's song a gentle whisper beside him.

Thalen and Elowen lay nearby, still as death until he spotted the steady rise and fall of their chests. Relief flooded him, though questions swirled like the mist around them. The last thing he remembered was the waterfall's roar, the world spinning away as they fell. Their survival seemed impossible, yet here they were.

"Thalen." Holland's voice came rough, his throat raw from swallowing river water. He crawled over, muscles protesting each movement, and gripped his friend's shoulder. "Wake up."

Thalen's eyes fluttered, unfocused at first. Recognition dawned slowly, followed by confusion. "We're not dead?" He pushed himself up on shaking arms, immediately searching for his sister. The tension in his shoulders eased only when he saw her breathing steadily.

"Apparently not." Holland managed a weak smile. "Though

I'm not sure how."

Holland struck flint against steel, sparks catching the dry kindling. The small fire wasn't necessary for warmth in the summer evening, but its presence was comforting—a reminder of civilization in this wild place. Steam rose from their clothes as they dried in the heat, the combined warmth of sun and flame slowly returning feeling to their waterlogged limbs.

Elowen hadn't stirred, but her breathing remained steady. Thalen hadn't moved from her side, his usual wit subdued by concern. He kept checking her breathing, his fingers occasionally brushing her wrist to feel her pulse.

"She'll be alright," Holland said, though the words felt hollow. Guilt gnawed at him. He'd led them here, into this cursed forest, chasing legends that had nearly killed them all.

"She better be." Thalen's voice cracked. "I can't... she's all I have left." The admission hung in the air, heavy with years of shared loss and survival.

The fog crept in, thick tendrils wrapping around their small camp. It brought an unnatural silence with it, muffling even the sound of the river. Their packs were gone, lost to the current, along with most of their provisions. The weight of their situation pressed down on them like the humidity in the air.

Evening light filtered through the canopy, creating shifting patterns on the forest floor. The Veilwood's shadows began to lengthen, turning familiar shapes into looming threats. They needed to move while they still had light, but exhaustion made every movement a battle.

"We should go," Holland said finally, wiping sweat from his brow. "The forest feels... different at night."

Thalen nodded, gently shaking his sister. "Elly? Come on, we

need to move.”

Elowen’s eyes opened slowly, confusion clouding them before recognition set in. “Did we...?” She tried to sit up, wincing. “The waterfall...”

“Don’t think about it,” Thalen said quickly, helping her to her feet. “We’re alive. That’s what matters.”

Fog drifted between the trees as they walked, their clothes still damp from the river. Muscles ached with each step, the aftermath of their ordeal weighing heavily upon them. The mist ebbed and flowed, turning familiar shapes into ghostly silhouettes while scattered sunlight pierced through gaps in the canopy.

Elowen paused, her hand trailing along rough bark as she caught her breath. Despite her protests, exhaustion lined her face. “Let’s rest a moment,” she said, voice barely above a whisper.

“Just a short break,” Holland agreed, noting how she swayed slightly. He’d been pushing them hard, eager to put distance between them and the ruins, but they needed to recover some strength.

Thalen sank to the ground beside his sister, relief evident in his posture. “This place,” he muttered, though some of his usual edge had softened. “I’ll be happy never to see it again.” He kept close to Elowen, his protective nature showing in every glance her way.

Holland found a fallen log and sat, using the river’s constant presence to orient himself. The chorus of birds filled the air, punctuated by the occasional splash from the water or rustle of leaves above. Despite their ordeal, the forest seemed almost peaceful now, as if it had tested them and found them worthy of passage.

A familiar chirp cut through the quiet.

Holland's head snapped up at the sound. There, perched on a low branch, sat Berry. The cardinal's red feathers caught the sunlight, making him look almost like a tiny flame among the leaves. His head tilted, regarding Holland with what seemed like curiosity.

"Berry!" Relief flooded Holland's voice. The bird hopped down, branch by branch, until he landed on Holland's outstretched finger. His tiny claws gripped gently, familiar and trusting.

"That bird," Thalen shook his head, a tired smile playing at his lips. "He's as stubborn as you are."

Elowen leaned forward, watching the reunion with soft eyes. "Maybe he wanted to make sure we made it."

Holland stroked Berry's head with one finger, marveling at how the tiny creature had survived their ordeal. The cardinal seemed unharmed, his feathers dry and neat. "You should go," Holland said softly. "This isn't your journey anymore. You've got your wings back—use them."

Berry chirped once more, as if in agreement. Then, with a flutter of wings that stirred the air, he took flight. Holland watched as the small red form disappeared into the canopy above, a strange ache in his chest.

"Ready?" Elowen asked, already pushing herself to her feet. Her voice was gentle, understanding the weight of the moment.

Holland nodded, standing. "Let's get out of this forest."

They pressed on, following the river's guidance. The fog continued its dance around them, but it felt less threatening now. Hours passed, marked by the sun's slow arc through the patches of visible sky above. Their pace was steady but careful, each step taking them closer to the forest's edge.

Moonlight painted silver paths through the thinning trees as they walked, their footsteps heavy with exhaustion. The river's song remained constant, though its waters had calmed since the rapids and falls behind them. Stars pierced the canopy above, and finally, the forest released its hold. They emerged into a clearing where the mist couldn't follow, and there, in the shadow of the rock formation, stood their horses exactly where they'd left them.

Thalen dropped to his knees, pressing his palms against the moonlit grass. "Thank Aarendor," he breathed, the words half prayer, half exhausted relief.

"Always the dramatic one, Thay," Elowen said, though a smile tugged at her lips. Her silhouette had already relaxed, as if the very act of leaving the Veilwood had lifted a weight from them.

Holland shared their relief, but something tugged at his conscience. He'd led them into danger, risked their lives, and for what? Ancient ruins and half-formed legends that had nearly killed them all. "I'm sorry," he said quietly. "This was my fault. I shouldn't have—"

"Don't." Elowen's voice was firm in the darkness. "We chose to come with you, Holland. We knew the risks."

"Besides," Thalen added, finally picking himself up off the ground, "who else would keep you from getting yourself killed?" The jest carried an undercurrent of affection that made Holland's throat tight.

Their horses nickered softly in greeting as they approached, dark shapes against the pale stone. The animals seemed untroubled by their long wait, having found plenty of grass around the rock formation. At least something had gone according to plan.

"We should make camp," Elowen suggested, already moving

toward the sheltered alcove. "I don't fancy riding through the night, and we could all use some real rest."

Holland nodded, though unease prickled at the back of his neck. The Veilwood loomed behind them, a wall of darkness against the star-filled sky. He couldn't shake the feeling that they'd only scratched the surface of something much larger, much more dangerous than they'd imagined.

They nestled into the alcove, using the rock formation's natural curve to hide their small fire from the road. The flames cast dancing shadows on the stone walls, barely enough light to see each other's faces. At least their tents had remained with the horses, sparing them from losing everything to the river.

The fire crackled softly as they sat in comfortable silence, each lost in their own thoughts about the day's events. The night sounds—crickets chirping and frogs croaking in the distance—created a peaceful backdrop that almost made them forget the dangers they'd faced.

Holland took first watch, positioning himself where rock met earth. The night sky sprawled above, a tapestry of stars unmarred by clouds. The gentle chorus of nature almost lulled him into a false sense of peace.

It shattered in an instant.

A sudden, inexplicable dread gripped his chest. He blinked, realizing he had briefly nodded off. The stillness of the night was broken by a sharp hiss—the unmistakable sound of arrows cutting through air. Flames bloomed across their camp as the arrows struck, setting tents and grass ablaze.

"Wake up!" Holland's voice rang out, urgent and sharp. "We're under attack!"

Thalen and Elowen scrambled to their feet, darting toward the rock formation for cover. More arrows whistled through

the darkness, each one trailing fire, turning their peaceful camp into a maze of flames. Holland pressed himself against the cool stone, heart hammering as he tried to spot their attackers in the moonlit field.

Then he saw them.

The sight knocked the breath from his lungs. Hubert Haversham stood there, bow in hand, face twisted with a mix of hesitation and resolve. Beside him, Fannen Lockwood's cruel grin gleamed in the firelight as he guided Hubert's next shot. Holland's mind reeled. Hubert—the boy he'd trained, encouraged, believed in—now stood among his enemies.

Another volley of arrows rained down, forcing them deeper into the alcove. The horses whinnied in panic, pulling at their tethers as flames spread through the grass. Smoke began to fill their shelter, thick and choking.

Suddenly, a piercing screech split the night air. The sound was unlike anything Holland had ever heard—ancient and powerful. A massive shadow passed overhead, and streams of fire erupted from above, driving their attackers back across the field. Their shouts of alarm carried across the distance as they fled into the darkness.

The mysterious creature swooped low over their camp, and as it passed, the flames seemed to bend toward it, drawn up into the sky until they vanished completely. In seconds, their burning camp was doused, leaving only wisps of smoke curling in the moonlight.

Then it was gone, leaving them in stunned silence.

Holland fell to his knees, the weight of what he'd witnessed crushing him. His hands trembled as he stared at the ground where Hubert had stood moments before.

"Holland?" Elowen knelt beside him, her voice gentle with

concern. "Are you hurt?"

"It was Hubert," he managed, his voice hollow, broken. "Hubert and Fannen... they were with Faron's thugs." The words tasted like ash in his mouth. Each one felt like a betrayal all over again.

Elowen wrapped her arms around his shoulders, and for once, Thalen didn't make a joke or lighthearted comment. They understood—this wasn't just an attack. This was the shattering of trust, the loss of someone Holland had believed in.

The night pressed in around them, but Holland barely noticed. All he could see was Hubert's face, twisted with that terrible resolve, and all he could feel was the crushing weight of another person he'd failed.

The Pit Of Despair

Sunlight streamed through the window of Redshield Manor's guest chamber, but Holland barely registered its warmth. Three days had passed since their return from the Veilwood, yet he remained curled on the bed, staring blankly at the endless sky beyond the glass. The memory of Hubert's face, illuminated by firelight as he aimed those burning arrows, played over and over in his mind.

Mr. Bently's quiet footsteps approached the door, right on schedule. The elderly butler entered, his weathered face pinched with concern as he collected another untouched tray of food. He paused, as if wanting to speak, then thought better of it and withdrew in silence.

Birds sang in the garden below, their cheerful notes a mockery of the hollow ache in Holland's chest. His friends had tried everything. Thalen's jokes fell flat against the wall of his grief. Elowen's gentle presence, usually so comforting, couldn't penetrate the fog of betrayal that surrounded him. Even Merric's practical attempts to discuss swordplay couldn't stir him from his stupor.

Then came the sound that would change everything—a steady, rhythmic thunk against hardwood, growing closer with each passing moment.

The door creaked open. A woman entered, her white hair pulled into an elegant bun, her bearing regal despite the cane she leaned upon. Without ceremony, she crossed to the window and threw it wide. Fresh air rushed in, carrying the scent of Lake Crestwood and stirring the stale atmosphere that had settled over the room.

“It’s a wonder you haven’t suffocated in here,” she said, her voice crisp as autumn leaves. “Lying about in the dark, refusing food and water—you’re either an imbecile or very foolish. Perhaps both.”

The sharp words cut through Holland’s fog. He turned his head slightly, taking in the elderly woman’s piercing gaze. “Who—” His voice cracked from disuse.

“Lady Agatha Redshield,” she answered, tapping her cane once against the floor. “Merric’s grandmother. And you, young man, are in desperate need of a bath.”

Holland’s ingrained respect for nobility had him stumbling to his feet, but his legs, weak from days of disuse, betrayed him. He caught himself on the bedpost, grimacing at his own weakness.

“None of that,” Lady Agatha waved off his attempt at formality. With another sharp tap of her cane, two servants appeared at the door. “Take him to the bathing chambers,” she commanded. “And see that he’s properly cleaned up.”

The servants stepped forward, gently taking Holland’s arms. Their touch was practiced and professional as they guided his unsteady steps through the manor’s halls. The polished wooden floors felt strange beneath his bare feet after days in bed. Each step seemed to require more effort than it should, his body

protesting the sudden return to movement.

At the bathing chambers, as the servants began to remove his sweat-stained clothes, a flicker of embarrassment broke through his numbness. “I can manage,” he rasped, his pride—or what remained of it—stirring at last.

Lady Agatha’s eyes softened almost imperceptibly. “Half an hour,” she said, gesturing to the fresh clothes laid out on a nearby chair. “When I return, I expect to see someone who remembers how to live.”

Holland lowered himself into the copper tub, the hot water shocking his skin. Days of dried sweat and grime began to loosen as he dunked his head beneath the surface. When he emerged, water cascading down his face, the world felt sharper somehow—clearer, though no less painful.

The heat worked its way into his bones, but it couldn’t touch the cold knot in his chest. Behind his closed eyes, he saw Hubert’s face again, twisted with that terrible resolve as he drew back his bow. The arrows had blazed against the night sky, each one aimed to kill. How many times had they trained together? How many meals shared? How many—

A sharp rap at the door scattered his thoughts.

“Time’s up,” Lady Agatha called through the wood. “I trust you’re decent?”

Holland pulled himself from the cooling water, his arms shaking with the effort. The fresh clothes waited on the chair: tan treads, a crisp white tunic, and polished black boots. Simple but fine—finer than anything he’d worn before coming to the academy. He dressed quickly, fingers clumsy with the unfamiliar fastenings.

When he opened the door, Lady Agatha’s keen eyes assessed him from head to toe. “Well,” she said, the ghost of a smile

playing at her lips, “at least you no longer smell like the wrong end of a horse. Come along.”

She turned without waiting for a response, her cane tapping a steady rhythm against the floor. Holland followed, his legs steadier now but still uncertain. They wound through the manor’s corridors, morning light streaming through tall windows, until they emerged into the gardens.

A white gazebo waited by the lake’s edge, its latticed walls draped with climbing roses. Inside, a table had been set with what looked like enough food for five people: fresh bread still steaming, preserves in crystal jars, cured meats arranged on silver platters, and wedges of cheese that made Holland’s empty stomach clench despite himself.

But what caught his attention was the rich, unfamiliar aroma wafting from a silver pot.

Lady Agatha settled into her chair with practiced grace, then reached for the silver pot. Dark liquid streamed into delicate cups, releasing a scent that made Holland’s nose twitch with curiosity.

“Have you ever had the pleasure of coffee, Holland?” she asked, adding cream to her own cup with precise movements.

Holland shook his head, watching steam curl from the dark surface. “No, my lady. It’s...” he hesitated, then decided on honesty, “It’s not something servants usually get to taste.”

“Mm,” Lady Agatha hummed, stirring sugar into her cup. “Well, you’re not a servant now, are you? You’re a guest in my home, and more importantly, you’re a friend to my grandson.” She pushed the second cup toward him. “Try it. You might find it helps clear the mind.”

Holland lifted the cup, inhaling the rich aroma. The first sip was bitter, almost shocking in its intensity. Lady Agatha

watched with knowing eyes as he added cream and sugar, following her example.

“Better?” she asked, reaching for a slice of fresh bread.

He nodded, taking another sip. The warmth spread through his chest, and with it came a strange clarity, as if the fog in his mind was beginning to lift.

“Eat,” she commanded, pushing a platter of cured meats toward him. “You’ll need your strength for the day ahead.”

Holland paused, the cup halfway to his lips. “The day ahead?”

A slight smile played at the corners of her mouth. “Did you think I dragged you out of that bed just to feed you breakfast?” She spread preserves on her bread with precise movements. “No, young man. We have work to do.”

“Work?” The word felt strange on his tongue, like something from another life.

“Indeed.” Lady Agatha’s eyes sparkled with something that might have been mischief. “But first, you’ll eat. Everything else can wait until you’ve put something in that hollow stomach of yours.”

Despite himself, Holland found his hand reaching for the bread. The first bite awakened something in him—a hunger he’d been ignoring for days. Soon he was eating with real appetite, the fresh bread and sharp cheese bringing life back to his senses. Lady Agatha watched with quiet satisfaction, sipping her coffee and occasionally nudging another dish in his direction.

The lake beyond the gazebo shimmered in the morning light, its surface broken only by the occasional jump of a fish. Birds darted between the roses that climbed the lattice, their wings catching the sun. It was peaceful here, Holland realized. Different from the oppressive silence of the guest room.

“Now then,” Lady Agatha said as Holland finished his third slice of bread, “are you ready to begin?”

“Begin what, exactly?”

She set down her cup with a decisive clink. “Your healing, of course. Though,” she added with a slight smirk, “you might not thank me for it by day’s end.”

Lady Agatha led Holland through the manicured gardens to a large wooden canopy near the lake. The space beneath had fallen into disuse—crates and barrels cluttered one side, while dust coated the stone floor. Without ceremony, she handed him a broom.

“We need to sweep this entire area clean,” she announced, her keen eyes surveying the mess.

Holland gripped the broom’s familiar handle, muscle memory taking over as he began to sweep. The motion reminded him of countless mornings at the Silvermane estate, though the thought brought less pain than he expected. A sudden movement caught his eye—Lady Agatha had rolled up her sleeves and grabbed a second broom.

“My lady,” Holland protested, watching her attack the dust with surprising vigor, “please, let me do this. You shouldn’t—”

“Shouldn’t what?” She fixed him with a sharp look, though her eyes twinkled. “Work? Get my hands dirty?” She swept with renewed determination. “Young man, I’ve never let anyone tell me what I should or shouldn’t do. I don’t intend to start now.”

They worked in companionable silence, dust motes dancing in the morning light. When the floor gleamed clean, Lady Agatha directed him to the crates. Inside the first lay ornate candlesticks, their gilded surfaces dulled by time. They arranged them carefully around the canopy’s edge, following

some pattern only Lady Agatha seemed to see.

The largest crate held their greatest challenge—a magnificent chandelier designed to hold a hundred candles. Holland’s arms strained as he helped secure it to a rope and pulley system built into the canopy’s frame. The chandelier hung just above the floor, waiting to be raised once its candles were lit.

“Well done,” Lady Agatha nodded, satisfaction clear in her voice. “But we’re far from finished.” She turned toward the manor, her cane tapping against the stone. “Come along. The kitchen awaits.”

The manor’s kitchen embraced them with waves of warmth and the scent of baking bread. Copper pots hung from iron racks, catching the light from the hearth where flames danced beneath a massive cooking pot. Two barrels sat beside a worn wooden table—one filled with potatoes, the other empty.

Lady Agatha settled onto one of the benches, sliding a small knife across the table to Holland. “Sit,” she commanded. “These potatoes won’t peel themselves.”

Holland took the knife, its wooden handle smooth from years of use. “My lady,” he started, the question that had been building finally spilling out, “why are you doing this yourself? Surely the kitchen staff—”

“Because I choose to.” She picked up her own knife, attacking a potato with practiced efficiency. “My title doesn’t make me above honest work. In fact,” a small smile played at her lips, “my husband always said he married me for my cooking—he died a fat and happy man.” Her eyes twinkled with the memory, and for a moment, Holland caught a glimpse of the young woman she must have been.

They worked in silence, the steady rhythm of peeling filling the air. Holland’s movements were mechanical, his mind

drifting back to darker thoughts. The knife slipped, nearly catching his finger.

“Careful now,” Lady Agatha said softly. She set down her knife, her eyes finding his with gentle intensity. “Holland, I know what weighs on you. This pain, this betrayal—it’s a burden no one should bear alone.”

Holland’s hands stilled, the half-peeled potato forgotten in his grip.

“I’ve watched Merric carry similar pain,” she continued, her voice warm with understanding. “His father’s imprisonment, the betrayal of those we thought friends—it nearly destroyed him. He built walls around his heart, thinking they would protect him. But walls don’t just keep pain out, they keep joy away too.”

Tears pricked at Holland’s eyes. He blinked hard, trying to hold them back, but they fell anyway, splashing onto the potato in his hands. “How?” His voice cracked. “How do you rise from something like this? I’ve faced cruelty before, but this—” He drew a shaky breath. “A friend’s betrayal cuts deeper than any nobleman’s scorn.”

Lady Agatha rose from her seat, moving to sit beside him. Her presence was steady, grounding, as she placed a gentle hand on his arm. “The first lesson,” she said quietly, “is to face your heartbreak. Let yourself feel it, let yourself grieve.”

The dam broke. Sobs wracked Holland’s body, each one carrying the weight of Hubert’s betrayal. Lady Agatha pulled him close, offering her shoulder as refuge. She didn’t speak—there was no need for words. In the warmth of the kitchen, surrounded by the scent of baking bread and the gentle crackling of the hearth, Holland finally allowed himself to mourn the friendship he had lost.

As the afternoon light slanted through the kitchen windows, Holland found himself absorbed in the preparation of what seemed to be an endless feast. The scent of roasting meat mingled with fresh herbs and baking bread, filling the warm air. His hands moved steadily now, chopping vegetables and kneading dough, the familiar work oddly comforting after his emotional release.

“Lady Agatha,” he ventured, wiping his hands on his apron, “this seems like rather a lot of food for just the family.” He gestured at the spread before them—dozens of loaves rising on the counter, three different roasts turning on spits, and more vegetables than he’d ever seen in one place.

She looked up from where she was stirring a massive pot of gravy, a knowing smile playing at her lips. “Lesson two,” she said simply.

Holland paused in his chopping. “How many lessons are there?”

“Three.” She tasted the gravy, adding a pinch more pepper. “Each one a step toward mending what’s broken.” She turned to face him fully, her eyes twinkling. “This feast is for our annual celebration—when we thank the staff and servants of the estate with a grand meal before their holiday. Two weeks of rest, well earned after a year of service.”

Holland’s knife stilled. In all his years at the Silvermane estate, he’d never heard of nobles showing such consideration for their servants. “That’s... remarkably kind,” he said carefully. “But I still don’t understand what this has to do with—”

“Lesson two,” Lady Agatha interrupted, laying a weathered hand on his arm, “is about looking beyond yourself. When you

focus on helping others, your own troubles lose their grip. Acts of kindness, Holland—they heal more than just the recipient.”

The wisdom in her words settled over him like a warm blanket. He nodded slowly, returning to his task with renewed purpose. Each vegetable he chopped, each loaf he shaped, wasn't just busy work—it was an act of service, a small step toward healing.

Twilight painted the sky in shades of purple and gold as Holland hoisted the chandelier into place. A hundred candles flickered to life, casting warm light across the now-pristine canopy. Musicians tuned their instruments nearby, strings humming with promise as servants began arriving in their best clothes, their faces bright with anticipation.

The Redshield family took their places at the serving tables—Merric and his grandmother among them—breaking centuries of tradition by serving their staff themselves. Holland watched as faces lit up with surprise and pleasure when Lady Agatha personally handed them heaping plates of roasted meat and vegetables, her smile as warm as the summer evening.

The band struck up a lively tune, and the gathering transformed. Lady Ella, Merric's vivacious younger sister, seized Holland by the hand, pulling him onto the dance floor beneath the vast, moonlit sky. Her laughter, light and carefree, was infectious, and Holland found himself swept up in her joy, lifting his spirits with every twirl. Her steps were quick and lively, and Holland, despite himself, couldn't help but be drawn into the rhythm, his movements becoming more fluid as the music worked its magic.

Lady Agatha sat in her cushioned chair near the edge of the canopy, her leg finally resting after the day's efforts. Her eyes sparkled with satisfaction as she watched the festivities begin to

unfold. Holland approached her, the question he'd been holding finally finding voice.

"You mentioned three lessons," he said quietly, standing beside her chair.

She smiled, nodding toward where Thalen, Elowen, and Merric stood together beneath the chandelier's glow. "Indeed. And you're about to discover the final one."

"What's the last lesson?"

Lady Agatha's expression softened, wisdom and understanding mingling in her gaze. "The third lesson, Holland, is to remember those who love you. We're not meant to carry our burdens alone. Those who care for you feel your pain and share your struggles. Their loyalty is a light in the darkness—cherish it, for it will guide you through even the bleakest moments."

Holland stood still for a moment, letting her words settle deep within him. As he looked at Thalen, Elowen, and Merric, their laughter and easy camaraderie, a wave of gratitude washed over him. He had been so consumed by his own grief, his own betrayal, that he'd forgotten the strength of the bonds he had forged with these people. Now, in the warmth of the evening, he realized how precious those connections were.

With a nod and a heartfelt smile, he turned back to Lady Agatha. "Thank you," he said, his voice thick with emotion.

"You're very welcome, my boy," she replied with a wink, her smile full of affection. "Now go and enjoy the night. You've earned it."

Holland crossed the courtyard toward his friends, each step lighter than the last. Thalen spotted him first, grinning widely. "Look who's finally risen from the grave! I thought we'd lost you to that bed forever."

Elowen elbowed her brother sharply in the ribs, making him

wince. "Ignore him," she said, smiling at Holland. "We're just glad to have you back with us. You're not alone, Holland. We're here for you, always."

Merric, his expression more serious, nodded in agreement. "I know I've acted like friendship wasn't important to me, but truthfully, you're the first real friend I've had since childhood. I understand the darkness you've been in. I believe we can help lift each other out of the pit of despair."

Holland felt a lump rise in his throat as he pulled them all into a tight embrace. "Thank you," he whispered, his voice barely holding back the emotion. "I don't know what I'd do without you."

Thalen, ever the joker, broke the moment with a dramatic clap of his hands. "Alright, enough of the mushy stuff! Let's enjoy this party!"

Laughter rippled through the group as they turned back to the celebration, their spirits lighter, the weight of the past few days finally lifting. As the music played on and the night deepened, Holland found himself laughing again, truly laughing, for the first time in what felt like an eternity. The pain of betrayal still lingered, but it no longer held him captive. He had his friends—his family—and for now, that was enough.

Thalen, ever the opportunist, made a beeline for the barrel of mead and quickly became the unlikely star of the evening. With a tankard in hand, he stumbled into the dance with a kind of reckless abandon, his laughter mingling with that of the servant girls who found his clumsy, yet utterly sincere attempts at dancing charming. He was a figure of exuberant chaos, his antics earning cheers and giggles from those around him as he swayed and stumbled, a grin plastered across his face. The more he tripped, the more infectious his laughter became, until

even the most reserved guests were chuckling along.

Elowen, not one to be left out of the merriment, firmly took Merric's hand, pulling him into the swirl of dancers. At first, Merric resisted, offering half-hearted protests, but the glimmer in his eyes betrayed his amusement. Soon enough, his reluctance melted away, and he was laughing, moving with a grace that seemed effortless. Together they wove through the crowd, their steps in harmony with the music, their laughter mingling with the festive air.

The melodies of the musicians, lively and soulful, filled the night, intertwining with the sounds of clinking glasses, shared stories, and the gentle lapping of the lake's waters. Overhead, the moon hung full and bright, casting a silver light over the scene as if it too was watching over this moment of carefree joy. It was a night that felt timeless, suspended in a perfect balance of warmth and laughter, a rare moment when the troubles of the world seemed far away and forgotten.

A Day In The Capital

The dawn sky held gentle strokes of pink and gold as Holland drew his blade through another practice form. The crisp morning air at Lake Crestwood carried the scent of dew-kissed grass and distant pine. Ten days had passed since Lady Agatha's lessons, and though the ache of betrayal still lingered, it no longer threatened to consume him.

"Your left side's open again," Thalen called from the sidelines, a gust of wind magic punctuating his observation. The sudden breeze nearly knocked Holland off balance. "See? If I'd been serious about that, you'd be flat on your back."

Holland adjusted his stance, a small smile tugging at his lips. "Some friend you are, attacking while giving criticism."

"The best kind of friend," Thalen replied with a grin. "One who keeps you humble and alive."

These morning spars had become routine during their stay, each bout pushing Holland to adapt his swordplay against Thalen's unpredictable wind magic. The challenge was exactly what he needed—something to focus on beyond the hollow space Hubert's betrayal had left.

Near the manor's rose garden, Merric faced his own daily trial. Elowen circled him like a cat toying with its prey, her movements fluid and precise. Despite his superior technique, Merric's face was already flushed, and not just from exertion.

"Has anyone ever told you how handsome you look when you're concentrating so hard?" Elowen asked, parrying his thrust with practiced ease. "Your brow gets all furrowed, like you're solving some grand mystery."

Merric's next strike went wide. "I—that's not—you can't just—" he sputtered, his composure cracking.

"Can't what?" She stepped closer, silver hair catching the morning light. "Pay you compliments? Notice how your eyes light up when you're about to make a move?" Her blade danced past his guard. "Or perhaps you'd prefer I pretend not to see how you watch me when you think I'm not looking?"

"I don't—" Merric's protest died as she swept his legs from under him. He landed hard, looking up at her triumphant smile.

"That's seven matches to none, Lord Redshield," she declared, offering her hand. "Though I must say, you're getting better at lasting longer."

From his position on the ground, Merric groaned. "Do you have to make everything sound like..."

"Like what?" Her innocent tone fooled no one.

"Never mind." He accepted her hand, trying to ignore how his pulse quickened at the contact.

Lady Agatha watched from her balcony, hiding her smile behind her coffee cup. Her voice carried across the garden, tinged with amusement. "Elowen, dear, do try not to break my grandson before breakfast. Though I must say, after watching you best him every morning this past week, one would think he'd have learned to keep his guard up by now."

The morning passed in a blur of training and laughter, but as the sun climbed higher, the reality of their departure began to settle in. With the new semester starting in four days and the Valadent Battle Royale approaching, they could no longer delay their return to the capital. Their bags were packed, horses saddled, yet they lingered in the manor's courtyard, reluctant to leave this haven they'd found.

Lady Agatha stood at the top of the steps, her cane tapping gently against the stone. Beside her, Lady Astra's elegant posture mirrored her mother-in-law's, though her eyes held a gentler warmth. Young Frederick bounced on his toes with barely contained energy, while Ella tried to maintain a lady-like composure despite her obvious sadness at their departure.

"Now then," Lady Agatha said, her voice warm but firm, "you'll all promise to visit your Grandmother Agatha soon, won't you?"

"Of course," Holland replied, the words catching in his throat. He stepped forward to embrace her, this woman who had guided him from darkness with her wisdom and love.

Frederick broke from his mother's side, launching himself at Holland. "You have to come back!" he demanded, his small arms wrapping tight around Holland's waist. "You promised to show me more sword techniques!"

"And I will," Holland assured him, ruffling the boy's hair. "Keep practicing those forms I taught you."

Ella approached next, her attempt at dignity warring with her youth. "Thank you for being my dance partner," she said formally, before breaking into a grin and hugging him. "Even if you did step on my toes a few times."

Lady Astra stepped forward, embracing each of them in turn. "You've brought such life to these halls," she said softly. "It's been

wonderful watching Merric smile again.” Her eyes lingered on Elowen, a knowing look passing between them.

“Mother,” Merric protested, though his tone was fond.

“Oh hush,” Lady Astra chided gently. “Let a mother hope.” She turned to the Frey twins. “You’re always welcome here, both of you. The manor feels more like home with you in it.”

Elowen hugged her tightly. “Thank you, Lady Astra. For everything.”

“Yes, well,” Lady Agatha cut in, though her eyes sparkled with affection, “someone had to teach you lot how to properly look after yourselves. And Merric—” She fixed her grandson with a pointed look. “Do try to let that heart of yours feel what it feels. Even the strongest walls need windows.”

Merric’s face flushed, his eyes darting briefly to Elowen before he embraced his grandmother. “I’ll try,” he murmured.

“That’s all I ask.” She patted his cheek gently before turning to Thalen. “And you, young man—”

“I know, I know,” Thalen grinned, sweeping her into a dramatic hug that made her laugh. “Try not to cause too much chaos.”

“On the contrary,” she said with a wink. “Cause exactly the right amount.”

They mounted their horses, Thalen already lamenting the two-day ride ahead. As they passed through the manor gates, Holland looked back one last time. The Redshield family stood watching them leave, waving proud in the morning light. Something had changed during their stay—something fundamental. They had arrived as friends seeking refuge, but they were leaving as family.

* * *

“I still can’t believe you convinced us to spend our last free day watching a play,” Thalen grumbled good-naturedly as they climbed the steps of the Arda Vista. After two days of hard riding and a day of rest at the academy, the chance to explore Valoria’s grandeur was a welcome respite from their training regimen.

The morning sun had burned away the morning fog, leaving the sky a brilliant blue. With four days until the semester began, the streets buzzed with returning students and merchants eager to cater to their needs. But today wasn’t for preparation or practice—it was for friendship, for moments of joy before the challenges ahead.

“You’re just upset because the street vendor ran out of those honey-glazed nuts you love,” Elowen teased, linking her arm through Merric’s as they walked. The gesture, so natural after their time at the manor, still brought a slight flush to his cheeks.

“I maintain he sold the last batch to that group of noble ladies just to spite me,” Thalen insisted. “Did you see how he smirked?”

Holland chuckled, remembering how Thalen had dramatically declared it a “personal assault on his happiness.” Some things, at least, hadn’t changed since their stay at Lake Crestwood.

The Arda Vista rose before them like a temple to the arts, its marble columns catching the midday sun. Two guards stood at attention by the entrance, checking seals and papers of those seeking entry. Holland felt the weight of his academy medallion against his chest—a symbol that granted him access to spaces once forbidden to someone of his birth.

“Papers and seals,” the guard demanded as they approached. His eyes narrowed at Holland’s common clothing.

Merric presented his noble seal with practiced ease, while

Thalen produced the Frey family seal with considerably less ceremony, dramatically flourishing it in a way that made Elowen roll her eyes as she showed her own.

“And you?” The guard’s tone sharpened as he addressed Holland.

Holland lifted his academy medallion, its surface catching the sunlight. The guard examined it with clear skepticism, turning it over several times as if expecting to find evidence of forgery.

“He’s with us,” Merric said, his voice carrying the quiet authority of his station. “A fellow student of Valadent.”

The guard’s lips thinned, but he couldn’t deny the medallion’s authenticity. He stepped aside with a curt nod, though his disapproving gaze followed Holland as they passed.

The amphitheater’s interior took Holland’s breath away. Curved walls adorned with intricate carvings of ancient performances stretched toward a ceiling painted with scenes from classic plays. Nobles in fine silks and velvets filled the seats, their jewelry catching the light like stars.

“First time in the Arda Vista?” Merric asked quietly, noting Holland’s expression.

Holland nodded. “In Krestfell, I only saw plays twice at the Thane Arena, during the harvest festivals when they opened the gates to everyone. Most times, commoners weren’t allowed in.” He paused, remembering how he and other servant children would sometimes sneak inside to catch glimpses of the passing shows. “Nothing I saw there comes close to this.”

“Well,” Elowen linked her arm through his, shooting a challenging look at a nearby noble who was staring disapprovingly at Holland’s simple attire, “you belong here as much as anyone. More than most, I’d say.”

“Belonging is a matter of perspective,” Thalen mused, guiding

them toward their seats. “Take me, for instance. Noble blood, but I’d rather spend my evenings in a tavern than at some stuffy social gathering. Much better stories in taverns.” His grin turned mischievous. “Though perhaps not as dramatic as *The Tale of Lady Nadine*.”

“You’ve seen it before?” Merric asked, surprised.

“Grandmother insisted we be ‘properly cultured,’” Thalen replied, dropping into his seat with none of the grace their grandmother had tried to instill. “Said we needed to understand the great romances of our time.” He threw a pointed look at his sister. “Some of us took those lessons more seriously than others.”

“Just because you fell asleep during the duel scene—” Elowen started.

“I did not fall asleep! I was... contemplating the deeper meanings.”

“You were snoring.”

“It was a dramatic sigh!”

Holland stifled a laugh at their bickering, but his attention was caught by movement several rows ahead. “Merric,” he whispered, nudging his friend, “isn’t that Professor Bolton?”

They all leaned forward, squinting through the crowd. Professor Bolton sat straight-backed as always, but something was different. His usual stern expression had softened as he turned to the woman beside him, their heads bent close in conversation.

“That’s Professor Nealy!” Elowen’s whisper carried a note of delight. “Oh, this is perfect—I knew there was something between them!”

“Between them?” Merric’s brow furrowed in that way that always made Elowen want to tease him more. “But they’re

nothing alike. Professor Bolton is all structure and discipline, while Professor Nealy...” He paused, recalling their last lesson. “She once spent an entire class theorizing about whether water magic could be used to determine the perfect steeping time for different types of tea.”

“For someone so clever, Merric, you can be remarkably dense about matters of the heart.” Elowen leaned closer, her shoulder brushing his. “Sometimes the most powerful attractions are between opposites. Like a stern swordmaster who needs someone to help him see the beauty in chaos, or a dreamy scholar who yearns for someone to ground her theories in reality.”

Merric’s cheeks flushed at her proximity. “You seem to have given this a lot of thought.”

“I give many things thought, Lord Redshield.” Her voice dropped to a teasing whisper. “Especially things that make you blush so prettily.”

A noble couple in the row behind them cleared their throats disapprovingly at Elowen’s forward behavior. She responded by leaning even closer to Merric, a quiet act of defiance against propriety that made Holland hide a smile behind his hand.

“If you’re quite finished scandalizing the nobility,” Thalen cut in, though his stern tone was undermined by his grin, “I believe the play is about to start.”

* * *

As the final curtain fell, thunderous applause filled the Arda Vista. The performance had stirred something in Holland—perhaps it was the themes of defying society’s boundaries, or maybe it was simply the shared experience of watching

his friends become lost in the story. Even Thalen, who had sworn he'd probably fall asleep, had leaned forward during the climactic duel.

"Well?" Merric asked as they made their way down the marble steps and into the afternoon sunlight. "What did you think of your first proper theater experience?"

Before Holland could answer, Thalen's stomach gave an audible growl. "I think," Thalen declared, "that watching star-crossed lovers and family feuds works up quite an appetite. Didn't you mention something about the Grand Bazaar having the best meat pies in Valoria?"

Elowen elbowed her brother. "Is food all you think about?"

"Currently? Yes. Absolutely yes."

"The Grand Bazaar it is then," Merric chuckled, already leading the way. "Though we should probably avoid the north entrance—the noble families tend to congregate there after the theater."

Merric led them down the main thoroughfare, past clusters of theater-goers who turned to stare at their mixed company. Unlike many of his station, he walked with his head high, completely unconcerned with the whispers that followed them. As they turned toward the heart of the marketplace, the sounds of music and competing vendors growing louder with each step, Holland found himself smiling. Let them stare. He had earned his place here, one hard-fought victory at a time.

The Grand Bazaar opened before them like a feast for the senses. Canopied stalls stood shoulder to shoulder, their fabrics a riot of reds, golds, and deep blues that danced in the afternoon breeze. The air was thick with competing aromas—spiced meats grilling over open flames, fresh bread pulled from stone ovens, and the sweet perfume of candied fruits.

A weapon smith's stall caught Holland's eye. Blades of various makes lined the walls, their polished surfaces gleaming in the afternoon light. The craftsman, a burly man with a leather apron, nodded in acknowledgment as Holland examined a particularly fine short sword.

"You've got a good eye," the smith said, noting Holland's interest. "That's Arkanblade steel—holds an edge like nothing else and takes enchantments better than regular iron."

"And costs more than a farmer makes in a year, I'd wager," Holland replied with a rueful smile.

The smith's eyes crinkled, then widened as he noticed the academy medallion at Holland's throat. "Wait—you're him, aren't you? Holland Blackthorn?" His voice carried enough to draw the attention of nearby shoppers. "The commoner who won the Selection Day Tournament?"

Holland shifted uncomfortably as heads turned their way. "I just got lucky," he said quietly.

"Luck?" The smith barked out a laugh. "Luck doesn't get you into Valadent. Luck doesn't help you beat noble-born fighters who've trained since birth." He stepped around his counter, lowering his voice. "I was born a commoner too. Took me twenty years to earn my citizenship, working my fingers to the bone. But you—" He gestured at Holland with calloused hands. "You're showing them all that we don't have to wait for permission to rise."

A small crowd had gathered now, mostly citizens and commoners, their eyes bright with something that made Holland's chest tight. Hope.

"My daughter watched your matches," a woman in a baker's apron called out. "She practices with a wooden sword every day now. Says she's going to be just like Holland Blackthorn."

“Sometimes heroes don’t choose the role, lad,” the smith said quietly. “Sometimes the role chooses them. And right now, whether you mean to be or not, you’re becoming a hero to people like us.”

“Holland!” Thalen’s voice cut through the gathering crowd. “Come on! These meat pies aren’t going to eat themselves!”

Holland nodded gratefully to the smith and made his way through the dispersing onlookers to where his friends waited.

“What was all that about?” Elowen asked, curiosity bright in her eyes.

Holland shrugged, uncomfortable with the attention. “Nothing important. Just talking about swords.” He gestured toward the food stalls. “Didn’t someone mention something about meat pies?”

Thalen’s eyes lit up, though Holland noticed both he and Merric exchange knowing looks. But thankfully, they let the subject drop as they made their way deeper into the bazaar.

“Gods, it’s hot,” Thalen groaned, wiping sweat from his brow. “Come on, Holland. I spotted a vendor selling iced lemonade earlier. My treat.” He tugged at Holland’s sleeve.

Holland grinned, following his friend through the crowd. The summer heat pressed down on the bazaar, making the shade of vendor canopies a welcome respite. Behind them, Elowen had already drawn Merric to a jeweler’s stall, where delicate pieces caught the afternoon sun.

A silver locket shaped like a rose drew Elowen’s attention, its petals so finely crafted they almost seemed to move in the light breeze. Her fingers hovered over it, not quite touching. “It’s beautiful,” she breathed, then glanced at Merric. “Do you ever wear jewelry?”

Merric’s hand went to his chest, where a chain disappeared

beneath his collar. After a moment's hesitation, he pulled it free. A heavy silver ring hung from the chain, its surface marked with the Redshield crest.

"My father's signet," he said quietly. "The mark of our house's leader." His thumb traced the worn edges. "I keep it close, but I've never worn it properly. It doesn't feel right, not while he..."

His voice trailed off, but Elowen understood. She'd seen how the weight of his father's imprisonment pressed down on him, how desperately he worked to restore honor to the Redshield name. Without thinking, she reached out, her fingers closing over his where they gripped the ring.

"You honor him by carrying it," she said softly. "And one day, when he's free, you'll have kept it safe until he returns."

Merric's eyes met hers, filled with a vulnerability he rarely showed. Before he could respond, Thalen's voice cut through the moment.

"Sweet relief!" he called, somehow managing to balance four glasses of iced lemonade, condensation beading on their surfaces. "Though I think we've lost Holland to that armor display next door."

Indeed, Holland stood transfixed before an armorsmith's stall. A masterfully crafted breastplate caught the sunlight, its surface etched with intricate runic patterns. The craftsman had managed to make the steel look almost fluid, each piece flowing seamlessly into the next.

"Come on," Merric said, pressing a glass of lemonade into Holland's hand. "There's somewhere even better I want to show you. The Hall of Heroes isn't far, and I think you'll especially enjoy it."

Elowen linked her arm through Holland's, practically dragging him away from the stall. The lemonade was perfectly

balanced between tart and sweet, ice cubes clinking as they made their way through the crowded streets.

* * *

The Hall of Heroes rose before them like a temple to legends past, its white stone columns stretching toward the cloudless summer sky. Each pillar bore intricate carvings—battles, coronations, moments of triumph etched in stone. Two massive statues flanked the entrance, warriors with drawn swords whose stone eyes seemed to judge all who entered.

The difference in temperature hit them the moment they stepped inside. Cool air wrapped around them, a blessed relief from the summer heat. Shafts of sunlight streamed through high windows, dust motes dancing in their beams, illuminating the statues that lined the vast chamber.

The afternoon slipped away as they wandered the halls. Shadows lengthened across the marble floor, the angle of sunlight shifting through the high windows. Holland moved from statue to statue, absorbing every detail, every story. His friends followed at a slower pace, watching as he traced inscriptions with reverent fingers, pausing at each new discovery.

Here stood Draven the Tidebreaker, his stone trident raised against unseen threats from the deep. There, Calista the Songstress, her bronze form forever caught mid-performance, an eternal song frozen in metal.

But it was Thane the Stormbringer who stopped Holland in his tracks. The statue towered above them, capturing the legendary warrior in a moment of command. One hand gripped a sword while the other reached forward, as if beckoning armies to follow. Holland's eyes traced every detail, from the

determined set of Thane's jaw to the intricate armor that had inspired countless imitations.

"There's a smaller version of this in Krestfell," Holland said softly, almost to himself. "Outside the arena where I fought on Selection Day. I used to..."

"Used to what?" Elowen prompted gently when he fell silent.

Holland's cheeks colored slightly. "Used to spend many nights just staring at it. Wishing I was him. Sounds foolish now."

"Not foolish at all," Merric said, his voice warm with understanding. "Thane rose from nothing to become a legend. He proved that greatness isn't bound by birth."

A loud growl cut through the reverent atmosphere. All eyes turned to Thalen, who had the grace to look sheepish.

"Sorry," he said, though his grin suggested he wasn't really. "But we've been here for hours, and that lemonade was a long time ago." He stretched, joints popping. "I heard about this new place in the River District—*The Family Table*. They say it's the best food in Valoria."

Elowen glanced out the windows where the sky had turned a deep purple-blue. "He's right. We should probably think about dinner."

The evening air hit them like a warm blanket after the hall's cool interior. The bazaar had transformed in their absence. Paper lanterns bobbed between buildings, casting pools of golden light across the cobblestones. The day's oppressive heat had softened into something gentler, carrying the mingled scents of night-blooming jasmine and cooking fires.

Merric led them down winding streets that grew quieter and more residential. The River District lived up to its name—the Shirebrook's gentle current accompanied their walk, reflecting the first stars appearing in the darkening sky. Unlike the

rigid divisions of the noble quarter or the cramped chaos of the common districts, here the architecture blended both styles. Elegant townhouses stood alongside modest shops, their differences softened by climbing vines and flower boxes.

The Family Table appeared around a bend in the river, its windows glowing with welcome. The building itself was a perfect blend of its surroundings—built from white stone but weathered just enough to feel lived-in, with wooden beams that spoke more of comfort than grandeur. Flower boxes spilled over with summer blooms, and lanterns swayed gently from the eaves.

A patio stretched toward the water, where diners sat at candlelit tables, their quiet conversation mixing with the river's song. The scent of fresh-baked bread and roasting herbs drifted out to greet them.

"Please tell me that heavenly smell means they have space for us," Thalen said, practically bouncing on his feet.

A warm glow spilled from the windows, and through the glass they could see tables of polished wood, each set with simple but elegant place settings. Copper pots hung from the rafters, their surfaces reflecting the light of iron chandeliers. The space somehow managed to feel both rustic and refined at once.

The host's eyes widened slightly at Merric's noble seal, then again at Holland's academy medallion—though in a way that spoke more of recognition than judgment. "Of course, my lords and lady. Right this way."

He led them to a corner table near a window, where the last rays of sunset painted the river in shades of gold and purple. The seats were comfortable, worn smooth by use, and the table bore the marks of countless meals shared—though it had been polished to a warm gleam.

“The menu changes daily,” the host explained, presenting each of them with a carefully written slate. “Our chef prepares what’s fresh from the market.”

Holland’s breath caught as he read the offerings. These were the dishes of his childhood—hearty stews, savory pies, roasted meats with herb-crusting vegetables—but elevated, refined without losing their soul. He glanced up to find Merric studying his menu with furrowed brows.

“I don’t recognize half these dishes,” Merric admitted, looking slightly lost.

“That’s because these are commoner dishes,” Holland explained, unable to keep the smile from his voice. “The kind Ety would make back home. Though I doubt she ever served them quite like this.”

A deep voice from behind interrupted them. “And that’s exactly what my wife intended.”

Holland turned to find Perrin standing there, though he looked different without his city watch armor. Instead, he wore a simple but well-made tunic, and his usually stern expression had softened into something warmer.

“Mr. Perrin!” Holland’s surprise quickly turned to a genuine smile. “I didn’t expect to see you here.”

“You look quite different without your armor,” Elowen remarked with a friendly smile.

“And who’s guarding the noble district while you’re here?” Thalen quipped.

Perrin grinned. “Even we guards get days off.” His eyes gleamed with quiet pride. “Though I’m not here as a guard. My wife Athena and I own this place.”

“You own—” Holland’s eyebrows shot up in surprise.

“Hard to believe?” Perrin chuckled. “About six months ago,

after saving every auren we could, Athena left her position with a noble family to open this restaurant. It was her dream.” His expression softened. “She’s the head chef—her talent in the kitchen is something to behold.”

“The menu makes more sense now,” Merric said. “These are traditional dishes.”

Perrin nodded. “Athena, despite my status as a Citizen, remains a commoner in the eyes of the law. She grew up with these meals, learned to cook them from her grandmother. Her vision was to take these simple dishes and elevate them using the finest ingredients—to share a piece of her childhood with everyone who walks through our doors.”

Elowen’s eyes sparkled with admiration. “That’s wonderful, truly. To take something familiar and make it extraordinary.”

“You should try the shepherd’s pie,” Perrin suggested, then his expression turned more serious. “But there’s another reason I came to speak with you.” His gaze shifted to Holland, his tone taking on a weight that made the others lean in. “As part of the city watch, I have access to a network of informants, and recently, one of them brought me some troubling news concerning you, Holland.”

The warmth of the evening seemed to cool slightly. “Me?” Holland asked, his voice quiet. “What about me?”

Perrin pulled up a chair, his voice dropping. “About a week after I escorted you to the academy, the city watch received a report about a major operation outside Watford—a kidnapping ring. According to the records, the person who claimed the reward for tipping off the guards was listed under the name of Holland Blackthorn.”

Merric’s eyebrows shot up. “Wait, you’re saying Holland helped take down a kidnapping ring?”

Holland nodded slowly. "It wasn't just me. Thalen and Elowen were with me. That's actually how we all met, back in Watford." He shifted uncomfortably. "I signed for the reward money on behalf of all of us."

Perrin's eyes flickered between the three of them, a new respect evident in his gaze. "What you did was nothing short of heroic—saving those children. But..." He glanced around before continuing, "Last week, one of my informants came through with something concerning. A group of men has been searching the city for you, Holland."

The warm glow of the restaurant seemed to dim. "Who are they?" Holland asked, though something in his gut told him he already knew.

"They're in the employ of the Rathbournes."

Holland, Thalen, and Elowen exchanged dark looks. The air around them thickened with unspoken tension.

"I see that name means something to you," Perrin observed quietly.

Thalen cleared his throat. "Oswald Rathbourne was the head of the kidnapping ring we dismantled outside Watford. Holland was the one who helped capture him."

"And now his family seeks vengeance," Perrin said grimly. "I've had my informants keep a close watch on their movements. We'll intervene the moment they cross the line." His eyes locked with Holland's. "But you must be vigilant. Do not travel alone."

"He won't be," Merric said firmly, his hand moving instinctively to where his sword would normally rest. "We've got his back."

Elowen's voice was steel wrapped in silk. "Always."

"What he said about the heroics," Thalen added, jerking his thumb toward Perrin, "that's just Holland. Running headfirst

into trouble to help others.” His light tone belied the protective glint in his eyes. “Honestly, it’s exhausting trying to keep up with his noble impulses.”

Perrin studied Holland for a long moment, his expression thoughtful. “You know, when we first met, you called me an example for those of humble origins. But here you are, barely a season into your time at the academy, and you’ve already done more than I managed in years of service.” A slight smile tugged at his lips. “Though I suspect making enemies of noble houses wasn’t part of your plan.”

Holland shifted uncomfortably in his seat. “I never meant to—”

“Change things?” Perrin finished. “That’s exactly what you’re doing, whether you mean to or not. The common folk talk about you in the markets, in the taverns. A commoner who not only got into Valadent but excels there. Who stands against corruption and helps those in need.” He leaned back, his smile widening. “You’re giving people hope, lad. And hope, well... that makes some powerful people very nervous.”

A serving girl approached with their drinks, and conversation paused as she set them down. When she left, Perrin stood, straightening his tunic.

“I should get back to work. But Holland?” His voice grew serious again. “Watch yourself. And if you need anything—information, help, or just a warm meal and a quiet place to think—you’ll always find friends here at The Family Table.”

As Perrin walked away, Merric raised his glass. “To friends,” he said simply.

“To hope,” Elowen added, her eyes bright.

“To making powerful people nervous,” Thalen grinned, earning an eye roll from his sister.

Holland lifted his own glass, looking at each of his friends in turn. The weight of Perrin's warning still pressed against his chest, but here, in this moment, he felt stronger than any threat. "To family," he said quietly. "The one we choose."

Their meal arrived in waves of savory aromas and artful presentation. Each dish told its own story—humble ingredients transformed into something extraordinary, yet still carrying the warmth of home. Holland watched his friends discover these familiar flavors made new. Merric's eyes widened at his first taste of shepherd's pie, while Thalen made the same pleased sound he'd produced earlier at the bazaar.

"This is incredible," Elowen said, breaking off a piece of crusty bread to soak up the rich gravy from her plate. "I've had fancy meals at a dozen noble houses, but nothing quite like this."

"It's honest food," Holland said, warmth spreading through his chest as he watched them enjoy dishes so similar to what Ety made. "Food that fills more than just your stomach."

As their plates emptied and the evening deepened, talk turned to the upcoming tournament. The Valadent Battle Royale was just weeks away, and excitement crackled between them like lightning before a storm.

The Valadent Battle Royale

The morning sun broke over Valoria to find its streets already stirring. Shop owners turned away customers with apologetic smiles, their doors closing early as the city's pulse quickened with tournament fever. The Valadent Battle Royale had come again.

"They say even the king will attend this year," a merchant called to his neighbor as he pulled down his shutters. Crowds streamed past his shop, all heading toward the colosseum that dominated the skyline—a behemoth of stone and iron that King Silvermane had, in what Holland considered a remarkable display of humility, named after himself.

The colosseum's shadow stretched across the city like a sundial marking destiny's hour. Its massive gates devoured the approaching crowds, noble and common alike. Holland watched from a vendor's stall as a richly dressed nobleman elbowed past a baker's son, both equally eager to claim their places, though their destinations couldn't have been more different.

The common folk would pack the standing sections that

hugged the arena's lower levels, pressed together like wheat in a storm. Above them, noble families would recline on cushioned seats, shaded by silk awnings that rippled in the summer breeze. And higher still, in pavilions that resembled small palaces more than viewing boxes, the royal court would watch it all unfold from behind gilded screens and perfumed air.

But it was the combat stage that drew Holland's eye. Six feet above the arena floor, a perfect square of saltcryst stone caught the morning light and held it, gleaming like a fallen star. Its surface was flawless, unmarred—though that wouldn't last long. By day's end, that pristine white would tell a hundred stories in scuff marks and spell burns.

The air hummed with more than just excitement. Every tavern and café had become its own arena, where those who couldn't secure arena seats gathered to await news of each match. Already, the scent of roasting meat mixed with ale and anticipation, while bookmakers called their odds in voices that carried above the general din.

Holland's hand found the pommel of his sword—a gesture that had become habit during his weeks of training. Each session with Drakarion had left him aching but stronger, though his mentor's reasons for helping remained as mysterious as the man himself.

"I care little for Faron's arrogance," Drakarion had said just yesterday, watching Holland catch his breath after their final bout. Steel glinted in his eyes. "His cruelty does not suit his station. If you meet him in the tournament..." He'd left the thought unfinished, but his meaning was clear enough.

The memory of Krestfell's Selection Day rose unbidden in Holland's mind—the sting of that orchestrated defeat still sharp after all this time. He'd been younger then, softer. Lord Eldric

had made sure his son's victory came at the cost of Holland's dignity. His fingers tightened on the sword hilt, then relaxed. He was different now. Stronger. But still...

A voidborn in a tournament of mages. The thought should have terrified him more than it did.

Trumpets pierced the morning air, their brass notes cutting through the crowd's buzz. Drums followed, deep and steady as a giant's heartbeat. The tournament was about to begin.

Holland stood with his friends as King Sylas Silvermane made his entrance. The monarch moved like a predator despite his fine silks and glittering crown, each step measured and purposeful. His sharp features might have been carved from the same stone as his namesake colosseum, just as cold and just as immovable. When he smiled at the nobles' applause, the expression didn't reach his eyes.

"There's a reason he only enters through the noble gates," Thalen muttered, barely audible above the cheering aristocrats. He turned to Merric, voice edged with bitterness. "This is the man you want to serve as a Royal Knight?"

Elowen's hand shot out, catching her brother's arm. "Thay," she warned softly, but Merric was already shaking his head.

"I don't wish to serve the king," Merric said, his voice steady despite the tension in his jaw. "I want to serve the people, like my father did. The Royal Knights may answer to the crown, but their true duty is to Thalassar itself."

"You don't need to explain—" Elowen began, but Thalen cut her off.

"You're worth ten of him, Merric. Why serve someone who—" He stopped, catching himself, but the words 'imprisoned your father' hung in the air between them.

Merric's hand went to his chest, where Holland knew he kept

his father's signet ring. "Because the rank of Master Sentinel comes with one royal request." His eyes found Holland's, and there was steel in them. "And I know exactly what I'll ask for when I earn it."

Holland felt pride swell in his chest. This was the Merric he'd come to know—the one who turned even imprisonment into a reason to excel, who saw injustice and planned to climb high enough to right it.

"A noble task," Holland said quietly, "if ever there was one."

Elowen's smile was soft but fierce. "A man of compassion. I like that."

The weight seemed to lift from Merric's shoulders as he looked at his friends, replaced by the kind of determination that moved mountains.

* * *

The priming halls beneath the Colosseum swallowed sound differently than the arena above. Every footstep echoed off ancient stone, every nervous breath amplified in the vast chamber. Sweat and leather and steel filled the air—along with something else. Fear, perhaps. Or destiny.

A noble youth in expensive armor doubled over in a corner, losing his breakfast. No one looked. They all understood. Above their heads, seventy thousand voices merged into a constant thunder, and the very walls seemed to pulse with it.

Holland sat on a worn wooden bench, his new sword across his knees. The blade caught what little light filtered down here, reflecting it like captured lightning. Professor Bolton's gift felt different from the practice weapons—alive somehow, waiting.

"I think I might be sick too," Thalen muttered, but his hands

were steady as he adjusted the grip on his club blade.

“You’ll be fine,” Elowen said, though her own fingers kept adjusting and readjusting her bracers. “We all will.”

Merric stood with them, his presence steady and grounding. The weight of his father’s imprisonment seemed to press harder on his shoulders today, but his voice remained firm. “Whatever happens up there, we can face it.”

Before anyone could respond, Professor Bolton’s arrival silenced the chamber. *Stormbane* swung at his hip, the legendary Arkanblade’s presence felt rather than seen. Bolton moved like he always did—unhurried yet purposeful, every step placed with the precision of a master swordsman.

His eyes swept the room, taking in pale faces and white-knuckled grips on weapons. When he spoke, his voice carried the weight of experience.

“Today, you step onto one of the grandest stages of your lives,” he said, then smiled slightly. “Though some of you already look like you’ve faced death itself.”

“The rules are simple,” Bolton continued, his voice steady and authoritative. “You will fight one-on-one with a randomly drawn opponent. Victory comes in three ways: knockout, forcing your opponent out of bounds, or making them forfeit.” His eyes glinted with rare humor. “Killing is strictly prohibited—not that some of you don’t already look half-dead.”

A few nervous chuckles rippled through the chamber. Holland noticed how even that small jest seemed to ease some of the tension from hunched shoulders.

Bolton gestured toward several robed figures at the far end of the hall. “The Arcane Enchanters Guild will enchant your weapons with non-lethal spells. Make no mistake—they’ll still hurt.” His expression hardened. “The crowd has been shielded

by an arcane barrier. No wild strikes. You fight your opponent, not the spectators.”

The Enchanters worked with practiced efficiency as students filed forward. Their hands glowed with power as they imbued each weapon, leaving behind spells that hummed just at the edge of hearing. Holland watched as Thalen’s club blade took on a subtle sheen, the metal seeming to ripple like water in moonlight.

Each contestant received a number, their place in the tournament now left to chance as much as skill. Holland looked down at the wooden token in his palm. Six. The number felt significant somehow, though he couldn’t say why.

The staging area opened before them like the maw of some great beast, offering glimpses of the saltcryst stage above. Holland settled onto a bench with his friends, their silence more comforting than words could have been. The first match would begin soon.

“Look,” Merric said quietly, nodding toward where other students gathered. Some paced, others prayed, a few sat stone-still with closed eyes. “Everyone copes differently.”

“I cope by planning how not to die,” Thalen offered, though his usual humor seemed forced.

Elowen elbowed her brother. “You cope by talking too much.”

Their banter washed over Holland as he studied the stage above. Soon enough, he’d stand there himself. The thought should have terrified him more than it did.

The first matches unfolded above them with brutal efficiency. Each clash sent vibrations through the stone walls, accompanied by the crowd’s roars and gasps. Holland watched through the archway, studying each bout with the focus of a hawk. Most contestants came out aggressive—no one wanted a drawn-out

fight. Ten minutes seemed to be the longest any match lasted.

“They’re burning through their Enera too quickly,” Merric observed, his tactical mind already analyzing patterns. “Look at how they tire by the end.”

Thalen shifted his club blade from one hand to the other. “Well, I’d rather tire myself out than give my opponent time to think.”

“That’s because you never think,” Elowen said, but her teasing lacked its usual spark. Her eyes remained fixed on the stage above, where a fire mage was currently driving his opponent dangerously close to the edge.

“Number six,” a tournament official called out, his voice cutting through the tension. “You’re up next.”

Holland’s heart jumped, but his hands remained steady as he rose. The sword Professor Bolton had given him felt right in his grip, its weight both promise and challenge. The dwarven shield, polished steel, heavier than his practice ones, anchored him to the moment.

Footsteps echoed behind him—too light for a human’s gait. Holland turned to find himself facing an Areodain warrior who seemed to command the very air around him. Jet-black hair framed features that were almost human, save for the iridescent feathers that traced from his eyes to his ears like a noble’s crown. His armor caught the dim light, gold-plated layers designed to mimic a bird’s plumage.

“I am Dravos Windrider,” the Areodain said, his voice deep as distant thunder. He inclined his head—a warrior’s greeting. “Let us fight with honor, Holland Blackthorn, and may the best warrior prevail.”

The announcer’s voice boomed through the Colosseum, carried by a speaking trumpet. “Introducing first, an Areodain

from the Kingdom of Brynmere, Dravos Windrider!”

Dravos strode onto the saltcryst stage, sunlight catching his golden armor. The noble sections erupted in boos—their hatred a physical thing, sharp as drawn blades. A woman in silk pressed a scented handkerchief to her nose as if Dravos’s mere presence fouled the air. Others turned their backs entirely, their disdain a performance of its own.

But in the commoner sections, something different stirred. These people knew what it meant to be looked down upon, to be considered lesser. Their cheers rose to challenge the nobles’ scorn, a wave of support that seemed to straighten Dravos’s already proud shoulders.

“And his opponent,” the announcer’s voice cut through the chaos, “from the district of Coralhelm in the great Kingdom of Thalassar, Holland Blackthorn!”

The commoner sections exploded. “That’s the boy from Selection Day!” The cry spread like wildfire. “First commoner in Valadent for three hundred years!”

Holland climbed the stone steps to the stage, each footfall echoing with purpose. The noble sections’ boos intensified, as if they found a commoner’s success even more offensive than an Areodain’s presence. But Holland didn’t flinch. Instead, he walked directly to Dravos and extended his hand.

A hush fell over the crowd.

Dravos’s dark eyes glinted with something like amusement as he clasped Holland’s offered hand. “It seems they despise you, one of their own, even more than me,” he observed, voice rich with irony.

“Not all nobles look down on us,” Holland said, his voice steady. “It’s just that those with the most bitterness tend to shout the loudest.”

A hint of respect flickered across Dravos's face. They were both outsiders here, standing against the tide of noble arrogance.

The gong's clash shattered the moment. Holland barely had time to raise his shield before Dravos's mace whistled through the air, wind magic making the weapon sing. Each strike came amplified by gusts that threatened to push Holland back, but he angled his shield, cutting through the magical winds like a ship's prow through waves.

Holland pressed forward, refusing to give ground. His sword became an extension of his will, each strike precise and purposeful. Though Dravos towered over him, the Areodain's height worked against him in close combat. Holland exploited this, darting inside his reach, forcing Dravos to defend awkwardly.

But Dravos was far from finished. Like all Areodain, he possessed the ability to shift between human feet and razor-sharp talons at will. Now those bare human feet morphed in an instant, bones and sinew restructuring into deadly weapons. The change brought new ferocity to his movements, each parry backed by inhuman strength. Then, with a powerful beat of his wings, he took to the sky.

Wind magic turned each of Dravos's wing beats into a battering ram. Holland stumbled back, his shield arm trembling against the onslaught. Above him, Dravos became a blur of gold and shadow, diving and wheeling through the air with deadly grace. The tournament rules allowed flight—a fact Holland was beginning to regret.

Each gust slammed into Holland like a physical blow. Dravos swooped low, talons extended, forcing Holland to roll aside. The saltcryst stage scraped against his armor as he came up in a crouch, already moving to avoid the next attack. His boots

found less purchase with each step, pushing him closer to the edge. One more hit would send him over—defeat served with a side of humiliation.

But something stirred in Holland's mind. A memory, yet not his own. Strange images flashed behind his eyes—a battle long past, a warrior facing down a flying foe. The vision vanished as quickly as it had come, leaving behind an idea that felt more like instinct than strategy.

Dravos circled higher, gathering speed for what would surely be his final attack. Holland watched him wheel against the sun, counting the seconds between wing beats. He shifted his sword to his left hand, letting his polished shield catch the light.

"Come on," Holland whispered. "One more pass."

Dravos didn't disappoint. He plummeted from the sky like a stooping falcon, talons extended, wind magic howling around him. At the last possible moment, Holland angled his shield, reflecting the sun's glare directly into the Areodain's eyes.

The effect was instant. Dravos faltered, his wings missing a beat as he tried to blink away the sudden blindness. His trajectory wobbled. Holland's shield slammed up, catching Dravos mid-dive with a sound like thunder. The impact sent shockwaves up Holland's arm, but he held firm.

Dravos crashed into the dirt beyond the stage's edge, his golden armor scattering reflected sunlight like broken glass. For a moment, the arena held its breath.

Then the commoner sections erupted. Their cheers shook the very foundations of the Colosseum, drowning out even the nobles' shocked silence. A few aristocrats found themselves clapping before quickly schooling their expressions back to disdain.

"Here is your winner, Holland Blackthorn!" The announcer's

voice barely carried over the chaos.

Holland jumped down from the stage, his heart still racing. Dravos was already pushing himself to his feet, his talons shifting back to human form. There would be bruises tomorrow, but nothing seemed broken.

“Thank you for the honor of combat,” Holland said, extending his hand once more.

Dravos clasped it firmly, respect clear in his dark eyes. “The honor was mine,” he replied, his voice rough but sincere. “You fought with both skill and wisdom—rare qualities in one so young.”

As field medics hurried forward to check Dravos, Holland made his way back to the staging area. The roar of the crowd followed him, but it was the memory of that strange vision that occupied his thoughts. Where had it come from? And why did it feel so... familiar?

Questions for another time. For now, he had more matches ahead, and somewhere in the tournament brackets, Faron Silvermane waited. One victory didn’t guarantee anything—except that he belonged here, magic or no magic, noble blood or common.

* * *

Merric’s boots scraped against saltcryst as he faced his opponent. Torvald Stonecutter filled the space before him like a mountain given form—all braided beard and rippling muscle. The dwarf’s war hammer, its head twice the size of its wielder’s skull, rested almost casually on one broad shoulder.

“By stone and steel,” Torvald’s voice rumbled across the stage, “let’s give them a proper show, friend.”

The gong's echo hadn't faded before Torvald charged. For his size, the dwarf moved like an avalanche—unstoppable, devastating. His hammer whistled down in an arc that could shatter bone. Merric twisted aside, feeling the air displacement brush his cheek. The hammer struck saltcryst, sending spider-web cracks through the stone.

From the staging area, Holland gripped the railing. "Too close," he muttered. "He's not thinking ahead."

Merric danced back from another crushing blow, his usual calculated style nowhere to be seen. Each dodge came later, each counter-strike less precise. The dwarf pressed forward relentlessly, hammer blows falling like thunderclaps.

Then Torvald changed tactics.

The hammer crashed down with earth-shattering force. The stage buckled, throwing Merric off balance. In that split second of vulnerability, Torvald's weapon found its mark. The impact lifted Merric off his feet, sent him sprawling across cracked stone.

The crowd gasped. Even the nobles leaned forward.

Blood trickled from Merric's lip as he pushed himself up. His chest screamed where the hammer had connected, but something else burned hotter—determination. His father's signet ring pressed against his chest, a reminder of everything he fought for.

When Torvald charged again, Merric was ready.

Instead of retreating, Merric rushed forward. Torvald's eyes widened—no one closed distance with a war hammer. The weapon swung wide, but Merric had already dropped, sliding across saltcryst like a shadow. His blade flashed once, precise as a surgeon's knife.

The crack of steel against bone echoed through the arena.

Torvald roared, his left ankle giving way. The mighty hammer fell from suddenly nerveless fingers, ringing against stone. But even on one knee, the dwarf's eyes blazed with the same determination Merric had seen during their shared classes in military tactics. He lunged for his weapon, muscles straining.

Merric didn't give him the chance. Three strikes, each perfectly placed—not to wound, but to disarm. The hammer skittered across the stage, and Merric's sword found Torvald's throat.

Silence held the arena breathless.

"Well fought," Torvald said, his usual booming voice carrying across the stage. "Professor Bolton's lessons paid off, it seems. I yield."

The crowd erupted. Merric lowered his blade and extended his hand. The dwarf clasped his forearm, grip still strong enough to bruise.

"We'll have to spar again during practice," Torvald grinned through his pain. "Though perhaps with less at stake next time."

As medics hurried forward, the tournament announcer's voice boomed: "Next match: Thalen Frey versus Freya Dawn-fire!"

Thalen stepped onto the gleaming stage, his club blade catching afternoon light. Across from him, Freya's copper hair seemed to dance like actual flames. She'd earned top marks in Professor Nealy's advanced fire magic course—a fact Thalen wished he could forget as he watched flames already curling around her fingers.

"You're a handsome one," she called, a dangerous smile playing at her lips. "Shame about what's about to happen to that face."

"Flirting already?" Thalen's grin didn't quite hide his nerves. "At least buy me dinner first."

The gong rang, and Thalen's hand darted to his satchel, pulling out a small leather-bound book. As he began to chant, Freya's flames condensed into tight spheres of deadly heat.

Nothing happened.

"Performance issues, Frey?" Freya launched her fireballs with deadly grace. Thalen barely managed to deflect them with his club blade, the enchanted metal dispersing the flames on impact.

From the staging area, Elowen leaned forward. "What is that idiot brother of mine planning?"

Freya wasn't waiting to find out. She advanced like a wildfire, her saber leaving trails of flame in its wake. Each strike forced Thalen back, the heat alone enough to make his eyes water. Their weapons clashed in a shower of sparks, steel ringing against steel as Freya pressed her advantage.

Her elbow caught him under the chin, snapping his head back. "I did warn you about the face," she taunted.

Stars danced in Thalen's vision. He stumbled, nearly missing the next strike that would have taken his ear off. Freya's blade ignited, becoming a ribbon of pure fire. She leaped, bringing the burning sword down in an arc that would end the match—
And suddenly screamed.

She looked down to find hundreds of Stinger Ants swarming up her legs, their bites like needles of fire. The spell Thalen had cast at the start of the match had finally paid off.

"Beast taming," he managed through split lips, "just started the beginner classes this semester."

A blast of wind magic caught Freya square in the chest, sending her flying from the stage. She landed hard in the dirt, still swatting at the ants that covered her legs.

The crowd roared its approval at the unexpected reversal.

Thalen hurried to help her up, already dismissing his tiny allies with a wave of his hand.

“You summoned them at the start?” Freya asked, wincing as she brushed off the last few ants.

“Yes,” Thalen offered her a steadying arm. “Though I didn’t expect them to swarm quite like that.”

Freya managed a smile through her gritted teeth. “Seems like you’re more than just a handsome face after all.”

Six rounds had passed since the tournament began. The saltcryst stage bore the scars of countless battles—scorched by fire, scarred by earth magic, pitted by wind and water. Now only eight competitors remained, each victory harder-won than the last.

Lyriana Starshine stood like living moonlight on the battle-worn stage. Her armor, crafted to mirror Silverbough leaves, caught the sun in ripples of silver and green. The elven warrior’s presence commanded attention—not through grandeur, but through the deadly stillness that preceded a storm.

Elowen felt her heart quicken. She’d survived five grueling matches to reach this point, but this would be different. She’d heard the whispers about Lyriana’s accuracy with a bow—how she could split an arrow at distances that seemed impossible. The silver band across the elf’s brow, marked with the Silverbough emblem, spoke of victories Elowen could only imagine.

“Your reputation precedes you,” Lyriana’s voice carried like music. “The half-elven girl who masters both wind and water. Show me if the stories are true.”

The gong’s echo hadn’t faded before arrows filled the air. They came not in a volley but in perfect sequence, each aimed to force Elowen into a specific pattern of movement. Wind magic deflected the first wave, but Lyriana had anticipated

this. Her next arrow burst mid-flight, flooding the stage with blinding light.

Elowen's world exploded into white. She barely registered the distinctive whistle of Lyriana's Shooting Star spell—an arrow wreathed in radiant energy. Ice crystalized before her, catching the arrow in a frozen shield that shattered on impact. The force sent her sprawling across the stage.

"Elly!" Thalen's voice carried from the staging area. "On your left!"

But Lyriana had already cast Reflecting Mirror. Where one elf had stood, now six identical figures advanced, daggers drawn. They moved in perfect unison, each step precise as a dance across the battle-scarred stone.

Elowen's response came in a torrent. Water cascaded from above, drenching the stage. With a sharp breath, she froze it solid. The elf's clones barely slowed, their movements fluid even on ice. But Elowen smiled—she'd played right into her trap.

Her hand slammed down. The ice erupted, sending crystalline shards exploding upward. Five clones shattered into light, leaving only the real Lyriana, caught mid-step as the blast threw her skyward.

Elowen didn't hesitate. Wind magic coiled around the falling elf, spinning her in a disorienting whirlwind before hurling her beyond the stage's edge. Lyriana landed hard in the dirt, her perfect composure finally broken.

The arena held its breath.

Then Lyriana laughed—a clear, bright sound that cut through the tension. She rose with fluid grace, brushing dirt from her armor. As Elowen approached to help her up, Lyriana removed her silver headband, the Silverbough emblem catching the light.

“You fight with both power and wisdom,” Lyriana said, placing the band gently on Elowen’s brow. “Wear this with pride. You’ve earned it.”

The crowd’s cheers swelled, but it was the look of fierce joy on Thalen’s face that made Elowen’s heart soar. Six rounds of battle had led to this moment—not just victory, but recognition. The half-elven girl from Belfane had proven herself against one of Greenhaven’s finest.

But there was no time to celebrate. The seventh round loomed, and with it, a challenge Elowen had dreaded since seeing the tournament brackets. Her next opponent would be Thalen.

The seventh round brought silence to the arena. After hours of brutal combat, the crowd leaned forward, eager to witness the clash between the Frey twins. But Thalen and Elowen had other plans.

They met at the center of the scarred stage, their steps synchronized as they had been since childhood. No battle stances, no drawn weapons. Instead, Thalen reached for his sister’s hand—the same hand that had pulled him from countless scrapes, that had dried his tears when their parents died, that had never let him fall.

Together, they raised their clasped hands high.

“We both forfeit this match,” their voices rang clear across the arena.

The silence shattered. Nobles erupted in outrage, their angry shouts echoing off stone. But from the commoner sections came something else—first a murmur, then a rising cheer. They recognized something more valuable than victory: the bond between siblings who had lost everything but each other.

In the staging area, Holland waited, shaking his head with a

knowing smile. The twins descended the steps, Thalen's usual grin firmly in place despite the nobles' continued protests.

"What made you decide to forfeit?" Holland asked, though the warmth in his eyes suggested he already knew.

Elowen adjusted the silver headband—Lyriana's gift—as she answered. "Thalen offered to forfeit alone, like he did during Selection Day." She shot her brother a look that mixed exasperation with affection. "But I wasn't having it. Either we fight properly, or we stand together."

"Besides," Thalen added, his eyes sparkling with their usual mischief, "the winner would have faced you next round. We couldn't let you suffer that kind of embarrassment."

Holland chuckled. "Very thoughtful of you."

"Luck's on your side though," Elowen said. "Between your opponent's injury and forfeit and our forfeit, you're heading straight to the finals."

The weight of those words settled over them. Holland had fought his way through five rounds without magic, relying on skill and strategy where others wielded the elements. Now only two matches stood between him and the championship—the semi-final bout he would watch, and the final he would fight.

The tournament official's voice cut through their moment. "The next match will begin shortly. Merric Redshield versus Fannen Lockwood!"

Thalen's grin faded. "This won't be pretty."

The grounds crew worked swiftly, their earth magic repairing the saltcryst stage one final time before Merric's match. Fannen Lockwood already stood at one end, his sneer visible even from the staging area. The same man who had tried to cheat his way through Holland's Machi-Ketto now carried himself with unearned confidence, as if his previous disgrace had never

occurred.

“You may be good, Merric,” Fannen’s voice dripped with contempt, carrying across the arena, “but the son of a traitor will never defeat a true, loyal noble of the crown.”

Merric’s jaw tightened, but his voice remained steady. “Did you say ‘true’? There’s not a shred of truth in you. Or have you forgotten your disgrace in the Machi-Ketto? You couldn’t even win against a commoner without cheating. How does it feel knowing our whole academy and many in this crowd know about your disgrace?”

From the staging area, Elowen’s hands clenched. She’d seen that dangerous glint in Merric’s eyes before—the same look he got whenever someone mentioned his father.

The gong rang.

Fannen struck first, hurling a barrage of stone projectiles that whistled through the air like angry wasps. Merric’s response was immediate—a wall of earth erupted before him, absorbing the impact. But Fannen wasn’t finished. Jagged spikes of rock tore through the ground, racing toward Merric’s position like the teeth of some great beast.

The crowd gasped as one spike caught Merric’s shoulder, drawing blood. He rolled away from the next assault, his sword flashing in the afternoon light as he severed incoming stone projectiles. Each movement was precise, calculated—the result of countless hours training with Professor Bolton.

“Is that all?” Merric taunted, his voice carrying across the stage. “My father taught me better moves when I was a child.”

Fannen roared in fury, slamming his foot into the ground. The entire stage buckled, waves of stone rippling outward. But Merric was ready. He leaped, using the momentum of the waves to launch himself skyward. As he descended, his sword blazed

with earth magic, striking the stage with enough force to create a shockwave that sent Fannen stumbling.

The noble recovered quickly, casting *Earthen Dome* to protect himself. But Merric had anticipated this. The ground beneath the dome turned to quicksand, and before Fannen could react, a massive boulder shattered his shelter. He tumbled out, disoriented and vulnerable.

Desperate, Fannen began an incantation, his hands glowing with deadly intent. But vines burst from the earth, wrapping around his limbs. He struggled, but each movement only tightened their grip. When he looked up, Merric's sword rested against his throat.

"Your arrogance has put you here again," Merric's voice was cold as steel. "This time, I want you to scream 'yield' loud enough for even the dead to hear."

Fannen's face flushed crimson. "I yield! I yield!" The words tore from his throat, raw with humiliation.

The crowd erupted in cheers, but Merric was already walking away. Behind him, Fannen's rage found voice.

"I will kill you, Merric Redshield! I will destroy everything you love!"

But Merric didn't look back. The crowd's roar drowned out Fannen's threats as he returned to his friends. His body ached from six rounds of combat, each victory carved into his muscles like a memory of pain.

He collapsed onto the staging area bench, and to his surprise, Elowen sat beside him. Without a word, she guided his head into her lap. For once, he didn't protest. Her healing magic flowed into him, warm and soothing, easing the day's toll from his bones.

"Well," Thalen broke the comfortable silence, "only one match

left before the semi-finals.” His eyes tracked to the arena where the next competitors would soon appear. “Faron Silvermane versus Avelos Hawkcaller.”

The tournament’s end was drawing near.

* * *

The announcer’s voice cracked with enthusiasm. “Ladies and gentlemen—” He cleared his throat. “Welcome the scion of House Silvermane, Faron of Coralhelm!”

The noble sections erupted in practiced adoration. Their cheers rang hollow against the commoners’ silence, like brass trying to pass for gold. Faron strode onto the stage as if he owned it, his expression suggesting he’d just woken from a pleasant nap rather than fought through six rounds of combat.

“And his opponent—” The announcer’s voice dropped noticeably. “Avelos Hawkcaller of Brynmere.”

The Areodain warrior ascended the steps with quiet dignity. His wings, silver-tipped and proud, caught the afternoon light. Unlike Faron’s manufactured presence, Avelos carried himself with the calm of someone who had nothing to prove.

Faron’s response was immediate and theatrical. He pointed to various spots in the sky, mocking the aerial advantage the Areodain would surely use. The noble sections roared with laughter at his display, while Holland noticed something else—a calculated gleam in Faron’s eyes that made his stomach twist.

The gong rang.

Avelos charged, defying expectations. His mace whistled through the air as Faron stumbled back, genuine surprise crossing his face before that familiar sneer returned. Fire erupted from his hands, forming a whip that cracked against

Avelos's weapon with a sound like thunder.

"Something's wrong," Merric muttered from the staging area. "Faron's not fighting—he's herding."

The observation proved prophetic. A dome of fire trapped both combatants, its heat turning the saltcryst stage cherry-red. Avelos, unable to take flight, dodged Faron's relentless barrage of flame discs. Each near-miss pushed him closer to the edge.

Then the dome vanished.

Avelos seized his chance. Wings spread wide, he soared above the battlefield, finally in his element. The crowd's attention followed him skyward, where an Areodain warrior was most deadly. Even some of the nobles who had laughed at Faron's mockery now held their breath, anticipating Avelos's counterattack.

Below, Faron simply stood there, that same calculated smile playing across his face.

"Am I so insignificant that you halt your assaults?" Avelos called down, his voice carrying the weight of pride. His wings caught the sun as he began to channel his Enera, the air around him shimmering with power. "You will regret that mistake!"

Faron's smile widened to something cruel. His fingers snapped once, sharp as a whip crack.

The sky exploded.

Fire erupted from the very points Faron had gestured to earlier—not mockery after all, but markers for deadly traps. Flames engulfed Avelos before he could react, searing through feather and flesh. His scream cut through the arena as he plummeted, wings blackened and useless.

Holland's hands clenched the railing until his knuckles went white. Faron had laid his traps before the match began—a clear violation of tournament rules. But he'd been clever, hiding

his magic behind theatrical gestures, leaving no proof of his cheating.

Avelos hit the stage hard. He tried to rise, but his limbs shook with the effort. Faron approached with the casual stride of a predator who knew its prey couldn't escape. The smile never left his face as he reached down and grabbed Avelos's wings.

The crack echoed through the suddenly silent arena.

Even the nobles who had cheered Faron's every move flinched at the sound. But their discomfort didn't stop them from roaring their approval as Faron kicked Avelos off the stage like discarded refuse.

The Areodain students erupted from the staging area, rushing to their fallen companion. Medics hurried forward with a stretcher, their faces grim as they assessed the damage. The remaining Areodain fixed Faron with looks of pure hatred, but he paid them no mind. He was too busy basking in the cheers of his noble supporters, arms raised in triumph as if he'd won through skill rather than cruelty.

In the staging area, Holland felt bile rise in his throat. Beside him, Merric's face had gone pale with fury.

"I'll destroy him," Merric whispered, his voice shaking. "In the semi-finals, I swear by all that's holy, I'll—"

"You'll beat him," Elowen cut in, her hand steady on his arm. "But you'll do it right. You'll do it clean. Show everyone the difference between true nobility and whatever that was."

But as they watched Faron strutting across the stage, Holland couldn't shake the feeling that this was just the beginning. Faron hadn't just won a match—he'd sent a message. And somehow, Holland knew that message was meant for him.

"The remaining matches will commence tomorrow afternoon!" The announcer's voice boomed across the arena. "This

will give our valiant contestants time to rest and replenish their Enera. The semi-finals will begin at the third bell, followed by the championship match!”

The staging area felt colder now, despite the day’s heat still lingering in the stone walls. Holland sat with his friends in the dim quiet, the roar of the crowd having faded to hollow echoes. Exhaustion lined their faces, the weight of what they’d witnessed settling heavy on their shoulders. Elowen’s healing magic had restored some of Merric’s strength, but even that seemed subdued, as if the very air resisted comfort.

“Well, Holland,” Merric broke the silence, his voice carrying an edge that hadn’t been there before. “I’m glad I didn’t get that bye. Otherwise, I wouldn’t have the pleasure of facing Faron myself.” His hand tightened around the hilt of his sword. “I’ll show him what happens when you fight with honor instead of tricks.”

Holland met his friend’s gaze and nodded, too weary to find the right words. He squeezed Merric’s shoulder, feeling the tension there. “I’ll leave it to you, then.” But even as he said it, something cold settled in his chest. Faron wasn’t just cruel—he was calculating. The way he’d broken Avelos hadn’t been mere victory; it had been a demonstration.

Rising with a groan, muscles protesting six rounds of combat, Holland stretched. “I’m going to take advantage of the hot baths before heading back. I’ll see you all tomorrow.”

The preparation chambers echoed with his footsteps as he made his way through. The scent of sweat and dust still hung in the air, mixing with the steam rising from the three large baths. Holland sank into the nearest one, letting the heat seep into his aching body.

He closed his eyes, but Faron’s face waited there in the

darkness. The way he'd smiled while breaking Avelos's wings... What would he do to Merric, given the chance? What tricks did he have planned for the semi-finals?

The water's warmth began to lull him, exhaustion pressing down like a physical weight. Just a few minutes of rest, he told himself. Just enough to—

Holland shook himself awake. He couldn't fall asleep here, not with tomorrow's matches looming. Pulling himself from the bath, he dried off and dressed quickly, his movements sluggish with fatigue. His shirt clung slightly to his damp skin as he gathered his things.

Pain exploded against his temple.

Holland's eyes snapped open to darkness. He tried to move, to fight, but another blow sent the world spinning. His hand reached out, finding nothing but empty air as consciousness slipped away like water through his fingers.

The last thing he heard was the echo of footsteps, fading like his vision into black.

Hope Is A Fire

River water and mold. Those were the first scents that pierced Holland's consciousness. His head throbbed where they'd struck him, each pulse of pain bringing reality into sharper focus. Darkness pressed against his eyes—a rough burlap sack, he realized, scratching against his face with every breath.

He tried to move. His arms screamed in protest, stretched above his head and bound tight enough to bite. His legs wouldn't respond at all. Panic clawed up his throat, threatening to choke him.

Water rushed nearby—a river, close enough that its sound filled the space. Something cold and metallic pressed against his fingers: a rusted bar. Wood creaked beneath him with every slight movement.

Voices murmured, too distant to make out clearly. Footsteps paced a steady rhythm—a guard, marking time with each pass. Then heavier steps approached, followed by the groan of iron hinges.

The sack ripped away. Lantern light stabbed his eyes, sending fresh pain lancing through his skull. As his vision adjusted, the

room crystallized: he hung in a metal cage, and before him, lounging like a satisfied cat, sat Faron Silvermane.

“Well, well,” Faron’s voice dripped false concern, “what kind of mess have you gotten yourself into this time, Holland?”

“Faron, release me at—” The words died as Faron’s hand cracked across his face.

“No, no, no.” Faron leaned close enough for Holland to smell wine on his breath. “I didn’t give you permission to speak, you filthy voidborn.” His lips curled. “A dog must know its place.”

Blood filled Holland’s mouth from the blow. He glared back at Faron, refusing to give him the satisfaction of looking away.

“Oh, don’t look at me like that.” Faron settled back, crossing his legs with theatrical grace. “I have quite the amusing tale to share.” He paused, savoring the moment like fine wine. “For months, I’ve tried everything to get you expelled—provocations, overwhelming assignments, even bribing teachers. Nothing worked.” His smile turned predatory. “So I planted a traitor instead. Hubert. Remember him?”

Holland’s fists clenched at the name, the metal bar above him creaking under the strain.

“Ah, yes, Hubert.” Faron’s chuckle was dark velvet. “Would you believe how easily he broke? One little threat to his precious alchemical career—a whisper to Professor Laric about failing grades—and his spine turned to water. Faster than one of his pathetic potions could dissolve.”

The bar grew slick under Holland’s grip as blood trickled from where the bindings cut into his wrists. But Faron wasn’t finished.

“Your chance meeting in the library? Your journey to the Veilwood? He reported everything. Every step, every word, every breath you took—all of it came back to me.” Faron leaned

forward, his eyes glittering with malice. “And then, as if the gods themselves smiled upon me, I found these gentlemen. It seems you left quite an impression in Watford. They’ve been looking for you ever since.”

Cold realization washed over Holland. Rathbourne’s men. The same criminals he’d helped expose during the kidnapping ring.

Faron stood, his movements languid and precise. Without warning, his hand cracked across Holland’s face again, harder this time. “You see,” he checked his pocket watch with his free hand, “in about ten hours, I’ll be facing that fool Merric in the arena. I’ll break him piece by piece, and it will all be because of you. And when they call your name for the finals?” His smile widened. “The whole city will know you for the coward you are.”

Faron paused at the iron door, turning back with deliberate slowness. “But you want to know my favorite part?” His voice dropped to a whisper that seemed to poison the very air. “It’s not just about you anymore, Holland. Hurting you directly? That’s too simple. No, I want you to feel real pain. The kind that festers.”

Holland’s chest tightened as Faron’s meaning sank in.

“Those half-breed Freys you’re so fond of?” Faron’s smile turned vicious. “I’ll make sure they never show their faces at the academy again. They’ll learn what it truly means to be outcasts. And Merric—” He savored the name like a sweet. “Poor, noble Merric Redshield, desperately trying to restore his family’s honor. When I’m done with him, his father’s disgrace will seem like a minor footnote in the Redshield legacy of shame.”

Faron leaned against the doorframe, casual as if discussing the weather. “And you’ll live with it, Holland. Wherever they

take you, you'll know that every bit of their suffering came from one simple mistake—thinking they could be friends with a voidborn who dared to rise above his station.”

The iron door groaned shut, leaving Holland alone with the echo of Faron's words and the sound of rushing water. Rage and despair warred in his chest until they burst free in a scream that tore at his throat. He thrashed against his bindings until his wrists ran slick with blood, until his muscles burned and his voice gave out.

Half an hour later, he hung limp, defeat settling over him like a shroud. Sweat and tears dripped to the wooden floor below, each drop marking another second lost.

Boot steps approached his cage. One of his captors appeared, sneering through the bars. “Done with your tantrum, girl?” The man's voice was thick with mockery. “Just wait till Rathbourne gets his hands on you. You'll be begging for this cage.”

Holland's fury found a new target. “Are all kidnappers as ugly as you, or did you win some cursed lottery to look like a mutilated pig?”

The kidnapper's sneer twisted into something darker. “Funny man, are you?” The cage door creaked open. “Let's see if you're still laughing.”

The first punch drove into Holland's stomach like an iron spike. Air rushed from his lungs as blow after blow followed, each one finding a new target. The kidnapper's laughter mixed with the sound of fists against flesh.

“Can't touch your face—Rathbourne's orders. He's got plans for that pretty mug.” Another strike, this one catching Holland's ribs. “But he never said anything about the rest of you.”

The man tore Holland's tunic, exposing bruised skin to damp air. Each new punch felt like fire spreading through his chest.

Soon, Holland hung limp in his bindings, tasting copper, his breaths coming in ragged gasps.

Time blurred. The only constants were pain and the steady sound of the river outside.

“Nearly five in the morning,” one kidnapper muttered to another. “Ship’ll be here within the hour. Fifteen hundred aurens just to deliver this brat. Easiest coin we’ve ever made.”

Through tearful eyes, Holland finally took in his surroundings properly. He hung in the center of a large enclosed boat dock, built directly over the river. Wooden beams stretched overhead, supporting a high peaked roof. Moonlight filtered through gaps in the weathered planks, catching on still water where the river flowed beneath the structure. Empty boat slips lined either side, their ropes swaying gently in the current.

A noise outside caught the kidnappers’ attention.

“What was that?” One straightened.

“Go check it out.”

Metal scraped against leather as a sword cleared its sheath. Cautious footsteps approached the door.

Water dripped steadily onto wood beside Holland. He turned his head, muscles screaming at the movement, and watched in disbelief as dark figures emerged silently from the river below. Perrin and his men pulled themselves up onto the dock’s edge, water streaming from their clothes, their movements precise and practiced. They must have swum underneath the dock’s walls to gain entry. Perrin caught Holland’s eye, pressing a finger to his lips.

Hope, sharp and sudden as lightning, cut through Holland’s fog of pain.

The kidnapper at the door scratched his head. “Ain’t nothing there. Must’ve been an animal,” he muttered, turning back.

His eyes went wide. His companions already lay unconscious, Perrin's men standing over them like silent shadows.

The front door burst open before he could shout. More of Perrin's forces poured in, boots thundering against wooden planks. The remaining kidnappers didn't stand a chance—they were dragged down and bound before they could reach their weapons.

Perrin strode to Holland's cage, water still dripping from his clothes. The lock fell to his picks in seconds. As the bindings came free, Holland slumped forward, gasping as blood rushed back to his arms. Without thinking, he threw his arms around Perrin, not caring about the icy river water that soaked through his torn tunic.

"Perrin, I—" His voice cracked. "I thought... I'd given up hope."

Perrin's hand settled on Holland's shoulder, steady and warm despite his drenched state. "Mr. Holland," he said softly, "hope is a stubborn thing. It doesn't die just because the darkness is thick. It hides, waiting for the right moment to breathe again." His eyes, reflecting moonlight from the gaps above, held Holland's gaze. "You've got friends, people who care for you. That's where your hope lies. Don't let go of it so easily."

Holland nodded, shame burning in his throat for having lost faith so quickly. "How did you find me?"

Perrin's smile held a hint of pride. "My informants had their eyes on these men. When word came they'd snatched you, we followed their trail. Once they brought you beyond the city walls..." He gestured to his men, still securing the scene, all of them in plain clothes rather than city guard uniforms.

"But you're not wearing your guard armor," Holland said, confusion cutting through his pain.

"The city guard has no authority outside Valoria's walls." Perrin's eyes glinted. "We're here because we chose to be."

"You risked your lives... for me?"

Perrin gestured to his comrades, their clothes still dripping river water onto the dock's wooden floor. "Every man here used to be a commoner, just like you. They watched your matches, Holland. You inspired them. They saw something in you that stirred their hearts." His voice softened. "They knew you were worth fighting for."

Holland's eyes filled with tears as he looked at each of his rescuers in turn. "Thank you," he managed, his voice thick. "All of you."

"We're about twenty miles from the capital," Perrin said, all business now. "This is Rathbourne family land—a private dock on the Shirebrook River. They meant to make you disappear for good."

Holland's chest tightened. "The tournament starts at noon. If I don't show up, Faron—" Anger flared hot in his voice. "He's the one behind this. He'll win by default."

Perrin's expression hardened. "We'll get you there." He led Holland outside the boat dock, where a small stable stood adjacent to the main structure. Inside, several horses shifted restlessly in their stalls, but one in particular caught Holland's eye.

The Stormstrider stood apart from the others, its smoky gray coat rippling with barely contained power. A silver mane and tail caught the pre-dawn light, shimmering like liquid metal. But it was the horse's eyes that held Holland transfixed—a deep, electric blue that seemed to mirror the heart of a storm.

"This breed is fast and tireless," Perrin said, running a hand along the horse's neck as he untied it. "If anything can get you

to the capital in time, it's this steed." He paused, studying the magnificent creature. "No doubt stolen by these men—a horse like this is worth a small fortune. But now, it's yours to use."

Holland approached the Stormstrider carefully. The horse's eyes met his, intelligence burning in their stormy depths. Something passed between them—an understanding, a shared purpose.

"Ride hard," Perrin urged as Holland swung into the saddle, trying to ignore how his bruised ribs screamed in protest. The horse shifted beneath him, muscles coiled like lightning waiting to strike.

Holland gripped the reins. His body ached, his head throbbed, but none of that mattered now. He had a tournament to reach, friends to protect, and a score to settle with Faron Silvermane.

The Stormstrider seemed to sense his resolve. At Holland's command, it exploded forward, hooves thundering against the packed earth of the stable yard before finding the main road. Wind whipped through Holland's hair as they raced into the pre-dawn darkness, every stride eating up the distance between him and the capital.

Behind him, the boat dock and his rescuers faded into shadow. Ahead lay twenty miles of hard riding—and beyond that, a reckoning.

* * *

"Ten minutes until the tournament begins!" The arena staff's call echoed through the staging area.

Merric's boots wore a path in the stone floor. "Something's wrong. Holland never misses training, let alone a match." His hand kept finding his sword hilt, gripping and releasing as if

the familiar touch might conjure answers.

“He never returned to the dorm.” Thalen leaned against a pillar, his usual grin replaced by a tight frown. “Not after the baths last night.”

Elowen paced opposite Merric, their steps creating a nervous rhythm. “Layfus is searching the city. Holland’s favorite spots, the library, even that tavern he likes in the common quarters.” Her voice caught. “But nothing.”

“My Lord Redshield?” An arena attendant appeared, bobbing a quick bow. “They need you at the entrance tunnel.”

Merric’s jaw clenched. He reached into his pocket, fingers closing around cool silver. “Wait here,” he told the attendant. “Just... just a moment.”

The rose locket caught the morning light as he held it out to Elowen. “I saw you admiring it at the bazaar,” he said softly.

Elowen’s eyes widened. “Merric, you didn’t—”

“Let me.” His fingers trembled slightly as he fastened the chain around her neck, the silver rose settling just below her collarbone.

She turned, rising on her toes to press a kiss to his cheek. “For luck,” she whispered.

Color flooded Merric’s face. He touched the spot where her lips had been, warmth spreading through his chest despite the knot of worry in his gut.

“Make him pay,” Elowen’s voice hardened. “Whatever Faron’s done, make him answer for it.”

The entrance tunnel stretched before Merric like a throat of stone, the roar of the crowd a distant heartbeat. An old man approached, stooped but smiling, a wooden bucket swaying from his arm.

“Water, young lord?” His eyes crinkled kindly. “Good for the

nerves.”

Merric nodded, suddenly aware of how dry his throat had become. The water was cool and clean on his tongue, a momentary respite from the weight of worry.

“Ladies and gentlemen!” The announcer’s voice boomed overhead. “From the district of Helmsedge, Merric Redshield!”

Sunlight hit Merric like a physical force as he stepped onto the stage. The crowd’s cheers washed over him, but his mind kept circling back to Holland’s empty place in the staging area.

“And now,” the announcer’s voice bellowed, “by special decree of King Sylas Silvermane himself, the noble family of Lord Eldric Silvermane shall be granted match-side seating, to witness their heir’s triumph!”

The noble sections erupted in practiced applause. Lord Eldric swept into the special seating area as if he owned the very air, the morning sun catching the prominent mole on his cheek that he so despised. Lady Griselda followed with perfect poise, while Lily took her seat with barely concealed disdain, her fan snapping open with more force than necessary.

“Special treatment for a special defeat?” Merric called across the stage, but something felt wrong. His tongue seemed too thick for his mouth.

Faron’s smile spread like oil on water. “Such spirit, Merric. But then, having the King as your uncle does have its... advantages.” He adjusted a steel gauntlet at his waist, the metal catching the sun with an almost sinister gleam.

The world began to tilt. Merric blinked hard, trying to force his vision clear. His limbs felt distant, disconnected, as if he were trying to move through honey. He reached for his Enera, that well of power within—and found nothing but emptiness.

The gong crashed.

Faron moved like a striking snake, sword already singing through the air. Merric barely got his blade up in time. The impact sent tremors through arms that suddenly felt like lead. Each movement was a battle against his own body, every step a negotiation with legs that threatened to betray him.

“Something’s wrong with him,” Elowen’s voice carried from the staging area. “This isn’t right.”

Faron circled, casual as a cat toying with wounded prey. “Not feeling yourself, Merric?” Mock concern dripped from every word. “Was the water not to your liking?”

Ice settled in Merric’s gut as understanding dawned. “You... poisoned...”

“Poison?” Faron’s laugh cut like glass. “Such an ugly word. Let’s call it insurance—a lovely little herb called Fadewort. Drains Enera, weakens muscles...” His smile turned predatory. “Guarantees the right outcome.”

“You’re a despicable coward,” Merric spat, each word a struggle as the Fadewort tightened its grip. “You couldn’t win fairly if your life depended on it.”

“Why bother with fair?” Faron’s blade flashed, forcing Merric back another step. “When victory is so much sweeter guaranteed.”

Even as his body betrayed him, Merric’s spine remained steel. “Holland will destroy you.”

Something dark flickered in Faron’s eyes. He leaned close, voice dropping to a whisper meant for Merric alone. “Oh, you poor, naive fool. After I break you here, Holland won’t be around to face me. I’ve made quite sure of that.”

The words hit harder than any blade. Merric’s arms trembled as he parried another strike, the edge of the stage now inches from his heels. His vision swam, the world tilting like a ship in

a storm.

Faron sheathed his sword with theatrical flourish. The steel gauntlet gleamed as he slid it onto his hand, flexing each finger with deliberate slowness. His smile promised pain—not just defeat, but humiliation. Breaking. The kind of cruelty he'd shown Avelos.

In that moment, clarity cut through Merric's fog. He wouldn't give Faron the satisfaction. Wouldn't be another trophy in the Silvermane's collection of broken opponents.

With what strength remained, Merric stepped back. The crowd gasped as one as he tipped over the edge, denying Faron his moment of cruel triumph.

The impact drove the air from his lungs. Above, Faron's face twisted with thwarted rage, the gauntleted hand clenching into a useless fist. The nobles' applause, led by Lord Eldric's slow, deliberate claps, seemed to mock Merric's choice.

"Merric!" Elowen was beside him in an instant, her hands already glowing with healing magic. "What happened? What did he do?"

"Fadewort," he managed, the word barely a whisper. He felt the herb's poison like thorns in his veins, draining every drop of Enera.

Thalen waved urgently to the field medics. "You're a dirty cheater!" he shouted up at Faron. "You should be disqualified!"

Faron's laugh cut like a blade. "Cheater? Oh, you simple half-breed." He stretched lazily, every movement a display of casual cruelty. "There's no cheating when you're destined to win. Now run along and tend to your friend. I've got a championship to claim."

As the medics lifted Merric onto a stretcher, the announcer's voice boomed: "Ladies and gentlemen, your winner—Faron

Silvermane! We will take an hour's intermission before—”

“No need!” Faron’s voice carried across the arena. “I didn’t even break a sweat. Let’s give the people what they came for—their champion crowned. Begin the final now!”

He spread his arms wide, drinking in the nobles’ adoration. But his eyes, cold and calculating, kept darting to the staging area entrance. Waiting. Watching. As if he knew something the rest of them didn’t.

As if he knew exactly why Holland wasn’t there.

“The final match will begin now!” The announcer’s voice cracked with barely contained surprise. “To crown our Valadent Battle Royale Champion!”

A heartbeat of silence.

“And now, from the district of Coralhelm—Holland Blackthorn!”

The commoners’ response shook the very foundations of the arena. They stamped their feet, their cheers a thunderous wave of hope. But as seconds stretched into moments, that hope began to crack. The entrance tunnel remained empty, a dark mouth that refused to yield their champion.

Faron’s smile spread like poison. His eyes found his father’s in the special seating area, matching sneers reflecting between them like mirrors of cruelty.

“I knew it!” Faron’s voice cut through the growing whispers. “Holland Blackthorn is nothing but a coward! A voidborn who finally learned his place!”

The nobles’ laughter swelled, but a figure rose from the instructors’ section, cutting their mirth short. Professor Bolton stood like a storm about to break, his usual composure cracking under barely contained fury.

“Enough!” The word crashed through the arena like thunder.

Even Faron flinched, though he recovered quickly, offering a mocking bow. “Professor, surely you don’t take offense? My assessment merely reflects the natural order. Commoners lack the capacity for true greatness. Holland’s absence proves it.”

“You claim his blood determines his worth?” Bolton’s voice carried across the arena, steady and sharp as a blade. “I have trained nobles and commoners alike. In all that time, I have never seen anyone master the sword with such natural talent.” His eyes locked onto Faron. “Holland Blackthorn will be remembered as one of the greatest swordsmen in Thalassar’s history—not because of his birth, but because of his heart.”

Lord Eldric rose slowly, his prominent mole casting a shadow in the midday sun. “You expect us to believe,” his voice dripped contempt, “that a voidborn wretch—an orphan left to rot in the woods—will surpass the finest swordsmen in Thalassar?” He laughed, the sound like breaking glass. “That boy lived under my roof for fourteen years. He was nothing but a stray dog with delusions of nobility.”

The surrounding nobles joined his laughter, but Bolton didn’t waver. Professor Nealy’s presence beside him was an anchor, her quiet strength feeding his own.

“Lord Eldric,” Bolton’s voice cut through the mockery, “you speak of a boy who no longer exists. The man I know carries more nobility in his heart than I’ve seen in a lifetime at court. His skill isn’t just learned—it’s a gift, and one day all of Thalassar will witness it.” His eyes swept the crowd. “If you can’t see his potential, the blindness lies in you.”

“Fine words,” Eldric’s smile turned cruel. “Let him prove them. Call his name one last time. Let everyone see what becomes of commoners who reach beyond their station.”

The announcer trembled. “I-Introducing... Holland Black-

thorn of Coralhelm!”

Silence answered. Faron’s laughter rose to fill it, the nobles joining in like jackals at a kill. He raised his arms in mock triumph—

Thunder rolled through the entrance tunnel.

Hoofbeats, growing closer with each passing heartbeat. The sound built like an approaching storm until—

Holland burst from the shadows astride the magnificent horse. The Stormstrider’s coat rippled like smoke given form, its silver mane catching sunlight like liquid metal. Its eyes blazed that impossible storm-blue as it carried Holland in a lap around the arena, each stride eating up the ground with impossible grace.

The commoners exploded. Their hero had arrived.

Holland reined in the Stormstrider, every movement sending fresh waves of pain through his bruised body. His torn tunic told its own story of survival, but his eyes burned with something fiercer than pain. Across the arena, Faron’s smug grin cracked, replaced by naked rage.

Elowen and Thalen reached him first. While Thalen pressed Holland’s sword into his hands, Elowen’s fingers ghosted over the worst of his injuries, her healer’s eyes cataloging each bruise and cut.

“Where’s Merric?” Holland’s voice was raw but steady.

“The medical ward.” Elowen’s words carried poison. “Faron had him poisoned with Fadewort before the match. He never stood a chance.”

Holland’s grip tightened on his sword. Each step up to the combat stage felt like a victory, each breath a reminder that he’d survived Faron’s first attempt to break him. At the top, his eyes found Lily in the crowd. She sat rigid in her finery, but when

their gazes met, she touched her lips and blew him the smallest of kisses.

He caught it, pressed it to his heart, and turned to face her father.

Lord Eldric's sneer deepened. "Fortunate you escaped Stonehaven, boy. But you won't escape the beating Faron has planned."

"Nice chair, Lord Eldric." Holland's voice carried just enough bite to draw blood. "Pity it must bear the weight of your noble arse."

Laughter rippled through the commoner sections. Lord Eldric's face darkened, veins pulsing at his temple. "Your eyes must be failing, commoner. I am in prime health for a man of my years—though I wouldn't expect someone of your... origins to understand anything about fitness or intelligence."

The nobles tittered on cue, but Holland's smile only sharpened. "Oh, I wasn't referring to your age or belly, my lord." His eyes fixed on the prominent mark that had haunted Eldric for decades. "I meant that sizable mole on your face. Must be quite the burden to carry."

The commoners roared. Even Lily had to hide her smile behind her fan, shoulders shaking. Lord Eldric's face turned the color of fresh blood.

"Silence!" he bellowed, jabbing a trembling finger at Holland. "I'll have your head for this!"

"No." Faron's voice cut through the chaos like a blade. He stood mere feet away now, close enough for Holland to see the cold calculation in his eyes. "First, I'm going to break him. Just like I promised." His voice dropped, meant for Holland alone. "Then I'll destroy everyone he loves. The Freys, what's left of Merric—and when I return to Coralhelm, I'll destroy Carson

and Etty.”

The threat ignited something in Holland’s chest, burning hotter than any pain. “Enough talking.” He brought his sword up in a guard position, every muscle coiled despite his injuries. “Let’s settle this.”

They circled each other like wolves, steel gleaming in the midday sun. The crowd’s roar faded to a distant thunder as Holland focused on his opponent—on the way Faron’s weight shifted, on the subtle tells that betrayed his next move.

The gong crashed.

Faron’s hand snapped up, sending a barrage of stone projectiles hurtling through the air. Holland pressed forward through the assault, his movements precise despite his battered body. Each dodge, each deflection brought him closer to his target.

Faron snarled an incantation, and stone spikes erupted from the stage floor. Holland wove between them in a serpentine pattern, denying Faron a clean shot. Each step brought him closer, and Faron’s attacks grew wilder, more desperate.

Six massive rocks materialized, hurtling toward Holland with killing force. He dodged five, but the sixth crashed into his shield, the impact sending shockwaves up his arm. With no time to recover, Holland made a split-second choice. He hurled his shield at Faron like a discus.

The unexpected move forced Faron to dodge, creating the opening Holland needed. He closed the distance in three strides, and their swords met with a crash that sent sparks flying. Faron, never one to fight fair, kept launching stone projectiles with his free hand even as their blades danced.

Some found their mark. Pain exploded in Holland’s thigh as rock struck bone. Another slammed into his already bruised ribs. But Holland pressed through it, his strikes growing

sharper, more precise. For the first time, uncertainty flickered in Faron's eyes.

Holland feinted high, drawing Faron's blade up. In one fluid motion, he tilted his sword, creating a shower of sparks that scattered across Faron's face. As his opponent flinched, Holland's boot drove into his stomach, sending him sprawling.

Faron scrambled up, conjuring a stone wall between them. Before Holland could circle it, flames roared to life, forcing him back. Through the heat haze, Faron charged, their blades meeting again in a deadly dance.

But something had changed in Faron's eyes. The arrogance had been replaced by something darker, more desperate. His free hand went to his belt, drawing a hidden dagger. Smoke poured from his mouth, engulfing them both in thick mist.

Holland's instincts screamed a warning. Through the murk, he caught movement—Faron's shadow rushing forward. But it was a feint. A massive stone smashed into Holland's sword, and in that moment of impact, cold steel bit into his arm.

As the smoke cleared, Holland saw blood flowing freely from the cut. His vision swam, strength draining like water through fingers. The dagger had been poisoned.

"All weapons are meant to be enchanted!" Professor Bolton's voice cut through the arena. "How does Holland have an open wound?"

The commoners erupted into fury, but Lord Eldric rose, waving his hands dismissively. "This is combat! Wounds happen!"

"You may be a governor, Lord Eldric," Bolton's words cracked like thunder, "but I am a swordsman. I know a dagger's cut when I see one."

Holland swayed on his feet, the world tilting beneath him.

Each breath came harder than the last, the poison spreading like ice through his veins. But he raised his hand, and the arena fell silent.

“Fight me!” The challenge rang across the stage.

Faron’s smile turned predatory. Stone projectiles whistled through the air, and this time, Holland couldn’t dodge. The impacts drove him to his knees, blood spraying from his mouth. Again and again the rocks struck, yet each time Holland forced himself up, legs shaking but spine straight.

The metallic sound of Faron sliding on his steel gauntlet cut through the air. He approached slowly, savoring each step. The first punch snapped Holland’s head back, stars exploding behind his eyes. Faron grabbed his leather chestplate, holding him steady for a barrage of strikes that painted the stage with blood.

A final kick sent Holland sprawling. The referee moved to stop the match, but Faron’s voice stopped him cold. “Call this match, and you’ll regret it.”

Holland lay there, tasting copper, feeling consciousness slip away. *I’m finished*, he thought. *I can’t—*

A flutter of wings.

Through blurred vision, Holland caught a flash of crimson against the blue sky. Time seemed to slow as a small shape descended, each wingbeat leaving trails of golden light in the air. The cardinal—impossible as it seemed—landed softly on his outstretched finger.

“Berry?” The name came out as barely a whisper. “Is it really you?”

The bird’s head tilted, those familiar intelligent eyes meeting his. In them, Holland saw the same warmth he’d known in the Veilwood.

Faron's laugh cut through the moment. "Is that your pet, Holland?" He stalked closer, blade catching sunlight. "How pathetic. Dying men do cling to strange comforts."

Berry's feathers ruffled, and Holland felt heat emanating from the small body. Not the gentle warmth of a living creature, but something far more intense—like holding a piece of the sun itself.

"Let's see how useful your little bird is in a fight." Faron raised his sword.

Berry spread his wings.

The first flames appeared as delicate threads of gold, weaving through his feathers like embroidery made of light. Then they grew, cascading outward in waves of crimson and amber. The cardinal's form began to shift, each pulse of fire making him larger, more magnificent.

Wings of living flame stretched toward the sky, spanning half the arena. Feathers of gold and scarlet blazed with an inner light, each one a masterpiece of fire given form. Berry's tail fanned out in a display of brilliant flames, layers of burning feathers creating a corona of pure radiance. His proud head bore a crest of white-hot flame, and those same intelligent eyes now burned like captured stars.

Where once sat a simple cardinal now hovered a creature of legend—a Flamaris in all its glory.

The heat rolling off its form sent the crowd scrambling back in their seats. Even the nobles' section fell silent, all pretense of superiority burned away by sheer awe. Faron stumbled backward, his blade dropping to his side, face pale with terror.

The Flamaris let out a cry that shook the very foundations of the colosseum—not the small chirp of a cardinal, but a song of fire itself, ancient and powerful. It circled once overhead, its

massive form casting the arena in golden shadow, before diving toward Holland in a streak of brilliant flame.

Fire engulfed Holland, but there was no pain. The flames wrapped around him like a lover's embrace, warm and familiar. Each tongue of fire that touched his skin mended flesh and restored strength. His cuts sealed themselves, bruises faded to nothing, and the poison burning through his veins evaporated like morning dew.

But the healing was only the beginning.

As the flames danced across his body, Holland felt something awaken deep within him. The emptiness he'd known his whole life—the void where Enera should have been—suddenly filled with raw power. It was as if the flames had kindled a spark that had always been there, waiting to ignite.

Then he heard it—not with his ears, but in his very soul. A name, ancient and powerful: *Aerithor*. The cardinal he'd known as Berry revealed his true identity, and in that moment of recognition, their souls intertwined. The Harmony Bond formed between them, and Aerithor's magnificent form dissolved into pure flame, flowing into Holland like liquid sunlight.

Two consciousnesses merged into one—Holland's determination and heart mixing with Aerithor's ancient power and wisdom. Yet beneath the majesty of the Flamaris, Holland could still feel that same playful warmth he'd known in the Veilwood, now a permanent part of his own soul.

When the flames finally receded, Holland stood transformed. His eyes flickered with literal flame—not just reflection, but actual fire burning behind his irises. Power thrummed through his veins, making the very air around him shimmer with heat. He could feel Aerithor's presence within him, their shared strength ready to be unleashed.

Faron, who had watched the spectacle with mounting horror, found his voice. “No one can survive that,” he whispered, more to himself than anyone else.

Holland raised his hands, and for the first time in his life, he felt the true weight of Enera answering his call. Fire erupted from his palms, not wild and uncontrolled, but precise and purposeful. Within him, Aerithor’s consciousness guided his movements, centuries of knowledge flowing through their shared bond. The flames danced around him in intricate patterns, responding to his will as naturally as breathing.

Faron’s confidence shattered. He unleashed everything in his arsenal—fireballs, stone projectiles, incendiary arrows—hurling them in a desperate barrage. But Holland moved through the chaos untouched, each attack dissipating before it could reach him, consumed by the sheer force of his burning Enera.

Their eyes met across the arena, and something in Holland’s gaze made Faron’s face contort with rage. It wasn’t hatred or anger he saw reflected there—it was pity.

“How dare you look at me like that!” Faron shrieked, his voice cracking. “Nobody pities me!” His face twisted as he charged forward, sword drawn.

Holland brought his hands together, and through their bond, Aerithor showed him something that made his breath catch—the art of calling lightning. Arcs of electricity crackled between his fingers, a dazzling display of power that stunned the crowd into silence. Lightning—an element reserved for only the most powerful fire mage masters—danced at his command.

Holland raised his hand, a bolt of lightning coiled at his fingertip. With perfect clarity, he understood what Aerithor had known all along—this power wasn’t meant for vengeance

or glory. It was meant to protect, to defend, to bring light to darkness.

The lightning struck the ground just in front of Faron with a deafening crack. The force of the blast threw him from the combat stage, sending him sprawling into the dirt below. For a moment, the arena was frozen in shock, the air thick with the scent of fire and possibility.

The arena held its breath.

Then the commoners' voices rose as one, a wall of sound that shook dust from the rafters. Their cheers crashed over the colosseum like a tidal wave, drowning out everything else. Boots stamped stone in thunderous rhythm. Hands reached toward the sky as if trying to touch greatness.

Holland's legs gave out. He hit his knees hard, lungs burning, heart threatening to burst. Inside him, Aerithor's warmth pulsed in time with the crowd's roar. They had done it. Together.

"Holland!"

Thalen and Elowen crashed into him from both sides, nearly bowling him over. Elowen's tears soaked his shoulder while Thalen's laughter rang in his ears. Above them, red roses rained down from the commoner sections, petals catching sunlight like drops of blood.

The nobles sat rigid in their seats, faces pale. They had watched a commoner—a voidborn—channel lightning itself. Their whispers carried edge of fear rather than contempt now.

Dean Branok's steady footsteps crossed the stage. His face held something Holland had never seen before—pride without reservation. The commoners pressed forward, spilling onto the arena floor despite the guards' attempts to hold them back. They reached for Holland as if touching him might transfer

some of his fire to them.

“It is my great honor,” Branok’s voice rolled across the arena, “to crown this year’s Valadent Battle Royale champion—Holland Blackthorn!”

The medal settled around Holland’s neck, heavy with more than just gold. The crowd’s chant built again: “Speech! Speech!”

Holland raised his hands, and silence fell like snow. His heart hammered against his ribs, but when he spoke, his voice carried to every corner of the colosseum.

“My friends.” The words came from somewhere deeper than his throat. “This isn’t about winning a tournament. This is about hope.”

The crowd leaned forward as one, hanging on each word.

“Hope isn’t just a dream.” Holland touched the spot where Aerithor’s warmth lived in his chest. “It’s a fire. It burns in all of us, even when we can’t see the flame. It carried me through the darkest moments. Through every person who said I couldn’t. Through every time I wanted to give up.”

His eyes found faces in the crowd—commoners who had bet their savings on him, nobles who had sneered at his presence, friends who had never stopped believing.

“They tried to extinguish that fire. But hope, real hope, can’t be smothered. It grows stronger in darkness. It feeds on every attempt to stamp it out. And when it finally blazes...” He lifted his hand, letting a small flame dance across his fingers. “It changes everything.”

The arena held its breath, transfixed.

“Remember this day. Not because I won, but because we proved something together. We proved that hope isn’t just a word. It’s a force that can reshape the world. And it lives in every one of you.”

The silence broke like a fever. The crowd's response shook the very foundations of the colosseum, their voices carrying beyond the arena walls, beyond the city itself. This wasn't just applause—it was the sound of change beginning.

For Holland, standing amid that storm of sound and feeling Aerithor's warmth pulse in time with his heart, it felt like the first ray of dawn breaking through an endless night.

* * *

Holland sat alone in the staging area, his fingers tracing skin that should have been bruised. The Harmony Bond still hummed through him like a struck bell, Aerithor's warmth a constant presence in his chest. Everything felt sharper, clearer—as if he'd spent his whole life seeing through clouded glass until now.

"There's our champion!" Thalen's voice broke through his reverie. He and Elowen approached, their faces bright with pride.

"Incredible doesn't begin to cover it," Elowen added, her healer's eyes checking him over despite the obvious lack of injuries. "Though I'd like to know how you're walking around without a single bruise."

Holland smiled, the warmth in his chest expanding. "How's Merric?"

"Resting, but in good spirits." Thalen dropped onto the bench beside him. "Won't shut up about your match, actually. Says he knew you'd win all along."

Elowen's expression turned serious. "Holland, that cut Faron gave you—it was Fadewort, wasn't it? The same poison he used on Merric."

"Like having my strength pulled out through my veins,"

Holland confirmed. "If it hadn't been for Berry..." He paused, the name feeling wrong now. "No, not Berry. Aerithor. The Flamaris I'd been searching for was right there all along, watching, waiting."

Before Elowen could respond, an arena staffer appeared. "Mr. Blackthorn? You have a visitor."

Lily stepped around the corner, and Holland's heart stopped. She wore blue, the color of summer skies, and her smile outshone the tournament's golden medal.

Thalen grabbed Elowen's arm. "And that's our cue to leave. Try not to let your victory go *completely* to your head, champion."

The moment they were alone, Lily flew into his arms. Holland held her close, breathing in the familiar scent of jasmine in her hair. For a heartbeat, everything else fell away—the tournament, the politics, the danger. There was only this.

"I've missed you," she whispered against his chest.

"Each day felt like a year," he murmured back.

She pulled away just enough to meet his eyes, pride warring with worry on her face. "I can't stay long. Father will notice if I'm gone too long, but I had to see you." Her voice dropped. "Holland, he's furious. I overheard him planning—"

"What is it?" The joy of reunion gave way to concern at her tone.

"He means to dismiss Etty and Carson. To make sure no noble house in Thalassar will hire them." Her hands tightened on his arms. "He wants to destroy them for raising you."

Ice formed in Holland's stomach. The two people who had given him everything, who had loved him when no one else would—they didn't deserve this.

"I won't let it happen," Lily's voice hardened with determi-

nation. "I'll warn them, help them if needed. Father may have power, but he doesn't control everything."

Holland took her hands in his, trembling slightly. Everything he'd wanted to say for months pressed against his chest, demanding release. Lily saw the struggle in his eyes.

"Say what's in your heart, Holly," she said softly.

Holland's heart hammered against his ribs. "When I graduate, I'll be a citizen." The words tumbled out, clumsy but earnest. "That means... I mean, there are laws about citizens and noblewomen..."

Lily's lips curved into a knowing smile. "Are you trying to ask me something, Holly?"

He took a shaking breath. All his eloquent speeches from the tournament meant nothing now—he could barely string two words together. "I know it won't be easy. The prize money isn't enough—not yet. But I'll save every auren I can. Work harder than anyone. And when I have enough..."

His fingers tightened around hers. "Lily Silvermane, when I become a citizen... will you marry me? Will you wait until I can give you the life you deserve?"

She answered with a kiss that tasted of sunlight and promise. When they finally broke apart, her eyes sparkled with tears and laughter. "Was that clear enough, or do you need me to say it?"

"I wouldn't mind hearing it," Holland grinned, his heart soaring.

"Yes, Holly." She pressed her forehead to his. "I'll wait as long as it takes. We've already waited this long, haven't we?"

He lifted her off her feet, spinning them both in a circle of pure joy. Their laughter echoed off the stone walls, a melody of hope and defiance. When he set her down, she grabbed his collar and pulled him close.

“Just promise me one thing,” she whispered. “Promise you won’t give up, no matter how long it takes. Promise you’ll keep fighting for us.”

“I swear it.” The words carried the weight of an oath. “I’ll save every coin, work every moment I can. And one day, I’ll give you a home where you can be free. Where we can both be who we really are.”

She kissed him once more, soft and lingering, before stepping back. “I have to go. Father will be looking for me.” Her smile turned mischievous. “Though he might be distracted—I thought that awful mole would pop right off his face when you won.”

Holland laughed, but sobered quickly. “Be careful.”

“Always am.” She smoothed her dress, composing herself back into the perfect noble daughter. Only her eyes betrayed the fire beneath. “Stay safe, Holly.”

He watched her go, his heart both fuller and heavier than before. Inside him, Aerithor’s warmth flickered like a candle flame, as if sharing his mix of joy and concern.

* * *

The academy corridors erupted as Holland walked through them. Students who’d barely acknowledged him before now pressed close, reaching to touch his shoulder, calling his name. Their cheers echoed off stone walls that had once felt so cold and unwelcoming.

“Make way for our resident hero!” Layfus’s familiar drawl cut through the chaos. He leaned against a pillar, pushing his glasses up his nose with theatrical precision. “The Champion of Dramatic Entrances requires space for his ego.”

Holland grinned, shoving through the crowd to embrace his friend. “Says the man who can’t enter a room without announcing himself.”

“I merely appreciate the art of a proper entrance.” Layfus’s smile softened into something more genuine. “But in all seriousness—you were incredible out there.”

“Thanks.” Holland squeezed his friend’s shoulder. “For everything.”

“Save the sentiment. Father Caelan and Dean Branok want to see you.” Layfus’s eyes gleamed with that knowing look Holland had come to recognize. “Seems our illustrious leaders have some matters to discuss with their new champion.”

The familiar scent of tobacco greeted them in Dean Branok’s study. Both he and Father Caelan sat in worn leather chairs, pipe smoke curling toward the ceiling like lazy spirits. The Dean’s dark blue robes seemed to shimmer in the lamplight, their golden lattice patterns catching each flicker of flame.

“Ah, Holland.” Branok’s deep voice filled the room. “What we witnessed today will be remembered in the academy’s history. A Harmony Bond, formed in the heart of battle.” He tapped his pipe against a crystal ash tray. “Unprecedented.”

Father Caelan leaned forward, his eyes sharp behind curling smoke. “You’ve come far from that boy in Krestfell.”

“The prize money,” Branok continued, “fifteen thousand aurens. Your share of the tournament’s earnings.” He paused, studying Holland’s reaction. “To the nobles, it’s a pittance. To someone like you—”

“Life-changing,” Holland finished quietly, mind already racing with calculations. Not enough for everything he dreamed of, but a start. A foundation.

Father Caelan’s expression grew grave. “But wealth isn’t

the only thing you've won today, Holland. What you did in that arena—a commoner bonding with a Flamaris—will draw attention. Not all of it welcome.”

“The prophecy,” Holland said, the word bitter on his tongue. “Dean Branok knows about it too, doesn't he?”

“He's a Lorekeeper, like myself.” Father Caelan's voice softened. “We've watched over you from the beginning.”

“And do you believe it?” Holland couldn't keep the edge from his voice. “That I'm some prophesied king?”

Branok's pipe stopped halfway to his lips. “At first? No. But after today...” He gestured to the window, where the last light of sunset painted the sky in flames. “How long can you deny what's right in front of you?”

“With respect, Dean Branok, I'm not looking to fulfill any prophecy.” Holland stood, his voice firm but respectful. “I'm just trying to survive. To protect the people I care about. If that makes me part of some grand destiny, so be it. But I won't let anyone else decide my path.”

Father Caelan and Dean Branok exchanged glances, something unspoken passing between them.

“Get some rest, Holland,” Branok said finally. “You've earned it.”

The corridors were quieter now, most students having retired to their rooms. Holland's footsteps echoed off stone walls as he made his way back to the dormitory wing. The torchlight cast long shadows, and something in the air made the hair on his neck rise.

Movement. From both ends of the hall.

Men emerged from the shadows, steel glinting in their hands. Hired blades, their eyes cold and empty. They parted like water around a stone as Lord Eldric stepped through their ranks, his

prominent mole catching torchlight.

“You’ve made a grave error, boy.” Eldric’s voice dripped malice. “Humiliating my family before my brother the king—before all of Valoria.”

Holland remained still, though inside him, Aerithor’s warmth flared like a stoked furnace. The fire spirit’s presence steadied him, turning what would have once been terror into calm resolve.

“When I return to Krestfell,” Eldric continued, savoring each word, “I will throw your precious ‘parents’ into the streets. They’ll find no work, no shelter. And you’ll know their suffering was your doing.”

Holland turned away, facing one of the tall windows. Moonlight spilled across the courtyard below, painting everything in silver. The mercenaries shifted uneasily at his silence.

“I used to fear you,” Holland said softly, still gazing out the window. “For years, I believed your cruelty was power. That fear meant strength.” He turned, and lightning crackled in his eyes. “I was wrong.”

Fire erupted between Eldric and his men, a wall of living flame that sent the mercenaries scrambling backward. Eldric found himself trapped, pressed against cold stone as Holland advanced.

“You made a mistake coming here tonight.” Lightning danced between Holland’s fingers as he slammed his palm against the wall beside Eldric’s head. “After what you saw in that arena, you should have known better.”

“I’ve changed my mind,” Holland said, his voice barely above a whisper. The crackling electricity cast strange shadows across Eldric’s face, highlighting the fear in his eyes. “I won’t forget what you’ve done. And I certainly won’t forgive.”

Eldric pressed himself harder against the wall, his chest heaving with shallow breaths. The mole on his cheek seemed to pulse with each terrified heartbeat.

“If you so much as *touch* my family,” Holland continued, letting a thread of Aerithor’s fire weave between his fingers, “if I hear even a whisper of mistreatment, I will come for you. And when I do, there won’t be a place in this world where you can hide.”

The electricity intensified, making Eldric’s fine hair stand on end. “I’ve learned from you, *my lord*. I know exactly how to burn someone’s world to ash.”

Eldric’s eyes rolled back, and he slumped to the floor in a dead faint. His mercenaries rushed forward, but none dared cross the dying flames to reach Holland.

Without another word, Holland turned and walked away, leaving Lord Eldric crumpled on the cold stone floor. Inside him, Aerithor’s warmth pulsed with approval.

The corridor ahead stretched long and dark, broken only by pools of torchlight. Each step took Holland further from the unconscious noble, but the weight of what he’d done—what he’d threatened—settled heavy on his shoulders. He’d meant every word, and that knowledge should have troubled him more than it did.

Holland’s footsteps echoed off stone walls as he made his way toward the dormitory wing. The adrenaline of the confrontation began to fade, leaving him drained but oddly peaceful. Then, ahead in the shadows, he spotted a familiar figure slumped against the wall.

Hubert pushed his glasses up with trembling fingers, his face a mask of misery. When he saw Holland, he fell to his knees.

“I’m so sorry, Holland!” Hubert’s voice cracked, tears streaming down his face. “I betrayed you, and I don’t deserve your

mercy or forgiveness. I wanted to tell you, but Faron... Faron threatened everything."

Holland stared down at his former friend, feeling the weight of both their burdens. The torchlight caught Hubert's glasses, hiding his eyes behind reflected flame. But his shoulders shook with each sob, his whole body seeming to collapse in on itself.

Without a word, Holland knelt and pulled the trembling boy into an embrace. Hubert went rigid with shock, then broke completely, clutching Holland's tunic as if it were the only thing keeping him from drowning.

"I know, Hubert," Holland said softly, his voice steady. "Faron told me everything. He used you, held you hostage with fear." He pulled back just enough to meet Hubert's tear-stained gaze. "I'm sorry you felt so alone. But you don't have to carry this anymore. I forgive you."

Hubert shook his head violently, fresh tears spilling. "How can you? After what I did—"

"Because I understand." Holland's grip on Hubert's shoulders tightened. "I know what it's like to live under someone's control. To have everything you care about threatened." He thought of Carson and Ety, of all the years under Eldric's thumb. "You didn't have a choice. You're my friend, Hubert. And I forgive you."

Something seemed to break in the air between them, like a thread of tension finally snapping. Hubert's sobs quieted to shaky breaths, and Holland felt a strange lightness in his own chest. Sometimes forgiveness freed both the forgiven and the forgiver.

Holland walked Hubert back to his room, making sure his friend was steady before continuing on.

When he reached his own room, he found Thalen sprawled

across his bed, snoring softly. Merric lay propped against a mountain of pillows, fighting to keep his eyes open.

“Congratulations, Holland,” Merric said, his voice raspy but warm. “I heard you were incredible out there.”

Holland pulled a chair beside Merric’s bed, sinking into it with a weary sigh. “Thanks. How are you feeling?”

“Doctors say I’ll be fine in a few days.” Merric’s smile was faint but genuine. “Elowen worked wonders, though I’m still weak. Fadewort does a number on you.”

“Get some rest,” Holland said, patting his friend’s shoulder. “You’ve been through enough.”

Merric nodded, already drifting off. “Knowing you won makes it easier.”

After Merric’s breathing evened out into sleep, Holland crossed to his wardrobe. Inside, buried beneath folded clothes, lay a simple leather bag. He pulled out the key Thalius had given him, its metal catching the moonlight streaming through their window.

That old man, Holland thought, turning the key over in his hands. *If he could see me now, I wonder what he’d say*. He could almost hear Thalius’s cryptic chuckle, imagine the knowing gleam in those ancient eyes. Somehow, the hermit had seen something in Holland long before anyone else had.

He tucked the key back into its hiding place, changed for bed, and finally let his exhausted body rest.

But sleep brought no peace.

In his dream, Holland stood at the center of the Silvermane Colosseum, but not as he knew it. The towering arches stretched impossibly high, their peaks lost in a star-filled sky that seemed closer than it should be. Moonlight painted the empty arena in shades of silver and shadow, and the air held an

otherworldly stillness.

“Your battles are not over, Holland.”

The voice came from everywhere and nowhere, soft yet clear as crystal. Holland turned, searching, but saw only endless rows of empty seats stretching into darkness.

“Who are you?” His voice echoed strangely in the vast space. “What do you want?”

“The time to reveal myself is not yet here.” The voice seemed to drift on the night air. “But you must find the Arbiter.”

“The Arbiter?” Holland felt the word resonate in his chest, as if it held power he didn’t understand. “What is that? Where do I find it?”

Warmth bloomed beneath his ribs—not Aerithor’s familiar fire, but something different. Something ancient. A red essence pulsed beneath his skin, growing brighter with each heartbeat until it rose from his chest like mist catching flame.

Above him, the essence took shape against the star-filled sky. A majestic lion materialized, its form crafted from living constellations. Great wings of starfire stretched across the heavens, and its eyes held the weight of ages. The sight filled Holland with awe and terror in equal measure, and something deep within him recognized this being, though he couldn’t understand how.

“Find the Arbiter,” the voice insisted, closer now, almost at his ear. “He is waiting for you.”

Holland tried to turn, to catch even a glimpse of the speaker, but—

He jerked awake in his bed, sheets tangled around him, heart hammering against his ribs. Sweat cooled on his skin as the dream’s images began to fade, but two things remained crystal clear: the celestial lion’s burning gaze, and the word that seemed

to echo in his very bones.

Arbiter.

To Be Continued...



About the Author

Jake SanSoucie is a passionate new author who finds joy in the art of storytelling. When he's not immersed in writing, you'll often find him behind the camera, capturing the world through photography and videography. For the past eleven years, he has been supported by his wonderful wife, Miracle, who shares and encourages his creative pursuits. Jake's diverse interests and dedicated support system inspire his journey as a writer, bringing fresh and captivating narratives to life.

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