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Legends of Zamour

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Miranda Hall Senior Project
Chapters and Excerpts from Part 1 of a Novel
May 4, 2022

Legends of Zamour

| Book I: Benira |

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PART 1

Prologue

The falcon was the first thing the man saw. It circled the divine spires of Nalim, carried along by a current of air. He saw it despite the fact that he was sitting in his small, windowless room. Knew it was real because something greater than himself had told him it was. Something that had forever lived as a presence within.

Peacefully, the falcon descended down into Temos, Nalim's largest city, weaving in and out of colonettes, its winged form reflected on arched glass windows. For a leisurely while it drifted through the sea of stone, finally coming to rest on the edge of a high bridge with a flutter of its wings, taloned feet clutching ornate molding as it overlooked the city.

The man opened his eyes. He could still see the bird, even as he looked at the white linen of his bedsheets and the cream fleece of his carpet and the way his candle dripped wax onto his desk, burning lower and lower. He couldn't explain how he was able to perceive them simultaneously in any way other than that existence was not singular or linear or definitive, at least not for him.

From its perch, the falcon watched a group of children playing in the cobbled streets. A little girl was showing the others how she could lift a boulder twice her size over her head. Seeing the way her friends clapped and squealed, one of the boys demanded that it was his turn and made her set the boulder down. When she did, he began to conjure small orange flames between his palms. He twisted them into various shapes, heeding his peers' enthusiastic requests to make figures of diamonds or flowers or fish.

The falcon's gaze flitted to a seaside ravine. A woman was kneeling on the yellow grass in an effort to soothe a terrified goat from the cliff's edge. The goat, which had been trembling and about to fall, stilled upon hearing her words of incantation. In a trance, it crept forward ever so slowly, making its way into her open arms.

West of the ravine, the movement of a rat scurrying down a small alleyway. The falcon cocked its head to the side as though contemplating whether or not to capture the prey. As the rodent disappeared around the corner, it seemed to decide that it was content to let it be.

Then, with the suddenness of snapping string, the man's vision shifted, and he was following the rat as it scampered down the backstreets of the city. On tiny little legs it ran, leaving behind the polished gleaming towers and marble statues for dirtied streets where small stone buildings were stacked too closely together.

One such street was littered with dried orange peels and muddy rainwater and the stench of sweat. Another group of children stood gathered together, three boys with broad shoulders and rough knuckles

surrounding a much smaller girl. The rat scurried past them, but the man stayed with the adolescents, watching the unpleasant scene unfold.

The boys advanced, cursing and spitting at the girl. She trembled as she wiped a glob of the largest's saliva from her cheek. Her eyes and nose ran with tears and mucus. She begged them to stop, but it was no use. She hadn't brewed them the tonics they had demanded. She had been born with the ability to, as a Sorcerer of the Healer class. An ability that they, all born Common, would never have. The least she could do was make some for them. Through her sobs, the girl tried to explain that she had not yet learned how to prepare the ones they wanted, vowed that as soon as she did she would make them in plenty. But the Common boys were too furious to be interested in pleas for forgiveness. Backing her into the wall, one of them swung at her face, fist hitting her nose with a sickening crunch.

The man did not want to see this. He closed his eyes and tried to think of the woman and the goat instead, attempted to control his vision as he had learned to. But this sight was too strong for the presence inside of him to let go of. He couldn't stop seeing the girl's smashed nose, couldn't do anything but watch as the boys punched her until their rough knuckles were bloody and her bones were broken.

Capacity for controlled thought dwindling, the man made the mistake of opening his eyes once more. As soon as he did, he felt a buzzing in his brain, saw the blurring of the physical world around him. He cursed. The obtrusive signs of time distortion. Any attempts at controlling his visions were futile once augments in chronology began. All he could do was tense his body in preparation for what was about to come.

Rapidly, his room obscured, and he saw hundreds of Common children of the past just like the rough-knuckled boys, downing tonics to forget that they were freezing and starving in the cold. Bitterness and resentment made their faces grow sallow and grotesque as they aged into obscurity. In layers of the future, thousands of Sorcerers were locked in dark cells, some too young to even fit their shackles. They had been damned from birth, placed there for crimes they did not commit.

The man thought he knew the extent of cyclical violence these images led to. On the face of everyone who had ever and would ever wrong a Sorcerer, he saw what his father had done to his mother. He watched humans of all kinds beat and bruise and kill, no amount of interference or attempt at rapprochement enough to stop it. But in the past, this had been where his apparitions ended.

Today, he saw the moment two hundred years ago when Nalim declared war on Benira. The King's battle cry echoed through castle chambers, its consequence felt by every soul in the cavernous city. Countless bloodied swords and spears accompanied the invasion of Benira's border. Hoards of warriors fell alongside their fellow men and horses, flesh and sinew strewn across the land they lay dying. The lush green of Benira was painted red, and in response the nation sent colored fire over Nalim, condensed globes of orange and scarlet and cobalt that incinerated worlds upon impact.

There was no calm before the emergence of similar visions four hundred years in the future, when Benira declared war on Erose. Then further forward Erose on Copen, and further backwards Copen and

Benira and Fanin on Nalim and Erosee and Tague. The violence grew increasingly accelerated and inseparable. All six nations were forever locked in bloodshed.

The man could no longer see any of the material space he occupied. His vision was drowning in fire as Nalim was repeatedly set ablaze, buildings crumbling to ruin and crushing the people beneath. Cities shook. Bodies were impaled and burned up in smoke, mourners unable to distinguish one corpse from another.

It had never been like this before. He needed to get out, to remember where he was. What would ground him? Anything. Anything. His chair was uneven, the palms of his hands were flat against his desk, he could smell the burning candle wax, and someone had shot an arrow through a boy's eye.

The boy crumbled and fell through the soil of each nation, landing at last in the arms of his mother. She clutched him tightly, wailing desperate pleas for him to return. But he wouldn't. Wrenched by invisible force from her grasp, he fell further and further and collapsed onto a sea of bodies, dead, naked, and piled high as mountains, each one weeping in mortem. The boy wept too, through the arrow in his eye socket, for all he had done and lost.

It wouldn't end, it would never end, and the man was sure he too would become one of these weeping bodies, buried and forgotten under countless others. How could he make them remember who he was?

His name. His name. Blindly reaching for a pen, he scrawled it frantically on his open book over and over again. He could feel the ink staining his palm and fingers as he scratched nib against parchment and corpses decayed under stone rubble. The falcon was on the ground, wings afire. All he could see were infinite falcons, flightless and dying and dead. What would have happened if they had been vigilant and alert? If they had found prey before becoming it?

His name.

What was his name?

Chapter 1 (Ansel)

When the first Prophet died and his body was laid to rest in the soil of his homeland, that was when the Feral first emerged. Or so the legend went. As the Prophet's mangled form decayed under six feet of dirt, his bones became their bones, and his organs their organs. The depravity in his soul made their blood black and their eyes savage and their nature demonic, and because he was no longer alive, neither were they. They were simply a collection of the worst parts of his being.

But though it was said that Feral were not truly alive, they could be killed. They had to be. If they were not struck and slain and burned by the thousands in dedicated incinerators, all of the nations, even Tague, with its island region existing primarily beneath the surface of the sea, would have been laid to waste. The only intent of a Feral, if a Feral could be said to have intent, was destruction.

Killing them wasn't an easy task. Even the smallest were birthed from the ground at least four times the mass of a fully grown man. Learning how to destroy such a specimen involved years of training. On the occasions that Ansel Burnett did succeed at slashing his sword through their necks, he would always mouth a silent apology under his breath as he withdrew his weapon and watched black ink coat the blade.

He did this though he knew that nobody viewed them as living, and though he knew that they were not creatures one was supposed to feel sorry for. Keeping the sentiment to himself prevented him from being mocked, and more importantly, prevented his instructors from thinking that he didn't have what it took to become a warrior. If they withdrew him from the program, it would be the end of his future.

He watched Instructor Renhold ready one of the dozen iron barred crates containing a single captured Feral. It was a Sunday afternoon and the early summer sun beat down on the sanctioned training grounds, illuminating crowns of surrounding trees and spotting the enclosed ring of dirt with light. The day would have felt peaceful and lazy, had it not been for the growls emanating from the shaking cage.

Ansel was seated in the stands high above the grounds, but soon he would be down on the field, readying himself to do just what Cora Gardner was about to. She stepped up to the marked patch of dirt a few feet away from the crate, narrowed eyes intent as she clutched her sword in her hand. Unlike Ansel, she had no shield.

"Ready?" Instructor Renhold shouted.

Cora flexed her broad shoulders and positioned herself. "Yes sir."

Instructor Renhold threw open the heavy latch that had been keeping the creature inside. A second of stillness transpired before the wooden door flew open and a large ebony mass came bounding out.

No matter how often you encountered them, seeing a Feral up close was always a slight shock. Their size, their snarling, rabid teeth, their mangled black fur and still darker lifeless eyes, were enough to induce fear. But even more disturbing was the way they changed form as they moved, bones cracking and mutating

as they altered between charging on all fours and standing at full height. From a bestial animal to something that could almost be human.

Ansel and the others leaned forward apprehensively. A Feral had never killed anyone during training before, at least not in this program, but injuries were more than common. Unlike sparring against another peer, there was no controlling a Feral. The only lifeline were the instructors, who stood ready to intervene the moment the situation went south. But Cora didn't look like she would need help.

She was skilled, easily more skilled than Ansel was, but then, her father was one of the most renowned Guardians in the nation. It wasn't surprising that she was aimed to be a warrior of a similar caliber. Rolling, striking, and ducking with ease, the fight ended when the Feral bolted at her and she flipped above it to evade the attack, landing on its back and bringing her sword down into its flesh. She kept the weapon secured firmly inside of its body as it twitched and stilled beneath her, bleeding out onto the ground. A roar of applause emerged from the stands.

Cora grinned, removing her blade. Her look of sheer satisfaction made Ansel smile.

"Well done Gardner," Instructor Renhold said as two of the other attendants hauled the body of the Feral back into the crate and lifted it onto a large cart. "Keep at it and you might rival your father one day."

Cora's grin widened. "Thank you sir."

On the bench in front of Ansel, Raymond Haag shook his long red hair. "Please," he sneered loudly, "Her daddy's the only reason she even has a chance at Bellalux."

Ansel rolled his eyes at the comment, but now wasn't the time to rise to the bait. Raymond was always obnoxious, and as Ansel was the only one who ever really bothered to stand up to him, he was the one Raymond enjoyed tormenting the most. Though Ansel was glad that he could keep his peers from having to bear the brunt of Raymond's provocations, it didn't mean that the physical and verbal affronts were pleasant.

Each time they had training, Raymond would sit nearby and try to get a rise out of him. Sometimes it worked, but not today. Not when he had more important things to focus on.

So when Raymond faced him grinning maliciously and said "Then again, they must be willing to consider anyone since you're here Burnett," Ansel ignored him. Raymond tried again. "I think a tinte would probably have a better chance in going head to head with a Feral, don't you?" Ansel didn't say anything. Raymond rolled his eyes and turned back around. "Fine, we'll let your performance speak for itself."

With Raymond's bout immediately prior to Ansel's, Ansel knew that he would be watching in a state of arrogant victory.

The matches went on. Almost all of the subsequent students would have died in their bouts had the instructors not stepped in. Leon Posner was the first after Cora to succeed, killing his Feral within seconds.

Being born a Brawler was an immensely unfair advantage; nobody else in the class had the ability to physically lift the creature and slam it into the ground with the force of a train car. But following his triumph, Ansel's classmate Edgar was badly injured. Rendered incapacitated, he was carried away for medical attention just before Raymond was called to the field.

He swaggered down with his usual hubris, tying his hair back into a ponytail and readying his set of knives. When Instructor Renhold opened the door to the fresh Feral's cage and it charged, Raymond leapt to the side, rolled, and flung two of his knives at its neck with remarkable speed. The blades landed with precision, and though they didn't cripple the creature, they did create enough pain to distract it. As it howled, Raymond darted under its belly and with another knife struck it over and over again, currents of black spouting until the Feral fell over on its side. Despite the fact that it was very clearly dead, Raymond continued stabbing. He only stopped when Instructor Renhold called the match.

"Okay Haag, that'll do," he said, while everyone clapped.

Though his execution was disturbing, Ansel did have to admire Raymond's skill. His success took only seconds longer than Leon's. To be that comparable to a Sorcerer whose field was situated in physical fighting would be something worthy of being respected, if Raymond bothered to show the slightest bit of respect toward anybody else.

"Good luck," he said to Ansel, voice dripping with sarcasm as he returned to his spot in the stands and Instructor Renhold called out, "Ansel Burnett!"

Ansel stood, one hand clutching his shield and the other resting on the hilt of the sword sheathed at his side. Heart pounding in his throat, he began the walk down the wooden stairs. Rays of sunlight beamed into his eyes when he emerged on the grounds, a glaring beacon he had to squint to see through. As his vision adjusted he saw the two attendants, Caleb and Jasmine, readying his cage. It might have been his imagination, but he thought that his crate shook more violently than the ones before it had.

He unsheathed his blade, and stepping up to the mark he readied into his starting position, shield in front of him and sword pulled back. Instructor Renhold approached the cage. "Ready?"

Ansel took a deep breath, attempting to clear his mind of all thought. Then he nodded, and the latch to the cage was flung open.

The response from the Feral was immediate. It came crashing through the door and bolted directly toward Ansel. Ansel fell into a roll and came up at its side. He tried to stab his sword between the creature's ribs but it was too quick, turning on him with snapping jaws. Ansel brought his shield up just in time to prevent them tearing into him, fell onto his stomach, and sliced at its legs. The Feral simply stood on its hindquarters and leapt over him.

Ansel retreated several steps. When the beast charged again he tried to do what Cora had done, flipping over it with the intent of bringing his sword into its back, but it understood what he was attempting

and changed direction. As it did, it shifted its bones and stood upright to ensure Ansel wouldn't be able to attempt the maneuver again. Luckily, Ansel landed on his feet. Unluckily, the moment it took for him to regain his balance was enough for the Feral to get a clear shot, and it swiped at him with its claws.

Ansel dove out of the way but not before he felt them gash his side, pain erupting as blood streamed from his hip. Out of the corner of his eye, he saw Jasmine and Caleb rush forward, but the intervention would mean his failure at the match and he wasn't out of the game, not yet. Before they could reach him, he ran toward the beast. It mutated to all fours again and charged at him. Ansel forced himself not to move out of the way. It was about timing.

The moment he saw the creature prepare to lunge he fell into a controlled slide, skidding below it as it pounced over him. When it landed and before it had time to turn, Ansel sprang up and jabbed his sword hilt deep in its back, right where he knew its heart to be. It bucked wildly for a moment but he held on tight and eventually, it ceased moving. Pools of its blood blackened Ansel's boots. He looked from them to the Feral's now motionless body. "I'm sorry," he uttered inaudibly.

He withdrew his sword. His wound was throbbing intensely, and he clutched his hip in the attempt to apply pressure on it. The applause around him didn't register until Instructor Renhold came forward nodding his approval. "Not bad Burnett, your last move was well executed."

"Thank you sir," Ansel replied.

"Go see Mara before you return to your seat."

"Yes sir."

Mara Tampasis, a rough, candid woman, was the program's resident Healer positioned on a bench just off the field. She was finishing tending to Edgar's wounds, and judging by the way that his broken leg had been mended and the gouge in his stomach had dwindled to a small cut, she had worked as remarkably as usual. "You're free to go," she told him. "I'm sure I'll see you again after your next match."

"Thank you," Edgar said gratefully, tracing his fingers over his stomach. He turned to Ansel. "Good job, your ending move, that was fantastic."

Ansel smiled. "Thanks, I'm glad you're okay." He felt a twinge of gloom as he watched Edgar walk away. The mop-headed boy was the closest thing to a friend that Ansel had at training, and he was almost sure that Bellalux would not accept him. Ansel doubted whether he would be accepted himself, but if he was, it would have been nice to have a friendly face.

"You're up Ansel," Mara prompted.

Ansel sat on the bench and took his hand from off his hip. The cut was still bleeding, though it had slowed. Mara leant down to examine the damage. "Hey you managed to avoid scarring your inner tissue. Nice job. Makes my work easier."

Placing her fingers over the wound, she began an esoteric chant. In an instant, every ounce of throe left Ansel's body. She trailed her hand up and down, pushing and pulling as though she were moving the tides of the sea, and he could feel the damage being tendered from the inside. His body realigning and returning it to what it had once been, or something even better. Wisps of golden light resided from her touch, into which his blood disappeared.

Ansel's concern turned to Mara's concentrated face, to her mouth continuing to mutter the spell ceaselessly. Thankfully she didn't look tired or pale. With every member of his family being a Common, Ansel didn't know much about Sorcery, but he did know that too much exertion led to drainage, exhaustion, and sometimes even collapse. But then, Mara had a great deal of grit and experience.

It was only a few minutes before the glow faded from her fingers and she fell silent. Ansel felt the movement over his hip still and she tapped it confidently a couple of times. "Alright, you're all set," she said. "Get back up there and watch the final couple of matches."

"Thank you ma'am," Ansel said, standing and picking up his shield. He felt as though he had eaten a bowl of the warm carrot ginger soup his stepmother always made him when he was ill.

"Mara's fine," Mara reminded him again. "I'm not an Instructor."

Ansel smiled. "Yes ma'am."

She chuckled and rolled her eyes as he walked along the edge of the field back toward the stands. Newly healed, he allowed the feeling of relief to flood him. He had prevailed. Had brought his success rate against the Feral up to sixty one percent, nine percent higher than it had been last semester. Although Bellalux would only take their credentials from the time of applications eight weeks ago.

The Institute's qualifications included a minimum seventy five percent victory rate in student sparring matches and a minimum fifty percent victory rate in Feral matches by the time of application. When Ansel applied he had a seventy eight percent victory rate against students and a fifty seven percent victory rate against Feral. It was close, but he had met all of the standards. He had written a good essay too. His friend Eitan, who was applying to write for the Satil Journal, had told him that much. Academically, his school marks were excellent. He did still have a chance at receiving one of the acceptance letters that were set to arrive any day now.

Upon returning to his seat he was greeted by a chorus of courteous "good job's" and "nice work's" from all his classmates except for Raymond, who cornered Ansel when he sat down and said "You call that a victory?"

“I won didn’t I?” Ansel kept his gaze on the last student, Zayn, who was readying to fight. “Do you need me to define ‘victory’ for you? I know words aren’t your strong suit.”

“A victory is a triumph over an enemy, big brain. You might have won technically, but there was no triumph. Stumbling around like a moron, wounded and a second away from being killed, Bellalux won’t care how good you are with words if you can’t fight properly.”

Zayn wasn’t faring well in his battle. The Feral knocked him across the stomach and sent him flying back several feet. Raymond pressed on. “You don’t actually think you’ll be admitted, do you? What’s your Feral rate? Fifty?”

“Sixty one, actually.”

Raymond laughed. “Even Cora’s is eighty, and she’s as mediocre as they come. If you do get in, how exactly are you planning on keeping up?”

Ansel tried not to think about the answer to his question. He wished he could provide a good retort, but all he could do was watch as the Feral descended upon Zayn, and Jasmine had to run in and help. “Do you ever give it a rest? Do you always have to pick a fight?” he asked finally.

It was a stupid question. Raymond couldn’t go five minutes without attempting to start a conflict. Even when the instructors punished him for his insolence by making him run an extra five miles, he never let up. “Not liking fights is exactly why you’re in the wrong place,” Raymond responded.

Jasmine tackled the beast and Caleb came and picked up Zayn, who was bleeding excessively from his neck.

Raymond snorted and shook his head. “You better hope you don’t get accepted into Bellalux, for your own sake. You won’t last three days there before you’re torn to pieces.”

As Caleb ran an unconscious Zayn off of the field to Mara, Instructor Renhold announced that the final bout of the day had concluded and that training was over.

Raymond’s words rang in Ansel’s mind as he walked home. The Guardian Institute of Bellalux had been all he had wanted from the time he was six and learned that both his father and his mother had attended and graduated as professional Guardians in their youth. But Raymond was right; Ansel was better than most of the students in their district’s training program, but likely the worst of the small number who had a chance at being accepted, and it wasn’t for lack of trying. He trained for hours almost every day, trained outside of the already taxing program, but some people had been training for longer, some people had natural skill, and Bellalux would take those people. Bellalux was for the best of the best.

His father had always told him that he was an excellent fighter, but the sincerity of a parent’s praise was always questionable, and it had been over twenty five years since he had attended the Institute. The man

no longer even owned a sword. The sword that used to be his now belonged to Ansel, gifted to him on his tenth birthday. "It's a strong and reliable blade, I know it'll serve you as well as it served me," his father had said. "But I have no use for it anymore." And it was true. He hadn't picked the weapon up since the day his wife, Ansel's mother, had died. Their time spent together as warriors was too painful for him to revisit.

When Ansel was younger he asked his father if it bothered him that Ansel wanted to be Guardian. His father assured him that it didn't. In fact, he said that there was no work more noble in the world and pushed him harder than ever. Ansel was grateful for this because he wasn't sure he would be able to give up his ambition even if it did upset his father.

Thoughts of Bellalux and Guardians carried him all the way through the fields of elderflowers and groves of bright red bonberries. It was not a short walk back to his home. The trek took around fifty minutes, which meant that usually Ansel went on horseback, but because it was so nice out he insisted on giving Esme, the smaller of his family's two horses, a well-deserved day off. He didn't regret the decision; if he had ridden he would have missed the newly blooming nectar cups. Wouldn't have had the chance to pluck one from the bush, sipping the honey flavored liquid from the pistil and then eating the yellow shell whole.

After a stretch the flora became progressively less wild, more pruned and structured as the grass shaved to forge the path that trailed into Leoga. His hometown, still a fair distance from his actual house, was a quaint place of stone buildings with thatched roofs, just off the south end of the much larger city of Satil. Ansel walked by the familiar shops and houses, peering into the windows of the apothecary and the bookstore.

He stopped inside the plant shop briefly to see the new arrivals writhing about in their pots and to thank the owner for giving him such a good deal on the perennial he had bought last time. The peaches on display at the market a few doors down looked too good to ignore, so Ansel bought four, one for himself and one for each member of his family. As he handed over seven pieces of copper, the old shopkeep glanced down at his sword. "Training today?" He asked.

"Yes sir."

"Grateful there are still young people who are, means the country's in good hands. Work hard at it alright?" Then he threw in an extra peach for free.

Ansel thanked him and ate it as he continued toward the lake his house was situated on, a clear depth of cerulean he spent hours in on any day he could. Gaze lingering on the way the sun caused its surface to sparkle, he walked to the far side where his small white abode stood with its many windows and crawling ivy.

His front garden was full of honeysuckle and tall grass and wildflowers of various colors. Because it was so dense and unkempt, there were always a number of phee idling about, amusing themselves by making structures with the flowers or flying in and out of the grass. Ansel's father always said they had really ought to maintain the garden so that the phee would leave, but his stepmother insisted that it was more inspiring

when unregulated and that the phee were innocuous. Ansel agreed. The small bodies of winged light had never caused any harm, save for the time his sister almost got lost while chasing one.

When he entered he found a few floating near the honeysuckle, and upon seeing him, one of them plucked a single flower and placed it gently on top of his hair. “Thanks,” Ansel said, putting the flower in his satchel. He checked the mailbox on his front porch again, heart racing as it always did since Bellalux announced they were sending out their letters of acceptance. But nothing had arrived in the six hours since he had last looked when leaving. Sighing, he opened the door to his home.

As soon as he entered he heard the patter of small feet. A second later his sister’s arms were wrapped around his waist. “You took forever,” she complained, “I’m so bored.” Ansel laughed and tousled her blonde hair. An endless ball of eight-year-old energy, Monika was always looking for the next thing to do. As Sundays meant no school, there were limited options.

“I’m sorry,” Ansel said. “But I come bearing gifts.” He pulled one of the peaches from his bag and Monika’s face lit up. Squealing her thanks, she pulled him over to the kitchen and began peeling its skin with a knife. Ansel suspected it was less because she preferred the fruit that way, and more because she wanted to show him how her knife work had improved, which it had.

Saccharine juice got all over her face as she ate and spoke at the same time. Ansel listened to her detailed accounts of brushing the horses and playing with the phee and finishing her book that wasn’t even due until the end of the week, and he answered her questions about training and Guardians and whether she would be a good Guardian and would he please help her learn how to use a sword? He denied this request, knowing that their parents didn’t want her to for at least another couple of years, but did agree to resume their swimming lessons.

They spent the next few hours in the lake, practicing for a while, then just splashing around in the shallow waters. By the time they returned to the house, the sun was setting and his stepmother was in the kitchen cooking dinner.

With the same pale blue eyes and blonde hair as Monika, Eliza was gentle but strong spirited. She had met Ansel’s father eleven years ago at a gallery in Satil, when he purchased one of Eliza’s art pieces. The two married quickly and had Monika three years later, and though Ansel felt it too disrespectful toward his own mother to view her as a new one, he loved her and Monika more than almost anybody in the world. She smiled warmly when they entered, asking Ansel about his match against the Feral as she chopped tomatoes.

“It went okay. I won,” Ansel said, leaving out the part about his injury because Eliza got anxious enough about his safety as it was. “Hey I was wondering - ”

“No, I didn’t bring in any mail while you were out,” Eliza answered before he could finish. She softened. “They said it would arrive some time this week. It’s only been three days. I know it’s difficult, but try to be patient.”

Ansel sighed. "I wish they gave us a more specific date."

Eliza laid down her knife and leaned against the counter. "What'll help you take your mind off of it? Do you want to help me with dinner? It's fresh snapper with heirloom vegetables." She knew how much Ansel loved cooking.

"Yes," Ansel smiled. "It smells amazing already."

When they finally sat down to eat, it tasted as good as it smelled. Ansel's father joined them at the dining table, apologizing for being late as he took his seat beside Eliza. "I wanted to help with setting up," he said, transferring some fish to his plate. "But organizing delegations is becoming more and more difficult by the day."

Although he was no longer a Guardian himself, Ansel's father did work for the nation's Guardian Administration, in a fairly high position because of the experience he had fighting in the War of Kin eighteen years ago. Ansel had inquired whether his profession would give him the opportunity to uncover which students had been accepted to Bellalux, but unfortunately, his field was limited to professional warriors and not practicing ones.

"Are you still struggling to find enough Guardians to station in Fortis?" Ansel asked.

"And Bonir," his father replied. "Violence is getting worse in both cities." That wasn't too surprising. Fortis and Bonir were both so poor that aggression and crime were how most people went about making money.

"Why can't you just relocate some Guardians from other cities there?"

"We're trying to," his father said. "But there's a shortage of available options right now. So many of them are overseas. Accompanying the ambassadors mitigating conflicts between Erosee and Copen." His face grew darker. "And on top of that, in the past few days, some of the Resistance have started refusing service from any Guardians who are Sorcerers."

Ansel's fork froze midway to his mouth. "What?"

"Mhm. Mostly written statements and demands, but this morning a few groups gathered on site to voice their rejection in person. Spat verbal assaults. It makes the whole process of allocation a lot more complicated."

Eliza shook her head as she swallowed a mouthful of peppers. "That's absurd. Guardians are supposed to protect people. If they're successful at their job, what does it matter if they're Sorcerers or not?"

Ansel placed his fork back down onto his plate, unsure as his stepmother of the Resistance's motives.

When Monika professed that the discussion was boring her they shifted the conversation, but the following day at school Ansel asked his friend Corina about what his father had disclosed. Her mother worked as a conciliator between Sorcerers and Common, so unsurprisingly, she had already heard about it.

“The first letters of protest arrived at the Council on Friday,” she explained. “But according to Ma, the agenda’s organization and execution suggests they’ve been planning it for at least a month.”

“But why?” Ansel asked. “It’s not like Sorcerer Guardians make more money than Common Guardians.” The frustration many Common felt toward their own drawbacks in wealth was what the entire Resistance was founded on.

It was midday and the two of them, along with their friend Eitan, sat outside eating lunch on the steps of the school as they always did when the weather was nice. Eliza had packed Ansel tomato and cheese sandwiches and slices of smoked ham.

“Maybe not at the same level,” Corina said through mouthfuls of rice, not bothering to swallow first. Though she had inherited the same political savvy as her mother, she had none of her manners or refinement. “But higher ranked Guardians do tend to get paid more, and most of the highest ranked ones are Sorcerers.”

“I guess,” Ansel said. “Still doesn’t seem like an effective group to boycott when the real monetary difference is in medics and engineers and innovators.”

“To be fair they boycott Sorcerers in those fields too,” Eitan pointed out.

“I wouldn’t be surprised if they’ve started to turn beyond issues of wealth though,” Corina said. “I know that’s how they promoted their organization, but historically, the root behind all these kinds of movements has been fear. The more scared people get, the more animosity there is. And since the War of Kin, well, fear’s gotten progressively worse.”

Ansel scratched his brow. He did know about the unrest the War of Kin had caused; it was impossible not to. Sovereign Serlienos’s reign over the nation of Nimal and attempted reign over its neighboring nation, their home country of Benira, had been built on trying to establish Sorcerers as the ruling class. Despite the fact that more Sorcerers fought against Serlienos than alongside him, fear still lingered nearly two decades later.

He had seen it early on when he traveled to Satil with his father. Many Common there shrank or flinched whenever somebody openly displayed magic. It wasn’t only the civilians who were anxious either. After the war, the leaders of Benira, a majority Sorcerers themselves, began administering moral evaluations to anybody who wished to study and practice the magical arts.

This had eased apprehensions slightly, but if Corina was correct it wasn’t enough to stop demoralization from Common organizations that were supposed to be judicious. “I feel bad for them,” Ansel

said. “The Guardians I mean. Can’t imagine people refusing you as a hero just for the mistakes that other people made.”

Corina nodded grimly. “Ma said that it won’t help hostility on the Sorcerer’s side either.”

The tolling bell sounded from above the school, indicating the end of lunch. Ansel stuffed the rest of his sandwich into his mouth and put the box back into his bag. Hustling through the domed entryway, the three made for the second story of the building for Contemporary Technology class.

“Did you guys study for the exam?” Eitan asked.

Corina frowned. “We had an exam?”

Ansel snorted. He had studied, of course. Was well prepared to answer every question from ‘why was the development of the Billingsly Elixir so important?’ to ‘describe in detail each of the five steps of Transport operation.’ He handed the test to Professor Currinder fairly certain that he had received full marks. Corina, on the other hand, insisted that they all go to Hedley’s Pub when school let out so that she could mourn her failure with a drink.

Hedley’s was a small, refined joint full of oakwood tables and stain glass lamps and vines that coiled along the ceiling and walls. The three took a seat at the bar and ordered a malt each.

“I’m cutting you off after two,” Corina told Eitan. “I’m not prepared to take care of your drunk ass again, not after last time.”

“I wasn’t that bad,” Eitan protested.

“Eitan you tried to eat the vines from off the wall.”

“Well they look like they would taste good. I stand by that sober.”

They talked about their plans for after graduation as they drank. From the time Ansel could walk he had only desired one career, but Corina had decided fairly recently that she wanted to follow in the footsteps of her mother. This made the process of finding work rather easy, and she had managed last week to secure a well paying position as the apprentice to a concolitator.

Eitan hadn’t been so lucky. He had wanted to be a writer from a young age, but with his father a farmer and his mother a chef, they weren’t able to help him much in the profession. So he scoured for work left and right, applying to six different entry positions at the Satil Journal and a handful of positions at various other, less renowned publishing houses.

“One of them is bound to accept me, right?” he asked.

“One of them?” Ansel replied. “Most of them will. The tricky part is going to be deciding which offer to take.” He meant what he said. Eitan had a remarkable way with words.

“Thanks,” Eitan smiled sheepishly. “I hope I get one of the positions at the Satil Journal, I really do. The most successful writers have worked there. Nava Courser did, did you guys know that?”

Ansel did. Nava Courser was the author of his favorite book series, *The Hunter Chronicles*, but he enjoyed listening to Eitan excitedly recount the history of her career all the same. Hearing once more about her journey from editor to drafter to journalist to novelist, he wondered briefly if he’d do well as an author if Bellalux rejected him.

But he knew it wouldn’t make him satisfied. Content maybe, but not satisfied. Yes, he loved stories, enjoyed writing, but he didn’t have the same drive toward it that Eitan had. The sense that it was the sole thing he was supposed to be doing. He longed for an active field, for engagement with those in need of help, for serving his country in the most noble and honorable way possible, as his mother had. When dusk began to settle, he said goodbye to his friends and left the warmly lit pub.

He decided to walk the long way home because it provided a better view of the sun disappearing over the horizon. As he ambled, the sky turned from bright yellow to violent orange, until a last flash of green light brought the day down with it.

The end of the detoured route involved passing the home of Gritley Bethol, an elderly tinte who lived where the lake rode off into the river. Ansel caught sight of him in his front garden tending to his flowers and prepared himself for conversation; Gritley was always eager to gossip.

When the tinte spotted him he ceased watering his marigolds and waved him over with a grin. “Oi, Ansel!”

Ansel meandered toward the house until he was leant against the garden fence. It only made its way up to Ansel’s waist, but tintes were so short in stature that Gritley’s head and shoulders were the only things visible over the white pickets.

“How are you doing, Gritley?” Ansel asked.

“Just fine my boy, just fine. Hard to complain on an evenin’ like this, although m’ lines are beginning to scab a bit in this heat.” He gestured toward his scrawny neck. Like all of his kind, Gritley had an intricate array of dark patterned lines that marked every inch of his wafer thin body, and these lines were indeed starting to peel in certain places.

“I’m sorry,” Ansel winced. “Does it hurt much?”

“Not too bad,” Gritley replied. “I just have’ta head into town tomorrow and pick up some Dao Liniment. Then I should be all set and ready for when the sun gets even hotter.” Before Ansel could react,

Gritley leaned forward. "Speaking of town," he said, golden eyes glinting, "Do you know Mrs. Mercer, the one who owns Mercer's Antiques?"

Ansel recalled the stout old woman in the shop of dimly lit clutter. "Yes."

"Did you hear she was arrested?"

"No." Where Gritley had heard such news, Ansel wasn't sure. "When? What for?"

"Yesterday. She was lyin' about the dates of some o' her products, saying they were from the Pulchra Era and not the Interit Era. Older artifacts raise prices. Apparently she was tryin' to make more money to raise her sons."

Mrs. Mercer's children Ansel knew better. The boys, not yet adolescents, were always running around Leoga in their ratty clothes. "Where is she being taken to?" He asked. "Not Geracium?"

Gritley scoffed. "O' course not. She'll be going to Luretes, charming little penitentiary."

"What's going to happen to her kids?"

"They're staying with her brother for the time being."

Ansel frowned. He hoped that she wouldn't be incarcerated for long. He didn't approve of lying, and as a training Guardian he should be prepared to arrest the guilty for any crime. But he didn't like the thought of a family being torn apart. Especially when a crime had only been committed to help said family.

He saw Mrs. Mercer's sons the next day at school during lunch, walking hand in hand with a rugged looking man who must have been their uncle. Their faces were downcast and their usual youthful energy was absent as they trudged along. Watching them made Ansel feel disheartened but he couldn't bring himself to look away until Corina tapped his shoulder.

"Ansel," she prodded. "Ansel."

"Hm?" Ansel turned.

"I was asking if you knew the body parts of an aquavie, Eitan just told me we have our Biology exam today."

"You didn't study for this one either?"

"I was busy helping my mom do real work," Corina defended. She handed Ansel the paper in her lap. "Here, is this right?"

Ansel looked at the incorrectly marked diagram. “No.”

He showed Corina where the limbs and organs were supposed to be. They had almost finished correcting everything when Eitan interrupted. “Hey guys,” he said. “Heads up.”

Ansel looked where he was gesturing and saw Raymond and two of his lackeys approaching the school. They were gnawing on stakes of roast chicken they had bought from the shop they went to every day; their parents were too rich and busy to bother making them meals. When Raymond spotted Ansel he grinned, bit off the rest of his chicken, and tossed the stick over his shoulder.

“God, here we go again.” Ansel put away his barley soup and stood up.

But Raymond didn’t say anything when he climbed the steps toward him. At first, Ansel was confused. Then he saw him reach into his jacket pocket and pull out a thick blue envelope, flashing it briefly as he walked past. Ansel had enough time to recognize the seal, the stamp, and the letters written in white ink before it was slipped away into Raymond’s coat again. His heart dropped to his stomach.

Before Raymond could reach the school doors, Ansel grabbed him by the shoulder. “Hey!” he said. Raymond allowed himself to be whirled around, smirk dawning on his face. “Where did you get that?” Ansel asked.

“Three guesses,” came the teasing reply.

Ansel moved his hand from Raymond’s shoulder to the hem of his jacket. Opening it, he pulled the letter out. He knew Raymond would be able to stop him if he wanted to; he had lost many physical encounters to the boy. But clearly, Raymond didn’t want to. Ansel looked at the cursive on the envelope. Addressed to Raymond Haag, return address, Bellalux Institute. It was a response to their applications alright, and, “It’s yours.”

“Well done, big brain. How bout you use your other two guesses to predict what it’ll say, hm?”

Ansel didn’t need two guesses. He knew exactly what the letter would say. But he didn’t affirm that. Raymond’s smirk grew larger. Then, with the speed of a nymphe, he reached into his other pocket and whipped out one of his knives, directing its point at Ansel’s stomach. Weapons were not allowed in school, but that didn’t stop him from concealing them in his baggy clothes every day. Ansel jumped back, immediately readying himself in a defensive position, but Raymond just laughed and began twirling the blade between his fingers. “Relax,” he cooed. “I’m not gonna gut you on school property. They’d rescind my admission.”

He snatched his letter back and used the knife to slice through the top of the envelope. Of course he had waited for an audience with Ansel to open it. Unfolding the parchment inside, he read aloud. “Dear Raymond Haag, Congratulations! You have been accepted into the Guardian Institute of Bellalux.” He stuffed the letter back into his pocket, not bothering to read the rest. “Shocking.” Folding his arms in front of his

chest, he looked Ansel up and down. Ansel said nothing, forced his expression not to waver. After a stretch of demeaning silence, Raymond finally spoke. “Where’s your letter Burnett?”

“Fuck off,” Ansel responded.

Raymond turned to one of his two friends, who had been leaning against the bannister behind him like attendants. “What do you think it means if an applicant hasn’t received their letter yet Jamie?”

Jamie bent forward slightly. “That they don’t want feeble toddlers attending their Institute?”

“Yeah I’d say that’s probably a good guess,” Raymond shrugged.

“You don’t know that,” Eitan interjected. “There’s a million different reasons why his might not have come yet.”

“Oh please, he’s totally been rejected,” Jamie said.

“Shut up Jamie,” Raymond snapped.

“Sorry.”

Raymond rounded on Eitan. He was so tall that he cast a shadow over Eitan’s entire frame. Leering unblinkingly, he twirled his knife once more. Though he had said he wouldn’t use it, Eitan eyed the blade nervously and shrank back into the bannister, falling silent. Corina bit her lip and cast her gaze downward. Ansel didn’t blame either of them. Raymond scared even other Guardian trainees, and neither Eitan nor Corina had fought a day in their lives. “That’s what I thought,” Raymond smirked again.

Ansel placed himself in front of Eitan. “Leave my friends out of whatever issues you have with me.”

Raymond laughed. “Oh, Burnett, I can’t say it hasn’t been fun, although I won’t miss having to watch your grating attempts at heroism. Pretty sure I’d bleed out of my eyes if I had to endure them any longer.” He whistled through his teeth and cocked his head, gesturing for his entourage to follow him into the school.

“I’d pay to see him bleed out of his eyes,” Corina mumbled as they retreated.

Ansel didn’t respond. A million different emotions swirled inside of him, all dwelling on the answer to Raymond’s question. Where was his letter? He had checked the mail that morning, had asked Eliza once and his father twice if they had seen it. “Patience is a sorely needed virtue Ansel,” his father had said the second time. There was no way he would have missed it if it had been delivered.

He didn’t notice how quickly he was breathing until Eitan put a hand on his shoulder. “Relax, he’s only trying to get a rise out of you.”

“Well it’s working,” Ansel’s voice sounded harsher than he had intended. He inhaled deeply and then turned around. “Why hasn’t my letter come?”

“Like I said, there are a million possible explanations,” Eitan replied, endlessly composed and sensible. “Your house is further away. It could have gotten lost, or they didn’t send them out all at once.” Ansel looked at him doubtfully, and Eitan kept his gaze calm and steady. “If you had been denied you would know. You said they send rejection letters too, right?”

“What if they’ve changed that this year?”

“They didn’t,” Corina said. “Edgar was absent today, and I saw Kalin and Naya crying in the bathroom. I thought it was about the exams, but I guess not.”

That information gave Ansel the smallest amount of solace. If rejections had been delivered as well, did it really mean that the delivery to Ansel’s home simply took longer? Or that the school sent them periodically? And if it was periodic, was the order based on certainty? Was Ansel’s late because they were torn between accepting him and not? He wished that he could ask every other student in the training program, but only four aside from himself lived in his town and went to his school.

“Okay, come on,” Eitan said, putting an arm around his shoulder. “Let’s get ready for class. Focus on your test alright?”

It was difficult to. Ansel’s eyes strayed to the window and to the crystalline chandelier casting soft light over the room, always returning to the clock hanging on the wall. He turned in the completed exam sure that he hadn’t performed as well as he had on the previous ones.

By the time school ended Ansel was convinced twenty hours had passed. He shouted his goodbyes to Eitan and Corina over his shoulder, threw open the doors, and bolted down the steps. His walk back home was faster than it had ever been.

If he was rejected, perhaps he could organize a way to present his case to the Director and staff. Perhaps he could perform a live audition and change their minds, or if they heard in person how dedicated he was to aid. Maybe his father’s vouch, as a veteran of the War of Kin, would count for something.

Ansel quickened his pace as he neared the lake. By the time he reached his gate, he was almost running. He shoved the white pickets aside, barely noticing how his action disrupted the phee, and rushed to the mailbox. He took a deep breath, keeping his lips tightly sealed because he was worried his thrumming heart would fall out of his mouth if he didn’t. Slowly, he opened the little black door.

Nothing.

Ansel stuck his hand inside in case Bellalux had used a shrinking charm for portability or an invisibility charm for covertness. Of course, they hadn't. Withdrawing his arm, he stared into the blackness until he thought he might fall in.

He felt sick. "It's not a rejection," he murmured to himself, listening to the sound of his voice in the attempt to stay grounded. "It just hasn't arrived, it's not a rejection." Repeating the mantra calmed him slightly. After several deep exhalations, he opened his front door.

He would go upstairs, to his bedroom, and take a nap, that's what he would do. He would sleep until his dreams made him forget that he was awaiting a response, forget that he had ever even applied. He set his bag down and dragged himself past the kitchen into the dining room.

That was when he saw it. It was impossible to miss, bright blue contrasted against the teak brown.

His letter from Bellalux was resting on the middle of his dining room table.

Chapter 2 (Ansel)

Ansel wasn't sure if the sight of the letter made him feel more or less sick. His stomach lurched and for a long while he simply stared, looking at the nauseatingly vivid color. Then he stretched his hand out, retracted it, stretched it out again, and forced his feet forward.

The envelope felt smooth and weighty in his palms. White cursive letters donned the front exactly as they had on Raymond's, but these ones spelled out Ansel Burnett. He stroked his finger over the address. Unable to bring himself to open it just yet, he pried with the flap. It was the anticipation before unwrapping a birthday gift, but a hundred times worse.

"Are you okay?" The voice startled him. Eliza stood in the doorway of the kitchen, arms folded across her chest.

Ansel held up the envelope. "When did it get here?"

"This morning, right after you left," Eliza said. She approached him and placed a soft hand over his shoulder. "I brought it in as soon as I saw it. Your father had already gone to work, or else he would have stayed. I could write him if you'd like, ask him to come home?"

"No," Ansel said. "No, don't do that. I don't want him to return early in case... I mean if..."

"Do you want me to leave you alone too?"

Ansel shook his head. His stepmother was already there, already knew it had been delivered. And she wouldn't be as disappointed as his father would be if he were rejected.

"Okay," Eliza kissed his forehead. "I want you to know that even if you don't get in - "

"I know," Ansel didn't need her to finish. "I know."

He took a deep breath, focusing on the feel of Eliza's palm against his shoulder as trembling fingers pried open the wax seal, pulled out the paper, and unfolded it.

The only word on the page that registered in Ansel's brain was 'Congratulations,' capitalized in perfect penmanship. He exhaled a sound that was somewhere between a laugh and a cry, legs nearly giving way from the flood of relief that filled him. His heart went from pumping a mile a minute to floating as high as an elusive volacap, ten tons of weight lifted from his back and shoulders.

"Yes?" Eliza shook his shoulder. "Yes?"

Ansel turned around and flung his arms around her neck. "Yes!" He cried loudly.

Eliza laughed. "That's incredible," she said, securing the embrace. "I'm so proud of you." She only broke her hold to take his face between her hands and look him in the eyes. "You're father's going to be so proud of you. You've worked so hard for so long."

Ansel smiled so widely that his cheeks hurt. "Thank you."

Stepping back, Eliza clasped her hands together. "You know what I'm going to do? I'm going to make a celebration dinner. What do you want? Anything."

Ansel suddenly realized just how hungry he was. And if anything was on the table, "Would the roast duck be too much to ask? If it's too much that's completely fine - "

"The one I made for your birthday last year?" Eliza asked. "Absolutely."

They compiled a list of ingredients, Eliza congratulating him again between additions of goat cheese and turnips and basil. When they finished, she gave Ansel one last kiss on the forehead and left for the market.

Alone at the table, Ansel picked up the envelope once more. The blue and white of the paper was no longer blinding, in fact, its different hues reflecting in the daylight looked beautiful and rich. The paper must have been very expensive.

How incredible would the school itself be? Ansel had only glimpsed the extravagant limestone buildings from a distance the few times his father had taken him to Amare. Entrance onto the school grounds for anybody who wasn't a student was prohibited, except by the government or special invitation. Still, even from far away, he had been able to see how grandiose the Institute was. Because Benira was a nation of free nature and lavish wilderness, it was not home to much lofty architecture. Bellalux was an exception. It, along with Castle Virida and the Capitol, held the only structures that could rival the icy palaces of Erose or the towers that had existed in Nalim before it fell.

His father had told him of the training arenas and the armory. Of the library and ballrooms and theaters, all large enough to hold five hundred people. Of the colossal mess hall that always had food available and the vast gardens that housed every flower one could imagine. Now Ansel would get to go inside and wander the endless halls. Would feel, finally, as though he were part of something bigger than himself.

He opened the letter again and read it through properly this time.

Dear Ansel Burnett,

CONGRATULATIONS! You have been accepted to The Guardian Institute of Bellalux. Your accomplishments in your training thus far have demonstrated that you are a talented and capable individual with great potential to become a successful warrior.

The Guardian Institute of Bellalux has provided the most exceptional defenders of Benira for the past six hundred years. Should you graduate from our program at the end of your five years, you too will be in place to become one of these noble figures.

Enclosed is a list of everything you should bring with you to the mandatory first year orientation, beginning the tenth of August. We look forward to seeing you then.

*Sincerely,
Evelyn Mercer
Director of Admissions*

The enclosed list was quite short. The only things required were a selection of textbooks along with pens and parchment, clothing, toiletries, and any money needed to purchase things away from home. All equipment, including wraps, guards, and weapons, would be provided, although bringing a personal weapon from home was permitted. Ansel was thankful for this because he had no desire to let go of his father's sword. Any items desired to make experience at school more enjoyable were allowed, including magical articles provided they were legal, but pets had to be registered. If one was taking courses in Sorcery additional items were needed, differing depending on class, but Ansel was not so he ignored that section.

It was real. Soon, he would be traveling to purchase everything he needed, then traveling to Amare and actually entering the prestigious grounds. He put the letter back into the envelope and held it close to his chest as he made his way upstairs.

The evening light that flooded his room from his open bay window turned everything golden. His bookshelves, his leather armchair, his grandfather clock that stood in the corner, all looked more beautiful than he had ever remembered them being. As soon as the plants on top of his dresser saw him, they began twisting and weaving dramatically. Ansel chuckled and placed his letter in the cover of one of his books.

"Impatient aren't we, Tenzin, Gemma? I know you've been waiting a while, sorry about that." He grabbed his canteen and poured a generous amount of water onto both of them. The purple petals of Gemma's flower opened and closed repeatedly in gratitude, and one of Tenzin's fleshy leaves coiled gently around his finger. "Nice, yeah?"

He placed the canteen back on the dresser next to Tenzin and ran to his desk to pull out a pen and a slip of parchment from his drawer. Grinning, he scrawled: "I've been accepted, orientation starts August tenth!" He blew on the message several times to ensure that it dried properly and walked to the window, leaning his head out.

Hooked onto the exterior wall of his home was the celerbox Eitan had gotten him for his birthday two years ago. The tiny yellow vessel cost more than a hand crafted sword. Eitan had spent months worth of savings to pay for it, and it was one of the best gifts Ansel had ever received. He opened the container and put the note inside. Only a few seconds after he removed his hand, the paper began folding in on itself until it

vanished completely. It would be re-materializing in Eitan's twin receptacle now. The apparatus, which Eliza and his father had stationed between their home and his office as well, was about the most convenient form of communication there was.

Ansel closed its little door and pulled himself back into his room. His gaze fell this time on his sword, which he had left leant against the wall next to his bed. As he sat down on his mattress he took the weapon reverently in both hands, unsheathing and examining it as he had done countless times before.

The silver of the blade contrasted the hilt, marbled black at the grip and embellished gold at the guard and pommel. In the center of the handle, the national symbol of Benira was intricately carved: six flower petals entwining into each other. The emblem meant something different now than it had this morning; a mark of service that he would carry with honor, would represent with integrity.

Reaching into his shirt, he pulled out the gold chain and scarlet pendant that hadn't left his neck since he was a child. It had belonged to his mother and was the only thing of hers that he owned. His father had no photographs, could only describe her wild hair and kind eyes, so Ansel didn't know what she had looked like. But he received the necklace when he was five with the promise she would always be close to him. He ran his thumb over the crimson surface.

"I did it." Claspng the necklace between his palms, he whispered the words into his hands like a prayer. "I did it." The dead could hear if given the same time and attention as the living, that much he had always believed. He sat with his mother for a while, trying to picture the spirited vibrancy his father had detailed.

Soon after Eliza arrived home alongside sacks of groceries and Monika, who had been playing at her friend Luisa's house. Monika bounced up and down relentlessly when Ansel told her that he had been accepted and made her show him the letter. She opened the envelope, pulled the paper out, read it, then repeated the cycle three more times as though she were imagining herself receiving the response, which amused Ansel to no end.

An hour later his father entered to find them all in the kitchen preparing the feast of duck and herbed butter, spring greens and roast vegetables, sweet potatoes and buttered rolls. "What's the occasion?" He asked, eyeing the immense amount of food across the stovetop and counter.

Before Ansel could say anything, Monika ran up to him with Ansel's letter in her little fist and waved it in front of his face. "Ansel got in," she chirruped. "To Bellalux, he got in earlier today, ask him! We're really going to have a Guardian in the family, can you believe it? I mean you used to be a Guardian but like, an actual now Guardian, not just an old one."

Ansel's father looked at him jubilantly. "Are you serious?"

Ansel nodded, grin spreading uncontrollably across his face. He set the duck he had been seasoning aside as his father came and seized him into a tight hug.

"I am so proud of you," he said. Ansel buried his face in his chest and his father patted his back. "I told you that you could do it, didn't I?"

Ansel released him and looked up into his brown eyes. "Yeah, you did."

"Well look who's always right," he said. Ansel laughed. Behind him he heard Eliza scoff and Monika let out an exasperated 'Dadaaa.' His father chortled. "I'm kidding. Well done son, really."

"Thanks Dad."

As they sat down to stuff themselves silly with ample food and expensive mead (cranberry juice for Monika), Eliza voiced her motherly concerns. "It's nerve wracking, that's all. I heard that a few years ago a student there was pushed so hard, he collapsed to the ground and never got back up."

Ansel furrowed his brow. "Where did you hear that?"

"I just don't want you to get hurt."

"If I get hurt I get hurt," Ansel shrugged. "I'm prepared for it."

Seeing her troubled expression, Ansel's father placed a comforting hand around her shoulder. "Eliza don't be paranoid, he's going to do great."

"Yeah," Monika said. "Nobody's a better fighter than buba."

Ansel thanked Monika, but the compliment was indisputably false. He was sure Bellalux had students that made him look like a child playing with wooden sticks.

A fresh wave of anxiety wracked his brain for the first time since his acceptance. His mind strayed back to what Raymond had asked during training. *If you do get in, how exactly are you planning on keeping up?* He desperately hoped that he could find an answer to the question.

His father must have sensed his ailments because after dinner he came and knocked on Ansel's bedroom door.

"You doing alright son?" He asked, taking a seat next to Ansel on his bed.

"Yeah," Ansel said.

"Relieved?"

"Yeah."

“Nervous?”

Ansel looked at him.

“I was nervous when I got my acceptance letter,” his father admitted.

“Yeah?”

“Oh yeah, the reputation of the Institute, the talent that had come out of those walls, the expectation to be the best, it was impossible not to be,” he said. “You’re not alone if you have apprehensions, I promise. I guarantee you everyone else is feeling them too. And I guarantee you that you’re all going to be okay.”

Ansel nodded gratefully. “I know,” he said, taking a breath. “I want to be a worthy soldier, that’s all.”

“You’ve already gotten into Bellalux, that’s the first step.”

“It’s a far cry from you, fighting in the War of Kin.”

His father raised a brow. “I hope you’re not wishing for a war?”

“Of course not, only to be as good of a warrior as you and mom were.”

“Well, you’ve got a long way to go before you’re there,” his father acknowledged. “But you’ve also got a lot of time. Our time in the War was seven years after our first school term. And I have no doubt that by then you’ll be better than we ever were.”

Ansel clutched his necklace over his shirt. “You think she would have been proud of me too?”

His father’s expression grew somber as it always did whenever Ansel brought up his mother. “Of course she would have,” he said softly, stroking Ansel’s cheek with his thumb. “How could she not be?”

He gave Ansel another hug before insisting that he get ready for bed. “I know you’ve had an exciting day,” he said. “But you still have school tomorrow, and it wouldn’t be in your best interest to lose all your good marks right before graduation.”

Ansel was sure that with exams nearly completed and only one week to go he could neglect all of his classes and still receive top marks, but he promised he would

He brushed his teeth and changed into pajamas, and had just finished readying his school bag for the next day when he heard a soft chime sound outside his window. Eitan had finally responded to his note. Opening the celerbox, he pulled out the scrap of parchment and unfolded it to tiny neat print. “That’s amazing! Celebrate tomorrow after school at Hedley’s?”

Ansel scribbled a hasty 'yes' on the back of the paper and slipped it back into the box. Climbing into bed, he felt his body ease. The day had progressed better than he could have imagined. And his father was right. Even if he wasn't as skilled as he wanted to be yet, Bellalux would provide the best opportunities for him to learn and grow. Closing his eyes, he drifted off into a content sleep.

He was awoken the next morning by the smell of sausages wafting through the air. The scent made him bolt up in bed and grin. Instantly he recalled Eliza's promise of a special breakfast celebration in addition to last night's dinner. As quickly as he could muster, he flung himself out of bed and changed into a fresh linen shirt and pair of pants, stopping only for a brief moment in the bathroom to hastily brush his auburn hair and wash his freckled face. "Bye Tenzin, Gemma," he called, grabbing his backpack and closing the door to his room.

He sprinted down the hallway and stairs, the floorboards beneath his feet groaning as he took the steps two at a time. When he entered the kitchen he found his father and Eliza tending to the stove, and Monika sitting at the counter, already scarfing down food.

"Morning, son," his father greeted.

"Hi honey," Eliza smiled.

Ansel looked at the spread that lay before him. Breakfast in their home was usually baked bread with an assortment of homemade jams and jellies. Today on the table lay not only breads and jams, but freshly made pastries filled to the brim with fruits and chocolate and cream, stacks of spongy pancakes and waffles, ham and sausages, fresh strawberries, blueberries and raspberries, and warm muffins and scones. It looked like the hard work of five handmaidens.

"This is incredible, how did you manage to do all of this?" He asked.

"An early start, and the blessing of your father's help," Eliza said.

"You didn't have to do all of - "

"Oh hush, you deserve it," she assured.

Ansel took his seat next to Monika at the counter and looked at the sausages, pancakes and muffins stacked high on her plate. "Got enough food there do you?"

She rolled her blue eyes and piled some sausage and omelette onto her fork with her fingers "Here, taste," she held it up to him.

Ansel bit the end of the fork and Monika pulled it out of his mouth. Delectable savoriness exploded on his tongue. "Well, didn't mama do a great job?" Monika questioned.

“Absolutely. It’s delicious”

Eliza transferred the omelette she had been working on from the frying pan to a plate with potatoes and sausage and placed it in front of Ansel, who tucked in immediately. As he ate, he told them how he was going to celebrate with a trip to Hedley’s after school. Ansel’s father protested that it wasn’t really much of a celebration, considering it was what they did almost every day, but Ansel enjoyed the routine.

When he arrived at school he was greeted by a delighted Eitan and Corina, and as others heard of his admission he received several additional enthusiastic responses. Edgar, who had now returned to school, congratulated Ansel, although he looked incredibly disheartened as he did. Ansel apologized about his rejection, guilty that the sympathy he felt wasn’t enough to affect his positive disposition. Even Raymond’s rumors that Ansel must have lied to the Institute or bribed his way in couldn’t ruin his mood. Ansel enjoyed each one of his classes, indulged in the leftover muffins and scones Eliza had packed, spoke to more people than he had in a long while.

After the final school bell rang, he, Eitan, and Corina left for Hedley’s. The three took their usual seats at the bar and Eitan ordered them all a tall glass of ale. “To Ansel,” he toasted when the drinks came. “Future hero of the Benira.”

Corina laughed and took a long draft. “You better stop that,” she said. “Before his head gets so big it explodes.”

Together they made predictions for the future, told stories of the past, and sang along with a musician at the corner table, who had enchanted his guitar to play accompanying melodies. By the time they left, Ansel was bouncing nearly as much as Monika did.

The childlike enthusiasm stayed with him in the days that followed, carrying him all the way through to graduation. The day before commencement he received his final transcript: top marks in every class, including Historical Geography, which had been the only one he was worried about. His entire family filed into the school yard the next morning, where garden chairs had been arranged amongst the flower beds. Eliza cheered at an embarrassing volume as Ansel received his degree.

Ansel spent the afternoon saying goodbye to everyone he knew he was unlikely to see again before he left for Bellalux, which was almost everyone except for Eitan and Corina. When he returned home, his father and Eliza surprised him with a brand new shield. It was lighter than his previous one had been, silver with a titanium gold rim and black marble boss to match his sword. Ansel could barely stammer out his thanks.

His instructors were impressed by its quality when he showed it to them on the last day of training, two days after his graduation from school. Instructor Renhold maintained that it was likely even better than the selection that they provided at Bellalux, saying that his parents must have spent a great deal of gold to obtain it. Then he offered Ansel a rare smile.

“You did well this past year,” he said. “Put in more time and effort than almost anyone. You’ve earned your spot at the Institute. Don’t let anyone make you forget it alright?”

In all of Ansel’s time at training, he had never been singled out for praise. It was a nice feeling. When Instructor Renhold dismissed them for the last time, he congratulated everyone on a year of hard work and commended all in their district’s program who had been accepted once more. Leon, Raymond, Cora, Tris, and Ansel. Only five of two dozen students.

Ansel stayed behind and laid in the stands for a long time after everyone departed, reveling privately in his elation until the sky turned gold. When he did leave he took the scenic route once to view the sunset more. Expectedly, was waved down by Gritley upon passing his house.

“Ansel!” he stood from his rocking chair. “Ansel!”

“Hi Gritley,” Ansel said, approaching the house. “Are your lines any better now?” The heat had worsened in the past few days.

“Completely healed,” Gritley responded, running bony fingers along his smooth neck to demonstrate. “Dao really works miracles.”

“Well I’m glad to hear it.”

Gritley removed his hand and straightened. “You’ll have graduated by now, I’m assumin’. You hear from Bellalux yet?”

“I have actually,” Ansel brightened. “Received my admission last week.”

“Congrats boy. Sorry bout the rough timin’.”

Ansel frowned. “What do you mean?”

Gritley grinned. “You haven’t heard?” He asked. He paused dramatically as he always did before delivering a scandal.

Ansel wished he would continue without needing a response. “No,” he replied politely.

Gritley beckoned him closer. “Word from Ortus,” he whispered. “Apparently, a few nights ago, some of the Guardians there went missing.”

Silence seemed to encompass the world at his pronouncement. “Sorry?” Ansel replied.

“Yep. I have a friend who works at the management branch in Ortus, she said that they went on a mission to the local town of Hataar and never reported back. It’s causing quite the panic amongst the administration.”

Only the chirp of soft crickets broke the stillness of the dusk. Ansel was sure that Gritley had heard his friend incorrectly. “That can’t be right.”

Gritley looked insulted. “You questioning the integrity of my information boy?”

“No sir,” he said quickly. “It’s just, my father works for Benira’s Guardian Administration. If something like that had happened, he would have heard about it.”

“Oh I wouldn’t be too sure about that,” Gritley’s voice was sly. “They’re tryna’ keep it all hushed up down there. Restrained to their sect. Don’t want the panic to spread. Latoya only told me because I’m one of her most trusted confidantes,” he puffed his chest proudly.

Ansel stared blankly at the jasmine creeping between Gritley’s fence posts. Could they really manage to keep something like that from the rest of the administration? From the Council? Wouldn’t they get in trouble if they did? “Well if they’re not telling anybody, then what are they doing about it?”

“Tryna’ find them o’course,” Gritley replied. “Brought in a bunch of Guardians from the surrounding areas, having them work overtime on searches.”

That Ansel’s father couldn’t have possibly missed, not when managing delegations was as difficult as it was right now. He would have to go home and ask about it. As he said goodbye Gritley called out after him, “Good luck at Bellalux boy. If you hear any more news from your father or while you’re at school, you can always come talk to me. I’m a dependable connection.”

If Ansel ever had any private news he didn’t want spread, Gritley was the last person he’d talk to. Still, his information, though sometimes containing the occasional false detail, was usually sound in principle. If this one was the same, it didn’t seem plausible for his father not to know. Killings among Guardians were common enough, with tribes and criminals and Depravedes, it might have been understandable had his father missed one of them. But missing persons cases were much more rare. It was politicians, ambassadors or concolitators or cabinet members who disappeared, not Guardians. Not usually.

Unless... unless his father had heard about it and hadn’t told him. That was possible too. But why wouldn’t he? If it had happened three days ago there had been plenty of time. Did it just slip his mind? Or did he not think Ansel was mature enough to handle the news? An unpleasant wrath stirred in Ansel’s gut at the thought.

His father was reading a book on the sofa in the parlor when he returned. Ansel slung his bag by the fireplace and sat in the soft fawn armchair across from him.

“Evening Ansel, how was your day?”

“Do you know anything about Guardians going missing in Ortus?” Ansel asked.

His father looked up from his book. “Where did you hear about that?”

“So you do know about it?”

“Have you been talking to Gritley again?”

“Is it true?”

Sighing, his father set his book aside. “Yes. Four Guardians in Ortus didn’t return to their scheduled posts a few nights ago and nobody has been able to make contact with them. But they’re not pronounced missing yet, it’s only been three days. A proper declaration of that sort takes a week.”

Ansel felt the beginnings of enmity bubble. “Why didn’t you tell me?”

“I didn’t want to worry you,” his father replied. “Make your acceptance a cause for concern instead of celebration. Especially over something that might be nothing.”

“It doesn’t sound like nothing,” Ansel protested. “Gritley said everyone there is panicking, sending out searches to try and find them.”

“Gritley dramatizes everything. Search parties have been dispatched, but that’s standard anytime something goes awry. And things going awry is very common when you’re a professional in the field.” Ansel’s father leaned forward. “But son, you’re not a professional yet, and Bellalux is heavily guarded from outside invasion. You have nothing to be scared of.”

“I’m not scared!” Ansel objected, properly offended by the assumption. “I’ve known the risks of what I want to do for years. And if I’m going to be taken seriously as a Guardian then these are the kinds of things I need to be aware of.” He looked at his father intently. “You do take me seriously, right?”

“Of course I do,” his father responded. “This was just something I felt you needn’t concern yourself with right now. You should be focusing on improving your training.”

“I can do both at the same time,” Ansel declared firmly. “Dad, I’m not a child anymore. I can handle it, I want to handle it.”

His father nodded and softened. “I know you can, I’m sorry. From now on, I’ll tell you every update I get on the situation, okay?”

Ansel acquiesced slightly. “Really?”

"I promise." He patted Ansel's leg and stood up. "Come on, let's help Eliza with dinner."

But Ansel stayed seated in his chair. Another thought had occurred to him. "Dad?"

"Yes?"

"The timing of these disappearances..."

"Yes?"

"You don't think they could have anything to do with the Resistance, do you?"

His father sighed. "We've considered it," he said. "It seems unlikely, because only one of the Guardians in question was a Sorcerer, but we haven't ruled out the possibility."

Ansel thought about it as he readied for bed that night. About whether the Resistance had really strayed so far as to resort to abductions, about who or what could potentially have caused them if they hadn't. It was strange. Strange, but not frightening. He had to be prepared to confront dangerous situations if he were to succeed as a Guardian. So no part of him was afraid as he closed his eyes.

The man looked too tall and big to be real. He stalked through corridors of dark stone, boots echoing off hard floors in steady rhythm. The space held no doors or windows and the only light came from mounted torches, flickering and illuminating his rough, scarred face. To his left, dozens of chambers, all barred and stationed with guards wielding swords and spears. A prison. The man too, must have been a guard, because he wore the same uniform and nodded at the sentinels as he passed.

To the end of the corridor, up a flight of stairs, a right turn into another hall, and up two more flights the man walked. The edifice was endless, but he seemed to know where he was going. As he advanced, the cells grew fewer and further between, with more sentries positioned in front of the entrances.

They prattled to each other as they puffed on long pipes and exchanged bits of copper. Distracted by the trivial acts, they didn't pay much attention to the man's haste. Eventually, he left them behind and their voices receded into the distance. By the time the man rounded a corner that placed him at the base of a high tower, he was very much alone. Stifling his mirth, he began to climb the spiral steps.

At the top of the tower, four more guards vigilantly clutched identical polished broadswords. The chamber they stood in front of was different from those before it, not barred, no apertures, just a massive slab of iron with three distinct locks. The guard's uniforms too were different, bronze garments with silver chest plates, and they eyed the man's dark green livery suspiciously.

One of them cleared his throat. "I'm sorry sir, you're not authorized to be in this sector. Only specially selected Guardians can be stationed with this convict, Council's orders."

The man didn't respond.

Another stepped forward. "Sir, we're going to have to ask you to leave. This woman is one of the most dangerous individuals in the nation. It's for your own safety."

Still the man offered no reply. He simply stared between them and chewed his tongue, face darkening. The four guards looked at each other and advanced in unison, tightening their holds on their weapons. None of them were as big and tall as the man, but one raised his voice determinedly. "Sir, if you don't heed our words we'll have to forcibly remove you from the premises."

The man cracked his neck and chucked deeply. "Sorry," he husked. His voice was like gravel. "I'm not leaving without what I came here for."

The guard closest to him raised her sword and prepared to strike with the flat of her blade, but before she could, the man decked her face with his elbow and bashed his knee into her stomach. The other guards swung but the man moved faster than should have been possible. Even with no weapon he landed strike after strike, disarming them and knocking them to the ground. He inflicted blows to their heads with such precision that all were rendered unconscious in seconds. Smirking at his work, he scoured their bodies. One key he found on the smallest male sentinel, another on the female. There wasn't a third key in sight, but that didn't seem to bother the man.

He freed two of the locks with their respective keys. Then he reached into his jacket pocket and pulled out what looked like a piece of red candy. Placing it in his mouth, he bit down hard, chewed, and swallowed. His muscles twinged and largened. Bursts of scarlet energy ran through his veins and generated a perverse glint in his eyes. He grunted painfully.

Without wasting a moment he curled his meaty hand into a fist and punched the last lock. One hit didn't impair it, but he struck again. And again. The skin around his knuckles cracked and began to bleed, but he didn't stop until he heard a rattling clink and the lock was flung off its chain. He hurled the fetters aside and kicked open the groaning door.

Inside was a woman, short in stature and small in frame. The dark black cloak she wore hooded her eyes and trailed down to her ankles, concealing her face and most of her body. But her presence was strong enough to temper the air around her and make the man sink down to a knee.

"My lady," he bowed his head deeply.

The woman stepped out of the chamber and he moved aside. She inhaled deeply, taking her time indulging in the fresh, cool air that circulated the tower. In the torchlight her cloak shone. It was not a dirty, tarnished garment. Woven from silk and sinuous in texture, it bore golden seams and patterns along the hems, and swished gracefully as she turned to look at the man. "Oh do stand up," she said. "You look absurd." Her rich, commanding inflection sounded far too old to be Beniran. She was a foreigner from the west.

“Apologies,” the man rose at once. He was nearly twice her height, but he shrank under her gaze. “How does it feel to be free at last, my lady?”

“It feels like it took far too long,” the woman responded. “What is the reason for your delay?”

“The task you required, it took us more time than expected.” He sounded abashed.

“Of course it did,” the woman mused. “With your ineptness, I’m not surprised. I’m relieved that I can finally take matters into my own hands.”

“As am I,” the man replied. “You’re the only one suited for it. This,” he gestured to the guards’ bodies on the floor and the bloodied lock cast aside. “This is where I excel.”

“Yes,” she said, casting her gaze down. “In such regard you’ve proven competent. Are they dead?”

“No my lady, only unconscious.”

“Well done, training restraint is imperative.”

“My lady,” The man shifted, as though choosing his next words very carefully. “I have no doubt that when they wake, they’ll recount to their superiors all they remember.”

“Well then, let’s make sure they don’t wake.”

Delight replaced the anxious lines of the man’s face. “Really?”

“Please, enjoy.”

Flashing a scarred grin, the man raced to the side of one of the fallen soldiers and picked up his sword. With immense eagerness he drove the blade between the ribs of the unconscious man, who’s face paled as he bled out steadily. The man watched him for a delighted minute before repeating the killings with the others, in different ways to keep himself amused. Slashed neck, broken skull, sliced stomach. Deep pools of crimson soaked the stone floors by the time he was finished.

Though the effects of the tablet from earlier had worn off, the maniac glint in the man’s eye remained. “God I’d like to see every damned Guardian in this nation dead.”

The woman rapped one of the dead soldiers heads with her foot and then stepped over him, placing her hand on the man’s lower back. “Patience,” she said. “Patience and restraint. You’ll get your wish soon enough.”

Chapter 3 (Ansel) - SYNOPSIS

Ansel's nightmare has rattled him greatly, made him question his own courage and confidence. He tries to ignore it but as the Guardians are officially pronounced missing, his trepidation worsens. When he travels to Satil to buy everything he needs for Bellalux, everyone seems to be talking about the disappearances. Shortly after, it is revealed that some of the Guardians who went in search of them have also disappeared. Nobody seems able to make a connection between the individuals who have disappeared. The day before Ansel is set to leave for school, he goes out to Hedley's with Eitan and Corina to say goodbye, but news of a Feral attack forces them all to evacuate. Because the establishment says that professional Guardians are handling it Ansel doesn't do anything, but Raymond does, helping the Guardians to kill the Feral and then mocking Ansel for being too much of a coward to get involved. Raymond and Ansel get into a physical fight but Ansel can't help but feel that Raymond is right, and is reminded of the time Monika almost died because he was unable to stop a Feral.

Chapter 4 (Michelle) - SYNOPSIS

Shifting perspectives, we are introduced to Michelle Payson, the wealthy, educated daughter of Council member Jerimiah Payson. As a Sorcerer of the Healer class and a child of a famous politician, her parents raised her to be well versed in the academics, practiced in the magical arts, and wary of the political climate. Though they had a distinct political career set in place for her future, she has decided to defy it by becoming a Guardian. At Michelle's mansion her parents speak of the current political affairs occurring in Benira and ask her for her opinion. Before she departs to attend Bellalux, they tell her that she will regret attending the Institute and will eventually make her way back to their sphere. Michelle says goodbye to them and to her guard Angelina, who was responsible for teaching her to fight. Angelina offers words of encouragement. On the train to Bellalux, Michelle meets Ansel, and the two become instant friends. She sees a boy (we'll come to know as Felix Santos) betting on physical fights, and gets an immediate negative impression of him. The chapter ends with Michelle and the students arriving at Bellalux, Michelle intent on keeping her identity as a Council member's daughter a secret.

Chapter 5 (Michelle) - SYNOPSIS

For the first time we see the Institute of Bellalux in all its glory; a collection of towering limestone buildings with draped banners of blue silk. The students all meet Director Friderich Farvald, who explains to them what the course of the school year will look like and what will be expected of them. Afterwards he introduces them all to Gwen Warner and Eugene Chen, upperclassmen counselors who will be guiding them through their orientation. Gwen and Eugene take them on a tour of the school, showing them the mess hall, library, arenas, and more. The final stop on their journey is the armory, where each of them are permitted to select one weapon from a large arsenal. Michelle and Ansel both elect not to select new weapons, as Michelle already has the best there is and Ansel is content with his father's sword. Felix Santos, whom we officially meet for the first time, ridicules Ansel for favoring sentiment over practicality. The three get into an argument, Ansel and Felix both immensely annoyed with the other's attitude. As the day comes to a close the students are all brought to the ballroom, where they will be sleeping for the first week of orientation to more

conveniently receive simultaneous direction. While getting ready for bed, Michelle is confronted by Cleo and Haven Hansen, two twins she recognizes as the children of Council member Rayvid Hansen. Michelle has heard from her father that Rayvid is an untrustworthy man with questionable ethical beliefs, and upon encountering Cleo and Haven, she realizes that they are the same. The reputation of each other's parents leads to an immediate adversarial relationship, where Cleo and Haven maintain that they will do whatever they can to kick Michelle out of the school. Because Ansel comes to Michelle's defense, Cleo and Haven make him their enemy as well.

Chapter 6 (Ansel) - SYNOPSIS

We are back with Ansel again as orientation begins at Bellalux. The students are woken up at the crack of dawn the next morning for a quick breakfast at the mess hall before they are told to get their weapons and meet in the main quad. All of the first years surround Gwen and Eugene, as well as two other upperclassmen, Sophia Ceballos and Jaya Finlay. The counselors explain that training will be broken down into four different sections with each of them handling a different section: strength building (Jaya), basic athletic skills (Sophia), weapons training (Gwen), and hand to hand combat (Eugene). The students are placed into four groups and taken to different areas of the grounds, rotating between counselors as their starting abilities are assessed. Ansel gets put in the first group of trainees with Michelle and Felix, as well as Cleo and Haven. As training begins it becomes clear that Ansel, while not bad, is below average amongst this group of kids. He does befriend one girl named Toni Levita during sparring, feeling an immediate fondness toward her because of her likeness to Corina. After a brutal training Ansel, Michell, and Toni spend the rest of the day getting to know each other. The week progresses and Ansel attempts to keep up with the new heightened level of vigorous training. It doesn't help that he gets less and less sleep as his bad dreams grow worse. One day he sees Cleo and Haven tormenting a student for information. He steps in to try and help but he proves to be no match for them, and would have been beaten had they not been in a public place. At the end of the week, the students are assigned to their dormitories and Ansel learns that his roommate is Felix, much to both of their chagrin. The two get into an argument their first night sharing a room, with Felix claiming that Ansel is self righteous and naive and Ansel arguing that Felix is ignoble and arrogant. They go to bed dissatisfied with the arrangement.

Chapter 7 (Ansel) - Partial Chapter

[synopsis:]

Training continues throughout the month and starts to take its toll on the students. Ansel is sore and weak and has just about had it with Felix's cocky attitude, with and constant taunting from Raymond, Cleo, and Haven. One particularly bad morning during training, he reaches his breaking point and when Gwen tries to fight him he unknowingly uses his Prophet powers, knocking Gwen's weapon out of her hand. This stuns everyone including Gwen, who is not sure what to make of it. Ansel attempts to figure out how to do this again during his training but is unsuccessful. On the brightside, Ansel has grown incredibly close with Michelle, Toni, and another girl named Sage Campour whom Toni met in her training section. Before long, orientation finishes and the rest of the school returns. Classes officially begin, and Ansel and Michelle both

excel in academics just as they always have. He finally feels close enough to Michelle to tell her that he hasn't been sleeping well because of his nightmares, which have begun to take on a narrative form. Felix too, knows about his nightmares from sharing a room together, and mocks him relentlessly. He and Ansel continue to be agitated with each other as roommates. While out one night, Ansel is cornered by Cleo and Haven, who engage him in a fight for not doing what they had asked. Outnumbered two to one, it isn't looking good for Ansel, until Felix intervenes and together they drive the two of them away. Felix is adamant he only helped because Cleo and Haven are worse than Ansel, but Ansel is hopeful for the potential of their relationship improving in the future.

[partial chapter:]

For the umpteenth time in the hour, Ansel found himself knocked to the mud soaked ground. Beads of sweat dripped down his face, mingling with the pounding rain until the two were indistinguishable. He pushed himself off his stomach and onto his knees, panting. From behind him came the sound of squelching footsteps.

"Up," Felix said.

They were in their fourth and final hour of afternoon training, and Felix had been his partner for the past thirty minutes. Ansel didn't move. He didn't know if he had enough energy left in his limbs to stand, let alone fight again.

"Come on, are you a soldier or what? Get up."

With more effort than it had ever taken in his life, Ansel turned. Felix's body, blurry from the rain, or from how Ansel had hit the ground, or both, stood looming over him. He looked impossibly big, mace over his shoulder like he was guarding a hostage. Ansel wiped his eyes. "Give me a minute."

"No, no minute, go and pick up your sword, now."

The annoyance that ran through Ansel gave him a little vitality. "You're not in charge here alright? Stop acting like you are."

"Gwen's in charge. We go non stop until she calls time."

Ansel grimaced and stood shakily on his legs. "Like you'd care about what she says if it didn't involve humiliating me."

"You do that just fine on your own."

"You're an ass."

"And you'd be dead already if this was a real fight."

The fact that there was truth to Felix's words that aggravated Ansel more than anything else. He walked over to where his sword had been cast and picked it up. "I know you think you're better than me -"

"I'm objectively better than you."

"But I got into this school, same as you. I have every qualification to be here."

"Fight like it, then."

Jaw tightening, Ansel widened his stance and gripped the hilt of his sword. He had only held it out in front of him when Felix charged, swinging his staff toward Ansel's side. Ansel sidestepped the first blow and deflected the caput with his own blade, but before he could attempt a strike of his own Felix rotated on his heels and jabbed his elbow into Ansel's stomach.

The pain was enough to make him double over, but he knew that was what Felix was expecting him to do, so he rolled backward instead. Sure enough, not a second later Felix's mace stuck right where Ansel would have been. Seizing an opportunity not to be on the defensive, Ansel swung his sword at Felix's heels, trying to knock him off of his feet, but Felix jumped, clearing the blade easily, and brought the griff of his weapon down onto Ansel's back.

Ansel's body collided with the ground once more. He rolled over, spitting out the grass and mud that had gotten into his mouth.

From above him Felix sounded muffled and far away. "Better than last time."

It wasn't much of a consolation.

"Stand up," Felix pressed. "Let's go again."

Ansel was interrupted before he could respond.

"And, that's time," Gwen called. "Nice work everyone. Take fifteen minutes rest and then we'll swap pairs for our last rotation."

Felix chuckled. "Wow, good timing for you." He slicked back his curls and without bothering to help Ansel off of his feet, turned and made for the stands.

Exhaling breathily, Ansel pushed himself up and retrieved his sword again. One more rotation, he could get through it. He tilted his head toward the sky and let the rain wash the mud off of his face. For a moment, the rest of the world was drowned out, and the only thing that existed was cool water against skin.

“You okay?” Michelle’s voice brought him back to reality. She was standing by his side, looking like she had been through it too. Her normally elegant hair was messy and mangled, and her shirt was spotted and torn and at least two shades darker than the pale pink it had been at breakfast. She leant her weight against her spear as though it were a walking stick.

“Yeah, I’m fine. You?”

“Been better, honestly, but I will be. Only one round to go, and then food, a bath, maybe a nap.”

As they walked toward the stands, Ansel caught sight of Felix talking to a tall burly boy, Jonas, he thought he remembered his name being. Jonas said something that made Felix roar with laughter and nearly spit out the water he had been chugging.

Michelle noticed where Ansel was looking. “I’m sorry you were paired up with him,” she said.

“It’s okay. I mean, I’m pretty sure he was actually trying to kill me, but it’s okay.”

“Good news is that he can’t, unless he wants to be kicked out too.”

“You know, I honestly don’t think he’d even care. I just wish I was good enough to put up an actual fight against him.”

They entered the stands and eased their tired bodies onto the bench where they had left their belongings. Ansel opened his bag and grabbed his towel, wiping it across his face to rid himself of the grime and sweat the rainwater hadn’t managed to clear. As he did, Michelle looked inside her own satchel and frowned. “Hang on, don’t tell me I forgot it,” she stuck her hand, groping around.

“What?”

“My canteen.” She began to pull things out of her bag. “Wraps, liniment, book, I should probably leave that in there, don’t want it to get wet.”

“You brought a book?”

“In case there was any free time,” she explained, continuing to list items. “Pens, ink cartridges, paper, medicine, guards-”

“How is your bag so full?”

“I like to be prepared. Except I forgot the most important thing, stupid!”

“Hey no worries,” Ansel said. He reached into his satchel for his canteen and handed it to her. “We can share mine.”

She took it hesitantly. "Are you sure?"

"If you don't mind that my mouth's been on it."

Michelle grinned. "Thanks."

As she opened the cap and brought it to her lips, Haven materialized out of thin air on the stretch of bench between them. "Sharing, Burnett?" he prodded vexingly. Ansel jumped. Michelle was so startled she nearly dropped the canteen. Before she could regain her bearings Haven grabbed the flask from her hand and took a long swig.

Ansel lunged for it but Haven vanished into the daylight, leaving Ansel grasping at empty air. "Your reflexes need improvement." When his voice rang this time it was from behind them. Ansel and Michelle whirled around to find him several rows back, downing more of Ansel's water. His sister came floating down from a tree branch high above, landing gently and silently beside him. They donned their usual coordinated blue and black, looking too well put together after hours of training.

"What are you, five?" Ansel scowled. "Give it back."

"But I'm thirsty," Haven protested, continuing to drink. Ansel attempted to charge at him. Haven popped away and up beside Michelle in the blink of an eye. "Careful, Burnett, no physical bouts while we're off the clock remember? Try something like that again and I might have to report you to Farvald."

Ansel spun around once more, refusing to look disoriented. "Because you're scared to actually fight me?"

"Sure, terrified. Cleo was watching your sparring sessions. I'm sure you really looked like the pinnacle of fear while you were taking those beatings."

Cleo smirked, and Ansel glowered at her resentfully. "Yeah? You think you're any better? How about you put your sorcery aside next round? We'll see how you do then."

"We have been," Cleo lied smoothly. "The instructors said no magic after all."

"Ansel's seen you use it," Michelle objected.

"Yes," Cleo mused. "I'm not surprised you'd believe his completely unproven claim. You're prone to believing a number of things you have no evidence for, after all."

"I mean, who wouldn't take the word of a self-righteous man who's found his dignity on the floor?" Haven said.

“Is there something you want from us?” Ansel asked. “Or are you just here to be irritating?” He presumed it was the former. Though in many ways the twins were strikingly similar to Raymond, they usually had agendas that he didn’t. Troubling, offensive, and potentially dangerous agendas, but ones that provided something to address.

“You mean besides a drink?” Haven asked, draining what was left in the canteen. He began swinging it around his finger by the strap. “Yes, actually. It’s about Santos. If you don’t stop sending that Common brute after us, I will make your life hell.”

“You already do,” Ansel said. “And what are you talking about?”

“Santos,” Haven repeated. “Felix. You think we’re the type to stand idly by and let him beleaguer and threaten us? Corner Cleo completely by surprise while she’s trying to study in the library? Call off your dog or we go to our father about it.”

Ansel’s brow furrowed. “Wait a minute, you think I told him to threaten you?”

“He’s your roommate. I can only imagine you hired him as muscle because you’re too afraid to try anything on your own.”

The accusation was so absurd Ansel nearly laughed. “Well, I hate to break it to you, but I didn’t tell him to do anything, I barely talk to him. We don’t get along.”

“I’m supposed to believe that?” Haven scoffed.

“He’s telling the truth,” Cleo stated, leaning in toward Haven. “Shock looks real. And the way they were fighting earlier, it went beyond practice.”

At his sister’s word, Haven faltered. He looked Ansel up and down and folded his arms in front of his chest. “Well then what is his problem with us?”

“Maybe it has something to do with the fact that you’re both absolute nightmares of people?” Michelle offered.

Haven looked enraged but before he had the chance to do anything Cleo flicked her finger calmly. A single blue flame shot from it, landing in Michelle’s hair. Michelle yelped and frantically patted it out before it had the chance to spread. The smell of burning lingered. “There’s more where that came from,” Cleo assured.

Ansel glared at them. “Felix isn’t a fan of people in power,” he said. “Especially when they’re Sorcerers, and especially when they’re arrogant because of it. Look at who your father is and how you behave. That’s your explanation.”

“So he’s throwing a tantrum because of our natural sovereignty ,” Cleo said. “Tell him to grow up and face reality.”

“And tell him to back off unless he wants trouble,” Haven added. “Our father can create a great deal of it for someone like him if we say the word.”

“Tell him yourself,” Ansel replied. “Unless you’re too scared to confront the man you’re so adamant you’re above.”

“We’re not,” Haven said, though Ansel thought he saw his eye twitch. “But he’s a nuisance we shouldn’t have to deal with. Why lift a finger for a Common when we can make you do it for us? Trash should be handled by trash.”

“You can’t make him do anything,” Michelle said.

“Really?” Cleo replied. More blue flames erupted in her palm, flickering dangerously as she looked from Michelle to Ansel with her perilous, unblinking eyes. “Because there’s a lot more than your hair that can get burned.” She held her gaze for several moments before extinguishing her fire and turning to Haven. “Let’s go.”

Haven tossed Ansel’s empty canteen on the dirt at his feet. “Stay hydrated.”

The two chuckled and circled on their heels, hair and bodies flouncing as they walked away.

“Did you know Felix was giving them a hard time?” Michelle asked Ansel. Ansel shook his head and Michelle bit her lip. “Is that bad that I’m kind of glad? I’ve never been glad about something like that before.”

Ansel shook his head again. He usually didn’t like the idea of anyone being harassed, but it was difficult to feel too sorry for Haven and Cleo when they spent so much time doing it to other people. He picked up his empty pouch from the ground. “What are we going to do for water now?”

Michelle took the canteen from him and held it up to the rainy sky. A few stray droplets fell inside the leather. Ansel snorted.

“You have a better idea?” Michelle asked.

“Not really,” he admitted. “And while we’re at it…” He tilted his head back and opened his mouth, letting the rain fall onto his tongue. It wasn’t much, but they managed a semblance of refreshment by the time they were called back again.

As they all gathered together, Gwen began to rattle off the fifty or so names in the last set of pairs. Michelle was put with a pale boy named Whitman. Felix’s partner was a tiny boy named Silas, who looked like he would have an even worse time with him than Ansel had.

“And Ezra and Marjorie, and Otto and Asher, and Beatrice and Thea,” Gwen finished, folding up the soaked piece of paper and stuffing it into the pocket of her pants.

Ansel realized that his name had not been called. He raised his hand. “Um...”

“Oh yeah, you’re gonna be with me kid,” Gwen said. “You were supposed to be with Levi, but he’s being given medical attention after his last bout.”

If there was one person Ansel wanted to fight less than Felix, it was Gwen. He had seen what she could do, gotten the smallest taste of her abilities during orientation, and he wasn’t eager for more. But he didn’t dare protest.

“Okay, pair up and begin,” Gwen said. “When I call time, grab your things and head to the courtyard, we’ll be meeting the other three groups there briefly to go over some details regarding the next week. After that, you’re free for the remainder of today.”

Cheers, claps, and sighs of relief emitted from the group. Gwen smiled. “Yes, congratulations, I know eight hours of physical practice a day is difficult, especially at the beginning, but you’ve been handling it very well.”

“Well, most of us have,” Cleo said loudly. Her tone was innocent enough and she kept her eyes on Gwen, but Ansel knew who it was directed toward.

Gwen raised her eyebrow. “Right. Well, go on, find your partner. Ansel, this way.”

Ansel glanced at Michelle, who mouthed *I’m sorry* before darting off to Whitman.

“Burnett!” Gwen said, louder this time. “Come on, stop wasting time.”

Taking a deep breath, Ansel unsheathed his sword and hurried over to the end of the field where Gwen was leading him.

As he had expected, Gwen was no less harsh and even more skilled than Felix, more skilled than anyone he had ever fought in his life. He was barely able to dodge a single hit let alone attempt to land one. The small amount of energy he had managed to regain during his rest depleted rapidly as he was thrown into the mud over and over again.

Gwen offered a piece of advice alongside each bruise.

“Tighten your hold on the grip after you rotate the blade.”

“Move your weapon like you’d move your arm, it’ll balance your body weight.”

But Ansel was so exhausted it was difficult for him to execute or even comprehend what she was saying. The rounds became shorter as he was knocked over more and more quickly.

“Look at my eyes before you look at my sword. They’ll tell you when I’m about to strike.”

He had only lifted his blade when Gwen deflected it and faster than he could see, hit his mouth with the pommel of her sword. As he flew onto his back he felt the cut on his lip that had begun to heal open once more, and he tasted the tang of copper run down his tongue.

“And, that’s time. Final rotation is over,” Gwen called out loudly.

Despite Ansel’s clouded vision and the ringing in his ears, he understood enough to breathe out a shaky sigh of relief. He tilted his head to the side and squinted to see gaggles of students begin to pick themselves up from off of the ground. Ansel didn’t move. Not yet. Even with wet dirt staining his skin, soaked clothes, and rainwater seeping into every crevice in his body, he felt like he could pass out then and there.

“You’re not listening to me.”

He was startled by how close the sound of Gwen’s voice was this time. Looking up he found her leaning over him, standing with her legs on either side of his torso.

“What?” he croaked.

“I said, you’re not listening to me. To the advice I’m giving you. I went easy the last few rounds. If you had taken in what I said, you wouldn’t have gone down so quickly.”

Ansel bit his lip and winced as he felt blood again. “I’m sorry, I’ll do better next time.”

“Alright then get your sword, let’s try again.”

“What?”

“Let’s try again.”

“Now?”

Gwen looked at him as though daring him to challenge her. Ansel tried not to look visibly pained. Yes, he wasn’t the best fighter there, but he wasn’t so bad that he deserved to be singled out. He willed himself to distance his mind from his body and staggered to his feet slowly. The other students stopped what they were doing and watched.

“This time,” Gwen said, spinning her own blade to ready it in her hands. “Hear what I’m saying. Look at my eyes.”

Ansel saw excitement dawn on everyone’s face as they watched Gwen get into position. Those who were further away drew nearer to get a closer look. “Ignore everyone else,” Gwen said, gesturing to the growing crowd. “Focus.”

Ansel did his best to take her advice. He knew that unlike Cleo and Haven, who had pushed their way up to the front smiling gleefully, most people were only staying to watch Gwen fight. Still, it was hard to overlook around twenty observers. He swallowed and steadied his sword, which was growing heavier in his hand by the second.

Gwen lunged forward and Ansel tried to watch her eyes. He noticed a small flit to the left and parried in that direction, quickly shifting his gaze toward the blade. There was a clang of metal against metal. He darted his eyes back to Gwen’s face in time to see her glance at his stomach and ducked down.

When he sprang back up Gwen attempted an overhead strike. He managed to put his sword between them but she pushed her weight down with the flat of her blade and twisted, prying the sword out of his hand and sending it flying. Ansel was able to evade the punch but not the kick that followed, and he was on the ground once more.

The breath was knocked out of his lungs and the distant sound of people cheering ensued.

“Better,” he heard Gwen say.

“If that’s better, I’d hate to see how you were doing before.” Haven’s sounded further away than he was.

“Oh I’m sorry Hansen, would you like to take his place?”

Ansel was too exhausted to care that Gwen had challenged Haven. He was too exhausted to care about Haven insulting him in front of everybody. He wasn’t sure if all the Healers in the world working together could make him feel better. Every bone in his body weighed ten times more than it should have, every muscle bubbled and burned as though the blood in his veins was magma. He wanted to throw up everything he had ever eaten but he didn’t feel like he had the energy to do so.

“You listened to me about eye contact, but don’t forget what I said about tightening your grip.” He saw a hand enter his field of vision. Gwen was standing overhead, looking at him expectantly. He forced his hand to take hers and allowed himself to be pulled upward. She handed him his sword, which he hadn’t realized she had collected, and took it gratefully.

“This time, strengthen your hold on the grip when you rotate the blade.”

“This time?”

“Ready yourself.”

Instinctually, he widened his stance and gripped his weapon.

“Wait, Gwen I don’t think I can - ”

Before he could finish, Gwen was charging at him again.

Only, she was moving more slowly than she had been before. He wondered if his brain was lulling everything but his own body felt in time. As she swung to the right Ansel sidestepped it with what felt like plenty of time to spare. She recovered quickly, but not as quickly as she usually did. Rotating around, she prepared a backhand strike, and even with limbs of lead and an unpositioned sword, Ansel was able to bring his blade up to meet it.

As soon as the metal hit Ansel ducked and backed about a foot away. Gwen prepared to swing again, but this time, in addition to her slow momentum, there was something strange.

A shadowed, animated likeness of herself extended outward from her body like a ghost. The shadow moved a millisecond before she did, striking right where Ansel was standing, and he leapt out of the way. In an instant, it was gone, and Gwen was where it had been.

Ansel didn’t know what had happened, didn’t have a moment to consider. All he knew was that he was not on the ground yet. Gwen looked momentarily confused before her eyes narrowed in focus. The shadow appeared again just before Gwen lunged, and its sword would have hit his side had it been physical, but it wasn’t.

He stepped and brought his own sword up parry where the empty figure’s had been, in time for it to collide with Gwen’s. As it did, everything but himself seemed to slow further, and Ansel pulled his sword back, seizing the opportunity to jab its hilt Gwen’s arm. He loosened her grip and then used the flat of his own blade to push the weapon out of her hand as she had done.

It clattered to the ground.

Chapter 8 (Felix) - Partial Chapter

[synopsis:]

The third and final perspective of this novel is with Felix, who begins the chapter having saved Ansel from Cleo and Haven. We get a glimpse into Felix’s outlook on life and why Ansel’s attitude irritates him so much. As someone who was born and raised in the poorest, most mistreated cities in the nation, he is

completely disillusioned with the apparent good of both establishments and people, and finds Ansel's manichean view of morality and faith in systems infuriatingly naive and disingenuous. However, he despises Cleo and Haven even more for their wealth and belief in their own superiority. As school continues Felix excels at training, proving to be one of the best first years, but is underperforming in academic classes. He has made a friend named Jonas, whom he likes for his toughness, his humorous and sarcastic nature, and their similar backgrounds. A week into the semester it is announced that the first years, along with the counselors, will attend the annual introduction of students to the Premier, Council, King, and Queen. This news excites nearly everyone except Felix, who has a deep disdain for Benira's authority. The counselors accompanying the trip also seem less than enthused to be attending, and on the train ride there Gwen and Eugene make their distaste for the Queen especially clear. When Felix meets the King and Queen upon their arrival in Regalia they prove just as insufferable as he thought they would be. Then they travel to the capital city of Cero and meet Premier Aliyah Meyer, who is much more charismatic and friendly, welcoming them all and explaining to them how Guardians will be working with the government in the future. Felix finds her amicable nature even more infuriating than the Queen's because of its falsity. When arriving back at Bellalux, he and Ansel get into an argument about the government and what it means to serve.

[partial chapter:]

"It is my honor to present the royal blood of Benira, her majesty Queen Siena Lani."

Two guards pulled open the doors, and Felix caught the barest glimpse of the queen's figure over dozens of eagerly moving heads. She stood in the entrance for a long moment, an egotistic effort to ensure that her presence was properly acknowledged. Then she began to sweep down the hall and into Felix's line of vision.

She was dressed so excessively that it was impossible for her adornments not to be the first thing he noticed. Her dress was a violent silver that flowed down to her ankles, the bodice and skirt embellished with gleaming decorative trims. Her neck and arms were accessorized with diamonds and sapphires and an assortment of other stones that Felix could not name. He knew almost nothing of jewelry, but he was fairly certain that a single stone from her necklaces would feed his family for a year.

As she drew nearer to his position at the front, Felix managed to get a look at her face. He had been hoping that the rumors of her incredible beauty were false, that the hearsay was wrong, that the photographs he had seen falsified her true appearance.

Unfortunately, that wasn't the case. Her full pouty lips and large brown eyes were striking. Her skin, fair but youthfully pink in the cheeks, was a reminder that she was less than five years Felix's senior, and her dark hair was coiled and pinned delicately around the silver crown in her hair. Audible gasps arose from several people, including Jonas, who kneeling next to Felix momentarily lost his dignified composure.

Felix heard a mutter on his other side. "Bitch." Gwen was scowling at the hem of the queen's dress as she glided past. It didn't seem as though the queen had heard her, but Gwen hadn't been quiet when she

spoke. Even Felix wouldn't have had the gall to risk such an utterance. It was nice to know that there was someone else who had as little love in their heart for her as he did.

The queen climbed the steps and turned in front of her throne to face her awed audience. She stood with hands clasped in front of her waist, offering no semblance of a smile.

From by the window, the voice of the Herald rang out. "King Hugo Hoffman."

There was a slight delay in reaction as everyone peeled their eyes away from the queen and looked back toward the opening doors.

The king, who was more easily visible because he was significantly taller, was decidedly less impressive than the queen. He wore robes of dark scarlet and a thick golden mantle draped over his shoulders. Stout and gruff with plenty of copper hair and a bushy beard of the same color, his severe face was so worn and tired that he looked a decade older than his forty two years. The golden crown on top of his head was slightly crooked. He walked more quickly and heavily than the queen, his loud lumbering footsteps echoing loudly. Several people in the first row, though not Felix, shrank back slightly as he approached.

He took his place next to Queen Siena. She looked almost comically petite standing next to a husband twice her age and size, but her poise and composure that made it clear to Felix who was the more powerful of the two. When they both took their seats, it was she who spoke. "Turn."

Her voice, although soft and even a little vernal, was commanding. Everyone in the room rotated on their knees to face the thrones instead of the carpeted path. "Rise."

Four hundred bodies stood at once. There was quite a bit of noise as shoes squeaked against the marble floors and weapons clattered clumsily against each other. She waited for everything to fall silent once more.

"It is my honor to welcome you, as prospective Guardians, to the noble court of Benira this evening," Queen Siena began, although the tone of her voice suggested that she didn't think it an honor at all. "I am sure you believe that you are here today because you are the best young fighters that the world has to offer. But all I see amongst you is carelessness, naivete, and a lack of dedication."

Felix rolled his eyes. There was no way that she could have made that determination from less than a minute in their presence. She had obviously prepared a whole speech intended to tear them all down. Given her reputation, it wasn't at all surprising. Or at least, wasn't at all surprising to *him*. The faces around him, which had been brimming with adoration, now dawned confusion and hurt.

"You have grossly underestimated the task ahead of you," she continued presumptuously. "Up until now, you may have enjoyed combat as a pastime, as a hobby. From now on this will not be something that you can give only a part of yourself to. This will be something that you must offer your life to. You are a member of the select few responsible for the protection of the nation. To become a Guardian is to

understand that your life is no longer your own. It belongs to me, it belongs to my husband, it belongs to Premier Aliyah, the Council, and to all of those to whom you are in service. It belongs to the people you have sworn to protect. If you are not prepared to make that sacrifice, then you are free to leave now.”

She paused, as if anybody would dare to proclaim that the idea actually didn't sound enticing to them after all, and exit the room with a wave and a 'thank you.' The thought of Felix relinquishing his life to someone like her, though maddening, was completely expected. Politicians and the idle rich always expected others to sell their souls for them. He had known what he signed up for.

“In a few short years, you will have the honor of serving us directly, and if you work hard enough you may even become influential figures in the country, working alongside the Council. Many of our most esteemed courtiers are Guardians. Now,” she stopped speaking for a dramatic moment. “You all know, of course, that at the end of each year of your schooling you will need to take an examination to proceed to the following year. At the end of your fifth and final year, you will take the exam that will reject or establish you as a professional Guardian. However, in important new information, you should know that some of you will not be making it to your first examination at the end of this year.”

An unspoken buzz arose as the students looked at each other with furrowed brows and shrugging shoulders. Felix glanced in front of him for Gwen and Eugene's reactions, trying to gauge if they knew what she was talking about, but they stared at each other with as much hesitation as everyone else.

“As of this year,” the queen continued, her voice a little louder, “we will be evaluating you throughout the term to determine whether you are performing adequately enough to continue your training. Only those of you who are implementing yourselves sufficiently will be eligible to take your examination. The rest of you, I would estimate roughly a quarter, will need to select a different path.”

“What?” Felix responded aloud before he could stop himself.

Fortunately he was not the only one. Jonas echoed his exclamation behind him, and murmurs began to radiate from the crowd at the new information. It had always been the case at Bellalux that, save for behavioral concerns, examinations were the only way one could be denied from moving forward.

Felix wasn't all too concerned about his own prospects, certainly not for the coming year, but he could not say the same about everyone else. He had observed a notable lack of skill in many of the students, some who worked hard but didn't have the right instinct. Some who were naturally skilled but sloppy and negligent. He had made predictions from the beginning of who might not pass at the end of term - his eyes strayed briefly to Ansel, who was looking perturbedly at Michelle - but not even letting them try?

“... You know about this?” he heard Eugene asking Gwen.

“Course not... all the help they can get... a stupid decision?”

“... form of agency ... you think Farvald knows?”

“He does now.”

Eugene sighed and ran his hand through his hair. Gwen folded her arms in front of her chest.

Still seated in her throne, Queen Siena held up her hand. “Silence please.” She didn’t need to raise her voice. The room went quiet at once. “As I am sure you’re aware, Guardian disappearances have been transpiring across the nation. This is not a punishment, it is a protection. For both yourselves and for us. We need to ensure that those of you who work for us are prepared enough to survive and prepared enough to protect us properly. Perform your absolute best and take your training seriously, and you will be more likely to prevail.”

The king coarsely cleared his throat. “Do not be discouraged, you’ll be just fine. Most of you will succeed our evaluations, and those of you who do not will have opportunities in different places, even at different Institutes. You will still be able to serve. These new procedures merely ensure that those who are tasked with the most important duties will be the finest, most readied warriors.”

If the king’s words were supposed to offer any sort of comfort, they were unsuccessful. The crowd looked more apprehensive than they had before he had spoken. Everybody present had worked to become a *Bellalux* Guardian. Any job without that title would be less significant, less prestigious, and most importantly, less lucrative.

“So with that knowledge in mind, work hard this year,” Queen Siena resumed. “Listen to your professors, to Director Farvald. Train until you’re exhausted, practice until you break. If you do that, you should be in a good position. You are dismissed. I will be seeing you again sooner than you had likely thought.”

The crowd began to jostle and whisper. The guard named Emerson shouted over the hubbub, “Alright everybody, follow me, I’ll be escorting you out of the castle. Keep up and please remain orderly.”

Students began to pile into the center of the hall, forming lines and treading over the red carpeting. Being at the front meant that Felix would be the last to exit. He placed his mace over his shoulder and looked at Jonas. “Still wish you were the king?”

“Maybe not,” Jonas said. He lowered his voice to a whisper. “I should have believed Gwen and Eugene, she’s vicious.”

“You should have believed *me*,” Felix protested. “I was the one who said it first.”

“Yeah, but you hadn’t met her, they had.”

“Gwendolyn, Eugene,” Queen Siena’s voice rang. Felix and Jonas ceased their exchange to look at her. She and King Hoffman had descended to the bottom of the steps and were standing only a couple feet away, guards flanking their sides.

“Your majesty,” Eugene bowed.

“It’s Gwen,” Gwen said.

“You are to attend a meeting with King Hoffman, myself, and some of my retinue in the North Tower cabinet room immediately” Queen Siena instructed. “Sophia, Jaya, and Professor Khan are being informed about this as well. There is something I wish to discuss.”

“Yeah there’s something I’d like to discuss with you too,” Gwen said.

The Queen ignored her. “Florence will escort you there,” she gestured to the Guard to her right. “And after our meeting she will escort you back. You are not to stray anywhere she does not take you, understood?”

“Yes ma’am,” Eugene said. Gwen nodded.

“Very well. And Gwendolyn,” Queen Siena looked over her shoulder at Gwen as she began to turn away. “Mind your attitude.”

Gwen clenched her jaw tightly, but managed to wait until the queen and king had exited through the side door before letting out a loud swear. “I cannot stand that woman.”

“She’s horrible,” Felix agreed.

Eugene chuckled and Gwen cracked a smile. “You haven’t seen anything yet,” Eugene promised. “Wait until you meet her in a private setting.”

“Really? How much worse could she be?” Jonas asked.

“Pray you don’t find out,” Gwen said. “Or actually, pray you stay long enough that you do, now that she’s going to be kicking people out, apparently.” She rolled her eyes.

“Not that you two have anything to worry about, from what I’ve seen anyway,” Eugene assured. “Now go, follow Emerson out before you lose the group.”

“Yeah, get out of here while you still can,” Gwen said. “We’ll see you right after we get out of hell.”

As they walked away, Felix and Jonas looked at each other and grinned.

“What I wouldn’t give to be in that meeting,” Jonas said, as they hurried to catch up with the last of the students exiting the hall.

Chapter 9 (Felix) - SYNOPSIS

A month passes at Bellalux and Felix is adjusting fairly well to life at Bellalux. Training comes fairly easily for him, he applies for the school’s Currelau team, and he is settling into the routine of classes. He uses his hearthring to communicate with his family frequently, though he always makes sure he is alone when he does this. Despite his difficulty trusting, he finds somewhat of a mentor in Gwen, who he respects a great deal and who is similar to him in a lot of ways. Gwen gets a call from Director Farvald to take three promising first years on a rescue mission and ends up choosing Felix for his combative ability, Michelle for her healing ability, and Ansel for the one instance in which he disarmed her. She also takes Eugene and together the five of them set out to the location an anonymous observer gave for the location of some missing Guardians. They travel together to Pardes and Gwen tells them the plan for what should be an easy and straightforward mission. But when they get to the old abandoned building where the convicts are being held hostage, they discover that the place is crawling with Feral that have been keeping the convicts from escaping when the guards are off duty. They find a few of the convicts and Michelle and Eugene stay with them as Gwen, Felix, and Ansel go to find the rest. Gwen tells Felix and Ansel to stay together as a team, but Felix, assured of his abilities and that their chances of success will be greater if they all go separately, convinces Ansel to split up. He scours the house on his own but instead of finding the remaining hostages, he finds four Feral. He gears up to fight them despite knowing that he has little chance against all of them at once. For a short while he is able to fend them off, and then one of them lands a hit.

Chapter 10 (Ansel)

Ansel felt the cry of pain reverberate through every bone in his body.

Felix.

Abandoning the rotting door he had been examining, he turned and raced down toward the direction of the wail, stumbling through rooms and halls in fresh haste. Felix's tolerance for pain was not low, so whatever had happened, it had to have been bad.

Dammit.

With every rapid step he took he cursed Felix for suggesting that they split up, cursed himself more for agreeing. Eventually he had to slow and close his eyes to listen for the sound of something more. Somewhere above him, he heard the unmistakable low, grumbling growls of Feral.

He hesitated momentarily, trying to determine the quickest path to take, but then a much louder roar erupted and Felix let out another excruciating groan of agony. "I need help, up here!"

In all the time he had known him, Ansel had never once heard Felix ask for help. He bolted, following any and every corridor that could potentially bring him closer to the din, but the building was like a maze and he found himself having to double back multiple times.

"Gwen!" he shouted into the empty space. His voice echoed off the walls. "Eugene, Michelle, if any of you can hear me, I need backup. In the upper right side of the house!"

Around an abrupt corner he stumbled across a flight of rickety stairs. The growls of the Feral grew clearer as he climbed and followed them into a long narrow hallway, picking up speed.

Twice he nearly fell through a decaying floorboard, but being light and quick on his feet did have its advantages, and he was able to scale them before they broke and crumbled to bits on the landing below. The hallway made a sharp left turn. Then another right, up another set of creaking stairs, and down a long corridor. Ansel ran, the noises getting closer and closer until the corridor opened into a large empty space.

The scene in front of him was not a pretty one.

Four Feral, the largest nearly tall enough to breach the ceiling, advanced on Felix, who was barely dodging their snarling teeth. Ansel saw instantly what had caused the scream; one of the Feral had already landed a strike on Felix, whose arm was bent in an unnatural position and bleeding excessively through his jacket. He clutched it in place with his remaining hand, mace cast on the other side of the room. His wincing, pale face made it clear that he wouldn't be able to hold his own much longer.

Without thinking, Ansel struck the hilt of his sword against his shield, and an echoing clang rang through the room.

“Hey!” He shouted.

All four beasts snapped their necks in his direction, eight savage black eyes immediately giving him their full attention. Ansel raised his sword as one of them pounced. He dodged the foaming mouth and bloody gums and struck his sword into its side, using his shield arm to block as a second lunged at him.

Neither the sword nor the shield did much damage. He saw a spurt of black drip from the Feral he had stabbed, but the blade clearly hadn't gone very far because it seemed not to notice. The largest Feral swung at Ansel. Sharp keratin barely missed his neck, grazing his shoulder as he rolled between its legs and emerged beside Felix.

“What are you doing?” Felix sounded like he was trying to yell but his voice was weak. “Get out of here!”

“I'm not leaving you,” Ansel said, arching his sword to ward off yet another attack and trying to ignore the blood trickling down his arm.

“You can't take on four of them at once.”

Ansel knew he was right. If Felix hadn't been able to best them there was no way that he could. A game of delay was all it was, keeping them at bay until one of the others arrived to help. But if they didn't arrive on time, couldn't find them, or worse, hadn't heard Ansel's call at all ...

Two of the beasts pounced on him and Ansel ducked out of the way. He had barely processed their bodies colliding with the wall when another struck him across the stomach. The breath was knocked out of his lungs and he went flying, landing at the entrance of the corridor he had come from.

As he pushed himself up he caught a glimpse of the dark tunnel. If he ran fast he could make it back down to his friend, to safety. Then he heard Felix roar in pain. Sidestepping and smashing his shield into the head of a Feral charging at him, he was able to spot another pinning Felix to the ground, its teeth inches from his neck. It was being held away only by Felix's mace, which he had undoubtedly tried to pick up while the monsters were distracted by Ansel.

Ansel could see more and more blood pulse out of his broken arm as he tried to force the creature away, face turning from pale to sickly green. In a flash Ansel saw the image of Felix losing consciousness, lifeless on the ground as the monsters tore into his body until it was unrecognizable, gouging on his innards. Dying in the worst place, in the worst way imaginable. He banged his sword against his shield again.

“Over here! Hey, I said over here you big ugly brutes!”

Each one turned on him once more. He had no idea what he was planning to do as two of them bounded for him at once.

But they were moving slowly, too slowly, as though time itself had liquidized around them, and Ansel recognized the sensation at once. He had felt it that day in the field, when he was fighting Gwen. He fell flat on his stomach and rolled.

He had intended only to roll out of the way, but the movements of the beasts were so delayed that he was able to stop himself under one of their stomachs and jab his sword deep into its belly as it flew through the air. Removing the weapon, he felt a burst of acidic liquid splatter his frontside, but he didn't give it a second thought. He spun out from underneath the creature as it let out a mournful howl and crashed to the ground.

The hairs on the back of Ansel's neck stood up and he whirled to find the larger Feral preparing for an attack. But a warning shadow emerged from it just as it had from Gwen. It swiped at him, phantom arm passing right through Ansel's throat. He dodged and struck the same spot, blade making contact with the arm of the actual creature. The limb flew clean off, and as it stumbled in pain Ansel ducked, slashed at its stomach, circled, and stabbed its back.

The two remaining Feral circled on him and charged from different angles, one baring its teeth for his waist, the other for his head. Ansel saw their preceding shadows. Knew what to do. He leapt from the wall, jumping off the back of the one approaching from lower and using the momentum to propel himself toward the one high in the air.

Bringing his sword down right into its neck, he fell in tandem with it as it hit the ground and ceased moving. Ansel left the weapon in the creature and rotated, bashing his shield into the head of the Feral who was still recovering from being used as a springboard. He clobbered until the beast's face was mashed and bloody, ripped his sword from the neck of the other, and slit its throat for good measure. It fell to the floor with a loud thud.

Ansel's senses were on high alert in anticipation of another attack. He stood, stance low to the ground, waiting for any form of movement, but there was none. His bloodied sword and shield were readied, and yet, nothing. There weren't any of them left. A moment ago there had been four and now...

Dead. They were all dead.

He stared around at the scene he had created. Black blood puddled around the splintered wooden floor and dripped from the cracks in the walls. The mangled bodies of the Feral were strewn across the room, reeking of rotting flesh and asphalt.

"I'm sorry." His whisper was barely audible to his own ears.

On the floor, Felix grunted. He was trying to push himself up but doing so was clearly painful. It looked as though in trying to stave off the Feral with his mace, his leg had been twisted as well. Still, his arm was far worse off. Sinking down to his side, Ansel tore the end of his own shirt and began wrapping the fabric from his forearm to his bicep, a makeshift cast that he hoped at the very least would slow the blood.

“Don’t move,” he said. Felix clenched his jaw and let out a guttural groan.

His sickly face gaped at Ansel. “How did you - all at once - ”

“Hey,” Ansel protested. He worried what would happen if Felix exerted energy, even to speak. He looked ready to lose consciousness as it was. “Don’t worry about that, we can talk about it later. For now just focus on breathing.”

When he had finished wrapping the wound, Felix tried and failed to push his hand away. Ansel retracted it on his own.

“Don’t talk to me like I’m a baby, I’m fine,” Felix said.

“Felix, you’re not fine,” Ansel protested. “Look at the state you’re in.”

Felix looked at his mutilated arm. “I’ve seen worse.”

“We have to go find Michelle, she’ll be able to help,” Ansel insisted.

“Just, give me a second alright?”

Ansel sighed and relented, clutching his sword and allowing himself to catch his breath. For a moment, heavy exhales and slow dripping were the only sounds permeating the silence. Then the rhythmic noise was broken by rapidly approaching footsteps. Ansel jumped to his feet, giving Felix a start.

“What?” Felix asked.

“You hear that?”

“Hear what?”

Ansel readied his sword once more as the sound drew nearer.

A familiar raspy voice cried out. “Ansel? Felix?”

Ansel puffed out a breath of relief.

“Okay I heard that,” Felix cracked a smile.

“Over here Gwen!” Ansel shouted. “Up the stairs, down the corridor!”

A few seconds later Gwen charged into the room, sword in each hand. Her eyes flitted from the bodies of the Feral, to the blood on the walls, to Ansel and then Felix, and she sheathed her weapons.

“Thank God you’re both alive,” she said, rushing to Felix’s side.

“He needs medical attention,” Ansel said.

“No shit. Help me get him up.”

Ansel wiped and sheathed his own sword, and together they propped Felix up between them.

“We couldn’t find the other captives,” Ansel told her as they began to hobble back toward the corridor.

“I know,” Gwen said. “Because I found them, brought them to the room. Eugene’s standing guard while Michelle works on healing them. We’re gonna get you guys back there too.”

It took a long time with the two of them practically carrying Felix, but eventually they were able to make their way back, encountering one Feral on their way which Gwen took care of with ease. When they entered the room Ansel saw three additional Guardians, who all looked younger than the initial four, recovering on the bench as Michelle tended to them. Upon seeing Ansel, Michelle ceased the incantation she was performing over one of their lower backs and ran toward him.

“Oh my god, what happened?” She gasped.

“Feral,” Felix answered. “Four of them actually, scratched me up really bad.”

Michelle looked at him incredulously. “Four Feral at once?”

“Yeah.”

“How did you survive at all?”

“Ansel. He killed them.” Felix said.

Ansel smiled awkwardly. He had half expected Felix to not admit to what happened.

Michelle tried to conceal her surprise. “Really? I mean, that’s amazing - that you’re both okay. Or well, not okay, but...” she glanced down at Felix’s arm. “Should I? ... ” She turned back to the Guardian she had been healing, who looked anxious for her to return. “Or maybe I should - ”

“Finish healing the hostages first,” Eugene instructed from the door. He had been so quiet that Ansel had almost forgotten he was there. “That’s our job. Felix will live, you can work on him afterward.”

Michelle looked at Felix for confirmation. Ansel thought he might protest, but he simply nodded.

“Okay,” Michelle said. She wrapped her arms quickly around Ansel’s neck. “I’m glad you’re alive.”

Then she raced back over to the Guardian, apologizing profusely. Together, Ansel and Gwen walked Felix to the edge of the room and helped him sit down. Gwen leaned his back against the wall and squeezed his shoulder. “You good?”

Felix nodded.

“Alright,” she said. “I’ll be right back.”

She went over to talk to Eugene, leaving Ansel and Felix alone in a temporary lull. From the corner of his eye Ansel looked at the patchwork splint he had made for Felix and then began using what was left of his torn shirt to polish the blood off of his shield. Felix didn’t look at him, not even when he spoke.

“Thank you,” he said.

“What?” Ansel asked.

“I said, thank you. For saving my life. I owe you one.”

Ansel shook his head. “Don’t mention it.”

Felix bit his lip. He looked like he wanted to say more, but he didn’t. Instead he leaned his head against the wall and closed his eyes.

It took Michelle around an hour to finish healing the rest of the Guardians and begin her work on Felix. By the time she did, the sky had begun to shift from black to a pink tinged blue, and the emptiness outside the windows was replaced with soft light. Ansel could tell by the way that Gwen paced and Eugene kept looking from Michelle to the door to the Guardians that they were anxious to leave before anyone or anything else came back.

When Michelle announced that she was finished with Felix’s arm and leg, her voice was weak and she looked almost as pale as Felix had. Collapsing on the floor softly, her eyes fell shut. Ansel scrambled over to her, closely followed by Gwen and Eugene.

“Michelle,” Gwen shook her shoulder.

“M okay,” Michelle muttered, but she didn’t open her eyes.

“She’s exhausted,” Eugene said. “That amount of magic, I’m not surprised.”

“Can we wait for a little bit to let her rest?” Ansel asked.

“No,” Gwen said. “We have to get out of here before the guards show up again.”

Ansel frowned. “Gwen, I don’t think she can walk.”

Gwen took a deep breath and picked Michelle up from off the floor as though she was the weight of a tinte. “Come on, work with me Michelle.”

It took some maneuvering but eventually Michelle was secured firmly onto Gwen’s back. Eugene turned to the seven healed Guardians who were resting in different corners of the room. “Do you guys have the energy to walk?”

One of the older ones stood, looking shaky but determined as she dusted herself off. “Still slightly weak, but we can make it. A little more struggle is better than waiting here, risking the guards or more of the Feral coming back.”

The others grunted in agreement, slowly making their way to their feet. Ansel tried to help Felix up, but Felix insisted that he was fine. He certainly did look a lot better; his face had regained most of its color. Eugene stood by the door guiding everyone out of the room. As they were exiting, the youngest looking of the Guardians, a boy who couldn’t have been more than a couple years out of school, stopped and gave him a forceful embrace that caused him to stagger backwards. For the first time since Ansel had met him, Eugene looked genuinely surprised. He stood completely still, like he wasn’t sure he knew what to do.

“Thank you so much,” the Guardian said, sounding like he was close to tears. “I thought I was never going to see my family again. Because of you, now I will.”

After a moment’s hesitation Eugene patted his shoulders and nodded, looking as solemn as Ansel was moved. “Of course.”

When Ansel approached them, the man let go of Eugene and flung his arms around him too. “Thank you.”

Ansel returned the embrace warmly. “I’m glad you get to be with your family again.”

The man let go, sniffing and clearing his throat. “Yeah, me too.”

The twelve of them departed the cursed old building and walked for a long while, Ansel and Felix in front and Gwen and Eugene bringing up the rear as they took turns carrying Michelle. The thick roots and

fallen branches of the woods were much more difficult to maneuver around in exhaustion, but thankfully in the early morning light the forest didn't offer up anything more dangerous.

Eventually they reached a familiar dirt path and Ansel recognized the small shabby houses that began popping up. They were on their way back to the hamlet of Enderfield. The people who were out and about in town when they arrived looked at them strangely. Ansel couldn't blame them. They were an odd group to find, all weapons and bloodied clothes, especially in a village this small. Gwen told them to try and avoid drawing attention to themselves as she hailed a large carriage and paid the rider several silver. They stumbled into the back of the vehicle and the four horses began to move.

The ride was mostly silent. Ansel watched the landscape around him grow lush and more abundant as they traveled further and further away from the middle of nowhere. Safe at last and no longer fearing for anyone's life, his mind reflected for the first time on his fight with the Feral. On what he had accomplished, the way he had been able to fight. He had done something he didn't understand or know how to control, but he was certain now that the instance with Gwen hadn't simply been a fluke.

He couldn't stop thinking for the entire duration of the hour-long journey. With everyone too exhausted to speak, his mental spiral was only interrupted when the carriage arrived in Pardes. They all clambered out. Michelle, who was finally feeling stable enough to walk, made sure to stroke each horse's mane before she left.

Ansel shook out each one of his limbs, using the physical action to fully tear himself from his train of thought. Swarms of people ambled below the canopies, darting in and out of shops. He asked Gwen if their situation might finally be considered enough of an emergency to warrant taking the transport, but she insisted that with their number, the train would be easier, and that it was a shorter walk to the station anyway.

By the time the sun had fully risen in the sky they were all piled into the seats of a train car. Ansel took the window seat next to Michelle and across from Felix. Gwen and Eugene spoke with the Guardians before they came over and sat down with them.

"They all seem to be doing fine," Gwen said. "They got over their shock quickly. They're professionals. We're all going to make a quick stop at Cero and meet briefly with the Premier, then the five of us will take the train and return to Bellalux. We should be back by sundown."

"Wait, the Guardians are coming to Cero too?" Michelle asked. "They're not going home?"

"They have to report to the Premier," Eugene said. "It's their job."

"You'd think she'd let them see their families first," Felix grumbled.

"Unfortunately, when you take up this mantle you have to put certain personal priorities second," Gwen said.

Fiddling with the string of his necklace, Ansel looked at Gwen. "Sorry that we found a bunch of Feral instead of the hostages."

"Don't apologize, the only thing that matters is that we got them out. That, and the fact that you didn't die," she said. Her face softened and she somehow fixed her gaze on all three of them at once. "Thank you all, for not dying." There was a gentleness in her voice that Ansel hadn't heard before. "I don't think we could have taken that on our conscience."

"No problem," Felix said. "That's why I did it. Lived. Didn't want you guys to feel bad."

Gwen and Eugene chuckled. Ansel bit his lip. "I just hope we didn't, you know, slow you guys down?"

"Are you kidding?" Eugene said. "Give yourself some credit, we couldn't have done this without you. You all performed well, especially given the unforeseen circumstances."

"Yeah, it would have been nice if the source had warned us about the Feral," Michelle said.

"They probably didn't know," Gwen said. "A lot of times sources have incomplete information." She looked at Felix. "How's your arm?"

Felix rotated it slightly and winced. The bones felt like they were in their normal position again, but there was still pain when he moved. According to Michelle, the cartilage was still in the process of fully fusing to its original state.

"It's going to take a couple more hours," she explained. "Usually it would be faster, but I was pretty exhausted by the time I operated on you, I'm sorry."

"You were great," Eugene assured. "That amount of exertion for a Healer your age, most couldn't have handled it."

"I *am* really tired," Michelle said.

"You should sleep," Gwen advised. "We have a few hours until we reach Cero."

Michelle heeded Gwen's words, slumbering off in minutes. Felix followed soon after. Ansel stared out of the window as the train tracks ran toward the ocean. He wished he could sleep too, but he couldn't stop his mind from wandering back to the fight. Slowed images of his sword anticipating flesh played in his head on a loop.

"You okay?" Eugene's voice pulled him out of his thoughts. Ansel nodded and Eugene raised a skeptical brow, leaning forward. "I heard Felix mention that you took on four Feral at once."

Ansel shifted. This wasn't the first time Eugene had been eerily intuitive. "Yeah."

Gwen smiled proudly. "I knew I made the right choice when I picked you for the mission."

Ansel managed to smile back but Eugene's face remained grave. "Look Ansel, no offense at all, but from what I've observed of your skill level right now, you and Felix should be the ones dead, not the Feral." When Ansel didn't reply, he pressed further. "When you were fighting Gwen that day in the field, I've never seen anything like that. And then, tonight, what happened?"

Ansel looked out the window again. "I don't know."

"That's what he told me after our fight," Gwen said.

"I'm not lying," Ansel promised. "I really don't know. It's like - " he watched the sunlight glint over the water as it raced by. "It's like, you know how, technically you're aware of the fact that Fanin is on the other side of that ocean, but you can't see it?"

Gwen and Eugene looked out the window where he was pointing and chorused a simultaneous "Yeah."

"Well, most of the time when I fight, it's like that. I know what I'm supposed to do, but it's hard to picture exactly how to do it with all of the variables constantly changing. But last night, or that time in the field, it's like suddenly those variables are compressed, the thousands of miles of water go away and I can see the country across the sea with perfect clarity." He paused for a moment, deciding to tell them the specifics at the risk of sounding insane. "When those moments happen, time slows down, I can sense the enemy's actions. They warn me."

"Warn you?" Eugene probed.

"It's - they kind of project these images that tell me what they're going to do." He looked back at Gwen and Eugene. "It sounds crazy, I know."

"Hey, who's to say what's crazy?" Gwen said. "Whatever happens, it's clearly working in your favor."

Eugene was quiet, and for a moment Ansel thought he saw a flash of suspicion in his eyes, but it was gone as soon as it arrived. "You must have a really strong survival instinct," he said finally.

"Yeah, I guess," Ansel replied.

Looking from Eugene's face to Ansel's, Gwen straightened. "Well I for one, am sure the Premier will be thrilled with your performance."

Meeting with the Premier was fairly easy, mostly because Ansel didn't have to do any of the talking. After she had spoken privately with the Guardians, she dismissed them back to their homes and brought the five students in to provide their version of what happened. Ansel, Felix, and Michelle all stood back as Eugene and Gwen filled her in on what had occurred: how there had been unexpected Feral and how the Guardians had been made unconscious, how the only piece of evidence they had found in the house was a broken vial containing some blood. Eugene handed over the vial gingerly to one of the guards.

The Premier thanked them all and promised that she would be in touch with Director Farvald shortly. Ansel's heart swelled as they all bowed, but Felix glowered as if it was taking all of his effort to sink to a knee.

He remained in a sour mood for the duration of the train ride back to Amare and the short walk back to Bellalux, though he kept casting sideways glances at Ansel as though trying to solve a complicated puzzle. Not wanting to upset him further, Ansel stayed beside Michelle's side and told her exactly what had happened with the Feral. He wondered if his experience might have been something medical, but Michelle didn't seem to know what to make of it any more than Gwen or Eugene did.

When they arrived back at Bellalux, more than half of the first year came out to greet them, all clamoring over each other to ask about what had happened on their mission. The babble was so loud that Ansel couldn't hear a singular question. He tried to give everyone his attention but found himself more and more disoriented as the noise grew louder.

Only Cleo and Haven, who Ansel spotted in the back corner of the courtyard, seemed uninterested. They rolled their eyes and whispered to each other just as they always did. Michelle tugged on Ansel's arm and pointed to where Toni and Sage were pushing their way through the crowd. Ansel grinned in relief but before he and Michelle could even start toward them, he heard Gwen shout over the noise. "Alright everybody back up, I know you're all curious about what happened but these three need their rest. I'm sure they'll all fill you in soon enough."

There was a great deal of grumbling and groaning but Gwen was never ignored. People began to disperse, casting lingering looks at them as they retreated back inside. Ansel caught Toni's eye and pointed upward, mouthing 'Avera roof.' Toni nodded and grabbed Sage's hand, pulling her away.

"God, I always forget how annoyingly eager new students are," Eugene said.

Gwen snorted. "Like you weren't that way two years ago."

"Shut up."

She laughed and looked at Ansel, Michelle, and Felix. "You guys okay?"

They all assured her they were fine, that they didn't need to go to the medical center or talk to any of the professors, so she let them go. Ansel and Michelle rushed to Avera, clambering the stone steps until they

reached the door to the roof. Toni and Sage were waiting with a decanter full of wine and a plate stacked with sandwiches.

“Figured you’d be hungry,” Toni said, as Sage enveloped them both in hugs, “but that you wouldn’t want to deal with people in the mess hall, so we decided to bring some stuff up here.”

“Thank you,” Ansel took one of the sandwiches. The soft bread filled with roast pork tasted better than anything he could remember eating.

They sat on the roof for at least an hour, taking in the starry night sky as they ate and drank and Michelle and Ansel explained what had happened. Toni and Sage too were astounded that Ansel was sitting in front of them instead of torn limb from limb, decaying in the stomach of Feral, and Sage hugged him again for good measure. Only when everything had been recounted, when their bellies were full of food and their heads were buzzing from the wine, did they all say goodnight and make their way back to their dormitories.

Ansel opened the door to his bedroom and found, much to his surprise, that Felix was already there. It was the first time ever that he had gotten in before Ansel, and the way he rose from the edge of his bed as Ansel entered made it clear that he had been waiting for him. Ansel shrugged off his jacket and tossed it on his chair.

“How’s your arm?” he asked.

“Feels good as new,” Felix said, rotating it with ease.

“That’s great. Michelle’s a fantastic Healer.”

“Yeah.” Felix was silent for a moment, standing in place as he looked down at his shoes.

“What’s up?” Ansel offered.

Felix took a deep breath. “I wanted to thank you again, for saving my life.”

“Oh,” Ansel could feel his face reddening. “That. Yeah of course. It was no big deal.”

“No big deal? Ansel you took on four Feral at once. I thought for sure you’d be killed, I don’t know how you weren’t.”

“Honestly, I don’t either,” Ansel said, trying to crack a smile that Felix didn’t reciprocate. “Look, I appreciate you thanking me, really. Given who you are, it means a lot.”

He had only meant for the light jest to ease the mood, but Felix reacted intensely. “See, that’s what I don’t understand.”

“What?” Ansel asked.

“You clearly don’t like me - ”

“Wait a minute, I never said I didn’t like you. It was you who had a problem with me first.”

“Whatever, the point is that we haven’t really gotten along,” Felix said. “Right?”

“I - yeah,” Ansel replied.

“But you saved my life.”

“Yeah.”

“Why?”

Ansel wasn’t sure how to answer the question. It had never really felt like a decision. “Because you were my teammate and you needed help.”

“That can’t be the only explanation.”

“Why not? That’s our job.”

“Our job, which technically isn’t even our job for another five years, only requires protecting powerless civilians in situations we’ve been trained to *handle*. Not sacrificing ourselves for peers we don’t even like by engaging in fights we can’t win. Or at least,” he paused. “shouldn’t be able to win. You could have left me behind with no threat to your career.”

Ansel looked at him dubiously. “My career doesn’t mean anything if I’m not proud of the person it makes me,” he said. “I don’t care about what the minimum requires. Being a worthy Guardian means that if anyone, civilian or Guardian, like them or not, needs help, you’re there. Regardless of any cost.”

The look Felix gave Ansel was equivalent to a doctor examining a patient. “You’re serious?”

“Yes,” Ansel said definitively. “I couldn’t live with myself if I let someone die knowing there was something I could do about it. And if you can, I don’t think you’re in the right profession.”

Felix ran his hands through his hair, walked back over to his bed, and perched on the edge. “Well you’ve already told me you don’t think I should be pursuing this profession.”

Ansel sat across from him on his own mattress. “Yeah, because you said you want to be a Guardian for the money.”

“And you don’t think money should be a motivating factor.”

“No, I don’t.”

Leaning forward, Felix placed his forearms on his knees. Ansel had never seen him look so serious. “What do you know about Fortis?” He asked.

That wasn’t the response Ansel had been expecting. “Sorry?”

“The city I’m from, what do you know about it?”

Ansel pursed his lips, trying to think of an answer that wasn’t ‘bad’ or ‘poor’ or ‘dangerous.’ “I know it’s the most industrial part of the nation, and that income tends to be lower.”

“We both know that’s the understatement of the century,” Felix said. “Ninety percent of the population is impoverished. It has the highest crime rate in the country. You’re aware of that, aren’t you?”

Ansel nodded uncomfortably.

“Are you aware that the precious Council and Royal Court you worship so much are the reason it’s that way?” Felix asked. Ansel blinked. Luckily, Felix didn’t give him the chance to attempt a response. “I mean, Fortis was always less wealthy because of the abnormally large number of Common, but when refugees started immigrating there from Nalim during the War of Kin, dear government became so afraid that they started cutting pay for jobs in the city. Knew it would invoke infighting and keep potential violence from spreading to the rest of the nation. They advertised it as dangerous to ensure that the only people who’d seek it out were also dangerous.”

Felix’s account made Ansel wary. Explicit cautions regarding Fortis’s dangers were standard throughout the nation, that was true, but he hadn’t considered where those dangers had originated... His parents, his teachers, the adults he knew had never mentioned anything about it. But then, they were all secluded in a well off sanction of the country.

“It’s why using violence to obtain money is the primary way of life in Fortis,” Felix continued. “Why the only people who move there now are asshole criminals. And the government’s definition of ‘help’ for the problem they created is stationing Guardians at every entrance to make sure all destruction is kept within the city.”

Ansel shifted, thinking of his father.

“So about a year ago,” Felix said. “My younger sister - ”

“You have a sister?” Ansel asked. He hadn’t meant to interrupt, but for some reason, he had never envisioned Felix having any siblings.

“Two, actually, and a brother. Anyway, my younger sister, she got really sick, but payment for people like us is so bad that we couldn’t afford the medicine she needed. She was okay in the end- ” he assured, seeing the look on Ansel’s face. “But for a minute she was definitely at risk of dying. That’s why I agreed to become a Guardian. The money, it’s not because I’m a mercenary - ”

“It’s to protect your family,” Ansel finished. “I’m sorry for assuming. I judged before I knew - ”

“Yeah you did,” Felix said. “But to be fair, it’s not like I gave you a good reason to think otherwise. And you’re right too. In a perfect world, I wouldn’t be training here. The thought of becoming a pawn for the people who hurt my family, it makes my skin crawl.”

Ansel bit his lip. “I get that. I really do, and when we graduate and become Guardians, we’re gonna help fix it. Like actually fix it.”

Felix scoffed.

“We will,” Ansel promised. Then he paused, trying to piece together what he wanted to say. “But being a Guardian, it’s not just about the government. It’s about the people, the individual people. It’s about helping them.”

Felix chuckled. “You know, that attitude was what irritated me the most about you,” he said. “All the preaching about being a hero, it reminded me of the shit that they say. The Queen, the Premier, the Council members, they go on and on about laying down your life to aid others but they’re too scared to actually attempt anything helpful. Fucking hypocrites. Everyone who says things like that, they turn out to be a bunch of empty words. At least, I thought it was everyone.”

Ansel realized what he was trying to say. “So you didn’t think I meant all the things I said about helping people?”

“I didn’t think you would follow through,” Felix admitted. “People like to talk a big game, make themselves look morally superior until they actually have to give something up. It’s so fake. But with you, I guess it wasn’t. I guess you just are morally superior.” When he laughed it sounded heavy. “You humbled me in more ways than one, that’s gonna take some getting used to.”

Ansel considered Felix’s words for a minute before he spoke. “I don’t think I’m morally superior,” he said finally. “I think you underestimate the number of people that would do the exact same thing I did. Michelle, Toni, Sage, I know they all would in a heartbeat.”

“Well I’ve never met anyone like that,” Felix said. “I didn’t actually think they existed outside of political advertisements.”

Ansel shrugged. "I mean nobody's perfect, but you try. It's not a bad thing to be around people who really want to help. Who you can trust, and know are going to be there for you."

Felix looked up at Ansel through his messy black curls and smiled. "No I guess it's not," he said. "I mean, it kind of worked out in my favor yesterday."

Ansel smiled back. "It kind of did."

They didn't say much more after that, but when they went to bed Ansel felt a new sense of peace imbue the room.

News of the encounter with the Feral had traveled quickly and by the following afternoon, everywhere Ansel went people came up to him asking him to recount how he had survived. Though Ansel had never been unpopular, the experience of being an object of intrigue was foreign and not entirely unwelcome. Even his professors seemed to be taking a greater interest in him. When he contacted his family he heard a pride and relief in their voices stronger than they had ever expressed before.

The most rewarding thing, however, was the way in which his relationship with Felix had changed for the better. Not only was Felix being nice (even letting Ansel use the bathroom in the morning), but he now seemed to genuinely enjoy being around him. The two had made plans to spend the night exploring the hidden room full of jarred magic that Felix had found, but Ansel saw him even earlier in the day. While he was eating lunch, Felix slid into the seat across from him with his tray, drenched in sweat and looking drained.

"Training was brutal," he said, taking a large mouthful of his beef stew.

"I feel like they should've given you the day off," Ansel said. "Considering what you went through."

"Kahn offered," Felix admitted. "But physically speaking there's nothing wrong with me anymore, so I said I'd go."

"Regretting it?"

"A little, mainly because they made us run for ten miles today. I hate long distance running."

"No stamina?" Ansel smirked.

"Bite me," Felix said. "I see you're full of energy. No training for you?"

"Not until tomorrow, today it's only academics. I just finished my Pulchra Era Literature class."

"Oh that's way worse," Felix said.

“No, it’s actually really fascinating, I love the book we’re reading right now,” Ansel insisted.

Felix rolled his eyes. “Of course you do.”

But by the time Ansel had finished explaining the plot to *Tragedies of Bitter Essence*, Felix was invested. They only ceased discussing the novel when Michelle approached their table. She looked restless, fidgeting with her fingers.

“Hey, I’m sorry to interrupt, how are you doing Felix?” she asked.

“Fine, thanks.” Felix’s response was slightly sharp and Ansel wondered if it was still about Michelle’s father or if he was merely tired of people asking him if he was alright.

“Great, I’m glad,” Michelle said. “I was wondering, Ansel, if I could talk to you privately for a minute?”

“Sure,” Ansel stood. “I’ll see you later tonight?” he said to Felix.

“Yeah, sounds good.”

Ansel returned his dish and followed Michelle out of the mess hall.

“Are you friends with him now?” she asked.

“Who, Felix?”

“Yeah.”

Ansel considered the answer. He’d like to say so, but he wasn’t sure if Felix would just yet. “I think so, we’re headed there at least.”

“Really?” She raised her eyebrows. “He’s a dick, nobody knows that better than you.”

“Is that what you wanted to talk to me about?”

“No, just curious. This is something much more important, but I want to wait until we’re alone.” She quickened her stride.

Ansel hastened to keep up. “Where are we going?”

“Library.”

When they arrived Michelle drew him to an unoccupied aisle full of linguistic encyclopedias covered in a thick layer of dust. After double checking to make sure that nobody was within earshot she spoke in a low voice. "I was up all night last night."

Ansel tried to keep the exasperation out of his voice. "Michelle, you needed rest after yesterday."

"I tried to sleep," Michelle promised. "But when I got back to my room, and it finally set in that the Guardians were all safe, that we were all safe, I started thinking."

"About?"

"About what happened during the mission. I didn't realize until I really went over it just how strange it was."

"How strange what was?" Ansel asked.

Michelle reached into the pocket of her sweater, pulling out a folded piece of paper and handing it to Ansel. Ansel opened it and found several well drawn diagrams of human bodies, each marked with red ink in the same places. He looked at her in confusion.

"The injured Guardians," Michelle said, "remember how we noticed that they were all maimed in the exact same ways, in the exact same locations? Deep intrusions in the shoulder blades, lower spines, and pelvises?"

Ansel recalled the identical gaping wounds. "Yeah."

"Well when I was examining them," Michelle continued, "I saw that the lacerations went all the way down *into* the bone. Whoever had abducted them, they were actually drilling the cartilage. And then during the healing process, I realized that I didn't only have to heal their bones, I had to replace their bone marrow. It had been taken out. Reproduction, that's part of what made the process so difficult."

"Okay," Ansel said stupidly.

"While I was doing it, I wasn't focusing on anything else because it required every ounce of mental energy that I had. But looking back on it now... it's weird isn't it? I mean, if someone was just trying to torture them, there are more efficient ways to do it. Why go through the trouble of withdrawing marrow? It's a difficult process, especially if you're doing it in a way that keeps someone alive."

She had a point. "And then I remembered the vial of blood that Eugene found."

Finally Ansel began to follow her train of thought. "You think that whoever abducted them is taking their bone marrow?"

Michelle nodded. “And not just taking it. Using it. Bone marrow is the origin of all blood. Which means it’s incredibly powerful, especially in spells. So I did the research last night, and it turns out that there are five hundred and seventy one incantations across all classes that utilize it. Some of them can be really, really dangerous.”

“Hold on,” Ansel said. “A Sorcerer is employing their blood for some kind of practice? What are you suggesting they’re trying to do?”

“I don’t really know yet, but given that whoever it is is targeting Guardians and is skilled enough to succeed, it can’t be good.”

Ansel scratched his brow. If Michelle’s hunch was correct, ‘not good’ was an understatement. A Depraved Sorcerer with a clear agenda was cause for distress. “You should talk to your father,” he advised. “He could warn the Premier.”

Michelle shook her head. “No, since I decided to become a Guardian he doesn’t take me seriously anymore. Unless I provide adequate proof he’ll insist that the experience is making me paranoid. Anything to try and force me home.”

“So you’re going to attempt to find proof?” Ansel knew the answer to the question before he asked.

“Yes.” She looked at Ansel with eager eyes. “Will you help me?”

Chapter 11 (Ansel) - SYNOPSIS

Ansel begins trying to help Michelle but she knows much more about magic than he does so he feels a little useless in the investigation. Additionally, in trying to figure out what has happened Ansel’s dreams are getting worse, so he tries to distract himself by hanging out with Felix. But each time he tries to help Michelle his dreams worsen so eventually he stops the investigation. As he spends time with Felix, Toni, and Sage, he begins to grow concerned about Michelle, who has begun to let the investigation affect her mental health. While out with Felix, the two stumble upon Cleo and Haven performing a spell in secret, and Ansel tries to go to Michelle in the hopes that she will be able to help but she is completely unable to focus on anything other than solving her investigation and proving her father wrong. Ansel’s concern worsens because of this.

Chapter 12 (Ansel)

What one was supposed to do when a friend slowly began to lose their sanity, Ansel didn't know. As the weeks progressed, Michelle's fixation about the potential crime devolved into an obsession. Any concern with getting good marks was replaced by endless missing homework assignments, and her already sparse social appearances diminished to none at all.

After a while she ceased attending the mess hall altogether, and it was only when Ansel managed to catch her as she was leaving her room that she admitted she had hardly been eating. Determined to make sure that she was getting sustenance at the very least, Ansel prepared a second helping of food after dinner each night and brought it up to her room. She had told him that it wasn't necessary, that she had plenty of snacks stashed away, but she needed real nutrition and she wouldn't get it if not for him. Besides, the ten or so minutes it took her to finish her food had become the only time he was able to see her.

Sage and Toni quickly learned that he was doing this and begged him to ask her if she would come down and spend time with them. Although he was doubtful that Michelle would agree, Ansel promised that he would upon delivering her a selection of lemon butter chicken, roast potatoes, and peas. When he knocked on her door, Michelle let him into her room, motioning for him to come inside.

Ansel entered, looking around the space. Her desk was barely visible under a disarray of splayed papers, books on the floor were multiplied and arranged in different formations, and the board on her wall now had so many interconnecting lines and pins that Ansel wasn't even sure what he was looking at. He handed her the plate of food.

"Oh wow this smells amazing."

"It's really good today."

Michelle grabbed a fork from her shelf and began tucking into the chicken before she was even fully seated at her desk.

"Oh yeah it is, damn." She gestured to her bed and Ansel sat. "Thank you, by the way, you don't have to keep doing this."

"Of course, you're my friend."

She grinned.

"So, anything new?" Ansel asked.

Michelle shook her head. "I'm still in the process of researching all of the known spells that use bone marrow," she said between mouthfuls of potato. "Seeing which ones might connect to what I saw at the Henshaw estate."

“Any that stand out to you?”

“A lot. There’s this Brawler spell that modifies the marrow to enhance strength. Once it’s reinjected into the body a person can become anywhere from two to ten times stronger, depending on the skill of the caster.”

“Hmm.”

“But I’ll let you know when I find something definitive,” she assured. “What about you? How are you? How are Toni and Sage and Felix?”

“Good, we’re all doing fine. We miss you.”

Michelle softened. “I know, I miss you guys too. What have you all been up to?”

Ansel spoke a little of Felix’s hidden skill with the guitar and Toni’s ongoing feud with Mr. Martin, but before he could even disclose anything about Sage’s sorcery demonstrations, Michelle had finished scarfing down her food and was putting her empty plate on her shelf. Ansel stood from her bed and took it back, knowing that it would just gather mold in her room if he didn’t bring it with him.

“Won’t you make yourself sick, eating that fast?” he asked.

Michelle waved her hand. “No, I brewed a bunch of these a few weeks ago.” She pointed to her highest shelf where around a dozen glass bottles were filled with dark orange liquid, yellow and red bubbles floating around it lazily. “Remedy for upset stomachs.”

“I feel like the simpler solution would be to eat more slowly.”

“If I had the luxury of time I would.”

Clutching the empty plate tightly, Ansel proposed what he had been asked to. “I take it that means there’s no chance of you having the time to come out with us tonight?”

Michelle looked at him apologetically. “I don’t think so. It’s just.. I know there’s something here.”

“So, when Toni and Sage ask me when they’ll see you again what should I tell them?”

“Tell them soon,” Michelle said, opening the door for Ansel.

“Alright,” Ansel replied, trying not to look too apprehensive as he caught a glimpse of Michelle uncorking one of the glass bottles and downing its contents before the door closed.

But concern for her remained in the back of his mind. He brought it to Felix a few days later while the two of them and Jonas were out in a nearby town at the local pub. Jonas had found it early on in the semester, and attending during the weekend had become a habit for the three of them. The pub wasn't as nice as Hedley's was, but it had a unique kind of charm that came from half priced drinks after midnight and bartenders as inebriated as the customers were.

The three took up a booth close to the bar, and Jonas, who drank faster than Ansel and Felix, sprinted to the bathroom after his third glass of ale, leaving them alone to finish their second.

Felix snorted. "He's fast, I'll give him that."

"You talking about his running or his drinking?" Ansel asked.

"Both. He's fast at everything really. You should see the way he writes, his penmanship is worse than mine. Or the way he scarfs down food. I've never seen anyone eat so quickly."

Ansel chuckled. "I don't know, I think Michelle could give him a run for his money recently."

"You still bringing her dinners?"

"Mhm, and believe me, the food is gone in two minutes every time. It's like she's inhaling instead of chewing, anything to get back to work as soon as she can."

"Geez."

"Yeah I'm starting to get a little worried. I mean, when was the last time you even saw her?"

"You mean that wasn't during class or in training? Probably a few days ago when she ran into the library and grabbed about ten books."

Ansel shook his head and picked up his glass, draining what was left in one draft. Felix followed suit. "She's going to drive herself insane if she keeps going like this. Even someone as dedicated as her has to break eventually."

"What's she working so hard at anyway?"

Glancing around to ensure that nobody was listening, Ansel brought his head closer to Felix and lowered his voice. "Can you keep a secret?"

"Sure."

"You know the mission we went on, the three of us and Gwen and Eugene?"

“You mean the one where I almost died? Yeah.”

“Well, when she was healing the Guardians we rescued, she noticed something.”

He explained what Michelle had told him as best he could, about how she thought their blood had been drained from bone marrow and was being used for some sort of Arcane sorcery. Felix listened silently until Ansel was finished and then clicked his tongue. “I believe it.”

Ansel looked at him astoundedly, prepared for a dismissive laugh instead of acceptance without an ounce of incredulity. “Really?”

“Yeah. I’m sure everyone else looking into the case has suspected it too. I mean Sorcerers may only make up about a quarter of the world, but they’re still responsible for the majority of crimes.”

Ansel knew that much.

“Besides,” Felix continued. “Using the Guardians for their blood explains why they were still alive. If whoever abducted them was just looking to kill them then they’d already be dead. I mean, that’s the first rule of committing a crime. You never delay your objective more than you need to.”

Ansel raised a brow. “You know a lot about committing crimes?”

“In Fortis, if you don’t, you’ll be robbed or beaten or worse.”

Ansel wondered how much he was speaking from personal experience. Before he could consider asking, Felix spoke again. “Has she talked to her dad about this? I’m sure he has inside knowledge about what’s happening.”

“She said she doesn’t want to until she has something definitive. Apparently he has a tendency to be really dismissive of her. Bigger things to worry about and all that.”

“Yeah I guess sacrificing parts of your parenting comes with being one of the people in charge of running the country.”

“That’s depressing.”

“That’s the truth.”

Ansel sighed. “Well in any case, it’s what she’s been working at non stop. I think the obsession’s becoming dangerous though, to her classes, her mental stability, her hygiene.”

“You try distracting her with something else?”

“All the time.”

If it wasn't struggling to bring her down to see friends, it was attempting to convince her to spend time painting or cooking or sleeping. But it was no use. He thought he saw temptation when he suggested letting her borrow his exclusive annotated copies of *The Hunter Chronicles*, which she hadn't gotten the chance to read yet, but even they weren't enough to deter her.

“I know they might not be helping her solve anything,” Ansel said. “But they would be helping her take care of herself.”

“I honestly think that if she took a break she'd be able to conduct her investigation better,” Felix mused. “It helps to tear yourself away for a minute so you can return with fresh eyes.”

“Maybe you should tell her that.”

“Please, if she wouldn't listen to you, what makes you think she'll listen to me?” He held up his hand to grab the attention of a server walking by. “Two more.”

The gruff woman grunted and took their glasses, refilling them at the tap and bringing them back.

“Thanks,” Ansel said.

Felix took a long swig and wiped the foam from his lips. “Well, you've done everything you could.”

“Yeah, that's what's the most frustrating.”

Felix looked like he was about to say something else when something but Jonas slid into the seat next to him before he could.

“Welcome back,” Felix said. “You were gone for quite a bit.”

“Yeah,” Jonas said excitedly. “I was eavesdropping on a conversation.”

Ansel blinked. “What?”

“When I was leaving the bathroom I overheard two girls waiting in line talking about you,” Jonas said to Felix. “One of them, this gorgeous redhead with eyes to die for, went on and on about how attractive you were, asking her friend for advice about approaching you.”

“Is that so?” Felix sounded amused in an unvexed sort of way, which made sense. During their outings the past few weeks Ansel had noticed that wherever he went, admiring eyes tended to follow. But despite his libidinous reputation, recently he had shown a reluctance to respond, and Ansel could place his money on why.

“Yeah,” Jonas continued. “And I know you’ve been in kind of a slump recently, but I think this is the perfect girl to get you out of it. She is seriously pretty - look there she is, over there.”

Ansel craned his neck over to where Jonas was gesturing. He hadn’t been lying; the redheaded girl, exiting the bathroom arm in arm with her friend, was stunning. When she saw Felix she giggled and waved, and Felix gave her a look of mild admiration before turning back to Jonas indignantly.

“First of all, I have not been in a slump, and second of all, I’m going to have to say no. I don’t want to take her away from her friend.”

“Since when do you care about that?” Jonas asked.

“Maybe he has someone else he’s interested in,” Ansel suggested, trying to keep the knowing tell from his voice.

“Who, Sage?” Jonas asked.

So he was aware.

“You have to give that up Felix, she’s never going to go for you. I mean, she’s like the textbook perfect angel, and you’re, you. Not to mention the fact that her parents are both esteemed Sorcerers, it’s a fantasy.”

“Oh, unlike you chasing an upperclassman?” Felix retorted.

“Yeah but I don’t let that keep me from pursuing other women,” Jonas said. “I took a girl from Darmir Village home the other day. You can’t stop living just because you have a crush.”

“Who’s got a crush?” A familiar voice asked.

Ansel, Felix, and Jonas turned their heads in unison. Gwen and Eugene were standing at the head of their table. The three of them were so distracted that they hadn’t even noticed. Ansel and Jonas pointed at Felix simultaneously.

“Oh yeah?” Gwen raised a brow at Felix and smirked. “On who?”

“Sage Campour,” Jonas said.

“Thanks a lot Jonas.”

“The girl with the glasses and blonde braid?” Gwen laughed. “Good luck with that.”

“Hey, don’t come at him yet,” Eugene protested. “You never know, he might be able to win her over.”

“Doubtful.”

“What are you guys doing here?” Ansel asked.

“Are we not allowed to go to bars?” Eugene grinned.

“We have a collection of about eight pubs that we rotate between,” Gwen explained. “Usually with Juniper and Flynn, sometimes Sophia will join too, but they still have midterm exams to study for.”

“Oh speaking of crushes,” Felix interjected. “You might find it amusing that Jonas here is quite enamored with your friend Sophia.”

Jonas looked about ready to murder Felix, but neither Gwen nor Eugene seemed all that surprised.

“Join the club,” Gwen scoffed, sliding herself into the seat next to Jonas. “You’ll have to get in line if you want to take her out, I’ve been trying for a year and nothing.”

“You might have more success if you weren’t always sleeping with other women,” Eugene said, as Ansel made room on the bench for him to sit.

“A girl can only wait so long - excuse me?” Gwen waved down the gruff bartender. “Five more please, malt, top shelf, on me.” She looked back at them and winked. “How good are you all at holding your liquor?”

Gwen’s question evolved into a competition that ended with Jonas nearly getting sick, and in between rounds Eugene challenged them all to a card game where Ansel and Felix both lost a few coppers. He revealed only after they handed him the bronze coins that a small sleight of hand made the game impossible for a challenger to win.

It was moments like these, watching Eugene demonstrate to an excited Felix how to hustle rich folks out of their money while Gwen advised Jonas to put his head between his knees, that Ansel realized two years wasn’t really much of a difference in age or maturity.

As they spent more and more time together it became difficult to view them as some of the most prosperous and coveted upperclassmen the school had ever seen. Eventually it was only during the weekly seminars that he remembered the gap in their experience. It was impossible to forget when observing Gwen focus on a dozen targets at once or Eugene win a match with little more than evasion, that they were more advanced fighters. Even so, Ansel had visibly noticed almost everyone in his year improving, including himself.

Though he had not seen any more of the strange shadows since the mission, his movement and weapon technique had grown infinitely more fluid, and he found himself less and less bruised each week.

“Your defense has gotten so much better,” Eugene confirmed the following Wednesday. “Keep it up.”

“Thanks,” Ansel grinned.

Felix approached him afterwards, looking especially pleased with himself. “Gwen told me that my hand to hand could rival some of the fifth years.”

“That’s awesome.”

“What about you?”

“Eugene says I’m improving.”

“You are.”

“Thanks. Hey, have you seen - ”

Before Ansel could even finish his sentence he caught sight of Michelle, sprinting from the field and back toward the campus, muddied hair flying behind her.

“How does she have the energy to run after this?” Ansel asked.

“Well at least the run is short,” Felix said. “My question is how does she have the energy to go do research for the next six hours?”

“I don’t know, we’re going to hang out with Toni and Sage.”

“Hanging out doesn’t require energy.”

Ansel rubbed the back of his neck.

“Look Felix, between training all day and then seminar afterwards, I’m really tired, I think I might just - ”

“No, you have to come. It’ll be weird if I show up alone.”

“Why would it be weird? They’re friends with you too.”

“Not like how they’re friends with you. Besides, I want another guy there, as much as you are one.”

Ansel rolled his eyes. "Fine, but for future reference, insulting me is not the way to get me to agree to things."

Dragging himself alongside Felix, Ansel made his way toward Sage's building and up to her room. As soon as they entered, Sage squealed excitedly and gestured for them to sit down beside her and Toni.

"Come on we've been waiting for you," she said, opening her book as Ansel and Felix sat cross legged on the floor. Before they had even fully settled, she launched into the magic she had been introduced to in her most recent lesson.

"It's called the solicity spell," she explained. "Also known as the binding spell. Basically it's an incantation that connects one individual to another."

"Connects one individual to another?" Felix inquired.

"Through mutual consent between an Empath and another individual, the Empath can cast a spell that allows them both to experience what the other experiences."

"So it's kind of like the one you showed us the other day that allowed you to read our emotions?"

"Not quite." Sage's eyes were glued to her book and she pushed her glasses up to keep them from falling down her face. "I mean sort of, but it's much more potent than that. Think of it almost as an increment. It doesn't just tell you someone's emotions. It actually binds your soul to the soul of another person so that you can both physically feel what the other is feeling. Live what they are living. It goes beyond any vague notion of reading or recognition, it's a true mutual existence."

Ansel's eyes widened, tiredness forgotten. "I'm not well versed in the field, but that sounds like really powerful magic," he said.

"Yes it is."

"So then how is it being taught in your introductory course?"

"Yeah, I thought powerful spells were, like, really difficult to cast," Toni said.

"Because even though it has intense effects, it isn't so much difficult, at least not in the traditional sense."

Sage handed Ansel the open book and Ansel looked at the endless instructions written in tiny print alongside complex diagrams and a number of runes he had no means of recognizing. Felix leaned over his shoulder.

"Looks difficult to me," he said.

Sage shook her head. "It's really not. See the thing that usually makes Empath spells hard is that they require the caster to impose their will onto someone else. Like, if you're trying to protect someone or make them remember a specific thing. But since this spell requires a mutual agreement from both parties, it actually takes very little energy on the part of the caster."

"Fascinating," Felix's intrigue sounded genuine.

"The difficult part is finding someone who will agree to having their soul literally tied to you," Sage continued.

"Yeah that sounds like a nightmare," Toni said.

"Which is why it isn't used very often."

"So when does it get used?" Ansel asked, handing the book back to her.

Sage took it and shrugged. "Usually it's between people who really trust each other, if one of them wants to understand what the other is feeling or going through. It can make your relationships stronger. A lot of couples use it if one of them is an Empath."

Ansel was the only one who noticed Felix snap his head up at Sage's words. Toni was busy looking at her skeptically.

"Couples? Really?" She asked.

"Yes, I mean, it's not a big deal. The spell breaks as soon as either party wills it to."

"Still, I can't imagine wanting to have my lover inside my head, feeling everything that I feel."

"Maybe not for long, but temporarily I think it could be interesting."

"So have you tried casting it yet?" Ansel asked.

"I mean, I've run through the preparations and motions dozens of times, but we won't actually have the opportunity to practice them until next class, so I'll be going in pretty blind."

Ansel could tell by the way that she drummed her fingers on the open page of the book that she wasn't keen on the idea.

"That is, unless, one of you guys wants to help me try?"

Toni snorted at Sage's proposition. "Uh, no thank you. I will be keeping my thoughts and feelings in my own head, where they belong."

The venture sounded compelling to Ansel but before he could volunteer, Felix exhaled a puff of air, unconvincingly nonchalant. "I mean, I guess if nobody else is willing to, I'll give it a try."

Exactly why he offered to help, Ansel wasn't sure. If the spell worked in the way that Sage had described it, there was no way he'd be able to get through the experience without her discovering his feelings. Unless he wanted her to know.

Sage grinned amusedly. "Really, the skeptic is willing to engage with magic this intense?"

"I'm only a skeptic because all of the Sorcerers I've encountered in the past were untrustworthy. You, well, I really trust you."

At these words Ansel met Toni's eyes, the two of them attempting to keep their smirks from growing large enough to disturb the sincerity of Sage's smile. She positively beamed, taking Felix by the forearm and dragging him close, too excited to notice his face reddening.

"Okay," she said, consulting the diagram on the book one last time. "You're going to want to sit here, right in front of me, and look directly at me the entire time. Hold my hand," she took Felix's hand in her own and laced their fingers together. "And when I ask, 'are you willing?' You respond, 'I am willing.' Okay?"

"Mhm."

"Alright." For a moment, Sage closed her eyes and sat completely still. When she opened them, blue meeting Felix's brown, she brought her free hand up in an open palm between them. "Are you willing?"

"I am willing."

Sage nodded. Then, reciting words of incantation that sounded nothing but foreign to Ansel's ears, she began to draw what looked like a semicircle that morphed into a spiral, closed her hand into a fist, and pressed it against Felix's chest.

Felix's body glowed the faintest tint of red and his hair rustled slightly. Sage lifted her fist from Felix and brought it to her own heart, her body glowing gently alongside his. She maintained direct eye contact until the light from both of them began to fade. Then she ceased the succession of words she was muttering, and slowly, she opened her hand and brought it down to her side, giving Felix a soft smile.

"How did that feel?" She asked.

"Strange," he said breathlessly. "Really strange."

“I know, when you’re not used to magic it can take some getting used to. Hopefully not bad though?”

“No, not at all.”

“I think I did it right too,” Sage said excitedly. “They say the biggest obstacle to the spell is usually resistance from one of the members, but you took it really well, I could feel it.”

Felix was smiling at her relentlessly, a smile larger than when Ansel had saved his life. “Really?”

“Absolutely. And, you can let go of my hand now, by the way.”

“Oh, right.”

Toni snorted and Ansel nudged her between the ribs, but not before Felix heard and snapped his head toward both of them, casting them a warning look. Ansel cleared his throat. “So, success? You guys are like, bonded now? Can you feel anything different Felix?”

Felix ran his hand through his hair. “Uh, I’m not sure.” He paused for a moment to consider. “I guess I feel, I don’t know, a bit lighter? Like optimistic for no good reason. And a little more anxious, also for no good reason. And I’m craving..” He furrowed his brow quizzically. “Raspberries? That can’t be right. I don’t even like raspberries.”

Sage laughed. “That’s right, usually around now I head down to the mess hall to grab some fruit.”

“Damn,” Ansel said. “Well done.”

“And it doesn’t stop there,” Sage said, eyes glinting. “Watch this.”

She stood up and scrambled to grab her canteen from the top of her dresser. Popping the lid off, she held it over her head.

“What are you - ”

Before Ansel could finish his question, Sage turned the canteen over and let the water spill out. As it drenched her completely, falling down to her eyes, her cheeks, the collar of her shirt, Felix let out a loud ‘*Augh.*’ Ansel turned to find his messy curls completely soaked, wet hair flattening over his eyes despite the fact that nothing had been poured on him.

“Oh no way,” Toni said, sitting up straight. “That is so cool.”

“Says the person who doesn’t have cold water running down their back,” Felix shuddered.

Sage winced. “Sorry I should have given you a warning first.”

"It's alright, you were just excited. I could feel it." Ansel could see Felix's grin from under his sopping hair.

"Where does the extra water come from?" Ansel asked.

"It's just made."

Toni stood and walked to Sage. Keeping her eyes focused on Felix, she raised her hand up to Sage's forehead and flicked. The 'ow,' that followed from both of them was in near perfect unison.

"Okay *that* is not cool," Felix said.

"No, it's more than cool. It's incredible," Ansel said, ignoring Felix's glower. "So even physical things that happen to you will happen to him?"

"Yes, anything physical as well as anything emotional, and it goes vice versa too," she explained, walking over to grab the towel hanging on her door and tossing it into Felix's lap. Felix looked up at her.

"What about you?"

"I only have one, but don't worry, I'll dry when you do."

Ansel had long pondered the hypothetical of being a Sorcerer, a good deal of that time spent thinking about what kind he would like to be. He decided, as he watched the water wipe concurrently from Sage and Felix, that if he had the choice, he would be an Empath.

The four of them continued to play with the connection for a while, testing to see what it could do. The limits were seemingly endless; even hydration worked simultaneously, which Ansel pointed out would be very useful if you encountered a shortage of water. When dinner rolled around, Sage had Felix break their connection, which was accomplished simply by pronouncing that you were no longer willing to be bonded to the other.

As they all sat in the mess hall indulging in tender rack of lamb they were joined by Jonas, and soon after by Gwen, Eugene, and a woman named Juniper, whom Gwen had introduced a couple of times before. Juniper smiled brightly and offered Ansel a flier. Eugene explained that she was hosting a party in the school's ballroom on Saturday. Apparently, it would include some of the best food and drinks from the local area, owing to her wealthy family.

After promising that he would attend, Ansel stood up and piled lamb, asparagus, and risotto onto a fresh plate.

"Again?" Felix said.

"I shouldn't be long, meet you guys back in the Avera living room."

"How long is her hibernation going to go on?" Toni asked.

"I wish I knew."

"Well tell her we love her," Sage said.

"Will do."

"And tell her to come out on Saturday or we'll drag her out," Gwen said.

"Alright," Ansel promised.

But he didn't make it to Michelle's room. He found her standing outside of the mess hall. It was clear that she had been waiting for him as she approached him on sight. "I need your help," she said desperately. Ansel looked her up and down. She was wearing the same clothes she had been for the past two days. Her eyes looked hollowed and sallow, and her unkempt hair was slowly beginning to fall out of its ponytail.

He softened. "Sure, you want to go chat?"

She nodded and smiled slightly. "Yes, but let's go somewhere that isn't my room," she said. "Trust me, you do not want to see what it looks like right now."

The library didn't allow food, so they sat in the back seats of the empty theater. Michelle sank herself so deep into the velvet cushions that it looked as though she was willing them to swallow her whole. "I'm pretty sure I've hit a dead end," she said dejectedly.

Ansel handed her the plate of food and she bit into some of the lamb gratefully.

"What makes you think that?" he asked.

"I've finished researching everything I can about all the known incantations," she said between mouthfuls. "But there are too many to give me anything solid. Of the five hundred and seventy one I mentioned, two hundred and fifty could be considered plausible. I revisited each spell and everything I observed during the mission countless times, but it's not even enough to lead me to a specific kind of Sorcerer, let alone a single spell."

"I'm really sorry," Ansel said. The apology was genuine, mostly because he didn't like seeing Michelle upset.

“The problem is that I know exactly what would give me another lead,” she persisted. “I need more information on the Guardians we rescued.”

She looked at Ansel, eyes gleaming intently, and Ansel understood what she wanted at once. “Michelle,” he began.

“Please Ansel, your dad works for the Guardian Administration, he has easy access to information on anyone in the field. And it’ll be so much easier to convince him than to convince my dad. Just ask him if he can get me files on the Guardians we rescued.”

“Michelle, you need to rest.”

She ran both hands through her messy hair, destroying her ponytail a little more, then clasped them into fists. “Please, please, I have no other way of moving forward unless I want to go to my parents, which I really, really don’t.”

Ansel sighed deeply. He wanted to help her, but he couldn’t predict how detrimental her response to another lead would be.

“Please, I’ll do anything.”

He was about to try another futile attempt talking her down when a potential idea struck him. He bit his tongue until it fully formed into a proposal. “Alright,” he said. “I will ask my father if he’d be willing to send over the files.”

“Thank you!”

“If - and only if - you agree to leave the investigation alone until they arrive. For the next few days, you rest, spend time with your friends, just take a break.”

“Deal,” Michelle said, smile widening.

Ansel looked at her suspiciously. “Really?”

“Yeah, easiest offer I’ve ever taken,” Michelle assured. “I can’t progress without them, and anyway the few days wait will give me time to read the annotated *Hunter Chronicles*. I’ve been dying to take them off of your hands.” She returned Ansel’s growing grin. “Anything else?”

“One more thing. You come to the party that Juniper is hosting on Saturday.”

“I’m invited?”

“Gwen says she will personally abduct you if you don’t come on your own.”

Michelle laughed. "Alright sounds good."

After Ansel made her shake his hand to confirm, she joined him in the walk to the living room and greeted Toni and Sage, who looked both shocked and enthused that she had finally been brought out of her dormance. They caught her up on every detail of their lives, and Ansel was relieved to see her laughing, shoulders loose, head tilted back. If she were to return to her manic search, at least she would have a few days break first.

When the end of the night came around he retired to his room and used his hearthring to contact his father. He listed the half dozen names that Michelle had given him, and as soon as he explained that their files would help him and Michelle decipher who was behind the abductions, his father chortled receptively, declaring that their proactiveness demonstrated the makings of true Guardians.

Because the documents were not at all confidential, he agreed to mail them over so long as Ansel promised not to use them for anything other than the investigation. Ansel, who had been expecting at least a slight resistance, assured him that the files had no value outside of the investigation anyway. After their conversation, he informed Michelle of his father's cooperation.

"My dad is sending them over tomorrow. They should be here in a few days."

"Thank you so much," the hearthring glowed in cadence with Michelle's voice.

"No problem. And thank you for coming out tonight."

"It was fun, I really missed spending time with you guys, looking forward to the next few days."

"Me too, Juniper's party should be a blast."

"And *The Hunter Chronicles*," Michelle added.

"Oh yeah, can't forget about them."

"No you can't."

"Let me know about how the annotations change your perspective. I think they make Abel's character in particular so much more complex."

They spoke for a long while, Ansel relieved to finally hear repose in her voice. The discourse only ended when Felix rolled over in bed and threatened to break Ansel's firelight if he didn't turn it off himself. Apologizing, he said goodnight to Michelle and pulled off his ring to rest it on his table.

He reached for the firelight, turning the knob all the way down and watching the flames flicker and extinguish until the room dissolved to black. Content with the way the evening had unfolded, a deep sleep encompassed him soon after he closed his eyes.

"Is it working?"

"I'm unsure yet. His cells are more resistant, but I might still be able to make it successful."

Inside a dark room that glowed with sickly yellow light, the woman stood over a wooden table. The surface of it was set up like a messy laboratory, open scrolls and books were strewn about everywhere and corked vials of red liquid rolled around. One of the vials had been uncapped and emptied, and its fluid hovering a few feet over the table, bending to the pull of the woman's hands.

Beside her, the two men, shorter dressed in a smart navy jacket and taller hunkering in a ripped sleeveless shirt, watched her weave the substance through her fingers and pull it apart into two separate pools.

"What part of the bone is this from?" She asked the shorter one.

"Left ilium, ma'am."

"Bring me the spinal marrow."

"Yes ma'am."

He stalked away and the taller stepped forward, eyes flitting from the ropes of red to the open books and equipment on the desk. "What happens if it doesn't work?"

"We could capture him again and try to extract the marrow from deeper," the shorter suggested, returning to the woman with a full vial and handing it to her. She took it gingerly, moving the previous solution back into its own vial before she uncapped the cork.

"No, it's not worth it to attempt, it would draw unnecessary attention and there's no guarantee that it would be effective."

"Ma'am, we're running out of Guardians with suitable blood."

"Right now, remaining inconspicuous is what's most important. We work from the shadows. Once my power is fully restored, we can afford to be more brazen." She rounded her hand in one fluid motion and the liquid rose from the fresh flask.

"Well then what should we do with him? Lavert?"

"I could hunt him down and kill him?" The taller sounded like he was pleading more than offering.

“Do you ever listen?” Agitation crept into the woman’s voice. “I said we need to be subtle. In what way is the murder of a man, a man who’s just returned from having been abducted, and therefore undoubtedly being given significant attention, subtle?”

“Wouldn’t the death of another Guardian be worth the loss of some subtlety?” The man asked. “It’s been ages since I’ve gotten to kill one.”

The woman turned on him slowly. From the angle her face wasn’t visible under her hood, but the man took an apprehensive step back.

“You were brought on to this mission because your passion generated dedication, but remember what I have said about patience,” she warned. “If you jeopardize us in any way I will have you removed and replaced before you even have the chance to protest.”

The man swallowed. “I only meant, ma’am, that they should suffer. Remember what they’ve done to us, to you.”

The woman took a step toward him. “Do you think I’ve forgotten?”

When she spoke this time, her voice was pure ice, sharp and bitter. Her eyes too must have been perilous, because her gaze was enough to make him shrink until he looked smaller than she was. “I asked you a question. Do you think I would ever forget? Could ever forget?”

“No ma’am. I’m sorry,” his eyes were fixed on the floor when he spoke.

For a moment, the woman just looked at him. Then she nodded, seemingly satisfied with his reaction, and turned back to her table, attention once more on the red fluid still floating in the air.

“Is it - ” the shorter began.

“Quiet,” the woman interrupted. “Silence aids concentration.”

He and the taller stepped back as she wove the blood about in her hands. Her fingers moved intensely as the liquid spread to the thinness of a sheet of parchment. Then she pulled back with a wave of tension and it strained as it bubbled and lightened in color.

The men let out gasps of amazement. “Is it working?”

The woman’s face didn’t need to be visible to convey her conspicuous glee. From inside her dark cloak came a cold laugh of immense satisfaction.

“It’s working.”

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