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A CREATIVE WRITING HONORS THESIS: GUARDIANS OF ALYATAUS

by

Kelsey K. Flynn

A Thesis Submitted in Partial Fulfillment
of the Requirements for a Degree with Honors
(Secondary Education)

The Honors College

University of Maine

May 2012

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ABSTRACT:

This is a creative writing thesis. It is a novel of roughly 55,000 words that is intended for the reading audience of ages 12-16. It is in the genre of medieval/fantasy/adventure. This literary work takes its inspiration from many young adult authors and is intended to inspire youths in a way of moral development. The protagonist begins the story as someone of questionable morality, and finishes the piece a considerable more moral person. It has been made to help others learn about things such as discrimination, racism, and sexism. This novel also includes issues such as bullying and questioning of sexual orientations. This novel is meant to focus on the idea that a person is made up of the experiences he/she has endured- both the good and the bad.

Dear Friends,

I would like to thank everyone possible for making this story happen. I would firstly like to thank my parents, Nancy and Joseph Flynn, for their love and support. I would like to thank my sister, McKenzie Flynn, for her love, affection, and lessons of hard knocks. My friends, most importantly: Suzy, Steve B., Andrew, Ken, Jessie, Amanda, Lisa, David, Ethan, Valerie, Steve T., Zak, and Tim. I would like to say thanks all to the Brothers near and far of Phi Sigma Pi: National Honor Fraternity as well as all members, past and present, of Wilde Stein. I would like to thank the Department of Student Affairs at the University of Maine for enriching my experience here at the school and in the community. I would also like to thank all of my family. I would like to thank my thesis committee for taking the time to work with me and read this extra-long thesis. I would especially like to thank Tina Passman, my thesis advisor and friend, who has been with me since my first semester of college. I would like to thank the Honors College at the University of Maine for this opportunity. Lastly I would like to thank the dreamers and free thinkers who came before me and inspired me to be different and write of a world that was of my own choosing and design. Life starts at the end of your comfort zone. Take that to heart and take risks.

With affection,

Kelsey Flynn

This book is dedicated to:

Hailey, Jillian, McKenzie, Valerie, Megan, Sophie, Kiki, and most importantly: Jean
Shadley, Ruth Flynn, Nancy Flynn, Joseph E. Flynn and finally the late Joseph I.

Flynn

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Chapter 1: The Balance



Dirkson, a large brute with nasty carrot-colored hair, and his little gang of deranged goon-heads beckoned a boy not much older than sixteen down an alleyway deep in the heart of New York City. Cornelius knew it was stupid to follow them, however he just couldn't get over this dark sick, green feeling in his chest. All he could think of doing was going back there and pounding the living daylights out of them, and so he followed them. Little did he know that this would soon change his life forever.

Cornelius, sixteen years and some few months, woke with a dry mouth and a heaving sick feeling in the rest of his aching head. In the distance he vaguely heard a teakettle whistle, however he refused to open his eyes. Chair legs scraped against wooden flooring, and he heard the rustle of clothing as someone sat down in the chair next to him.

“You were looking right disgraceful when I found you.”

His eyes snapped open, he knew that voice! Not from reality, but from a dream, a dream that had plagued him all his life. He turned his head. Despite the

sudden roar in his ears at the motion and stared. Sharp dun brown eyes stared back at him through dark lashes against an old withered face. The hag stared at him - and Cornelius, though he knew it was rude, couldn't help but stare back. She was small and sat with a bit of a hunch. Her eyes were deep set in her skull and held what seemed like all of time's knowledge. Her clothing would seem reasonable for an older lady: tan pants that lightly gripped her slightly pudgy form and fit with her equally reasonable button-down shirt. The shirt's design, however, was everything but reasonable, white, with what seemed like hundreds of brightly colored pink and purple flowers.

“Nice shirt,” he snickered, despite himself.

“Nice face,” she shot back, and he stopped to glare at her. She reached over to the bedside table and grabbed a blue plastic hand mirror. “Look for yourself. Only your mother would love your mug at the moment.”

Cornelius took the mirror gingerly with one hand and held it so that he could see. His face and most of what else he could see was one huge swollen sunrise. The swelling and bruising contrasted sharply with his slate-gray eyes, inherited from his grandmother, and he wasn't able to see an inch of his usual honey-colored skin.

“What happened?”

“You have been very thoroughly thrashed; even I'm impressed.” She paused and spoke more seriously, “If I hadn't come along, you might have been left there for some pick-pocket to find, or worse.”

Cornelius knew what was worse in that part of town, though he didn't know if he'd gotten the better end of the deal with this sharp-lipped lady.

He gave the mirror back to her and let his hand drop back onto the bed. He wasn't tucked in, he now noticed; though the temperature was enough that he was comfortable. His stomach heaved, and he closed his eyes until the feeling passed. The chair scuffed again, and a smell, a horrible bad smell, wafted under his nose. He opened one eye at a squint. A cup of what looked like tea was being held out to him in a small china teacup, white with pink and purple flowers, of course. Cornelius was beginning to see a theme.

“I will not drink whatever nasty thing that is in that cup.”

“You will, or you will continue with that sick feeling. Drink.”

The cup was forced forward and Cornelius reached up to grip it for fear that it would be dropped on him. Reluctantly, he tilted his body upwards and brought the cup to his mouth. The smell made his eyes water and his stomach heaved again.

“I'll barf,” Cornelius said at last, moving the cup away. A hand, surprisingly strong for such a small old wrinkly thing, gripped the cup and forced it back to his lips.

“You will not, and stop being a child.” Cornelius felt compelled to drink it, as he was no child and she was challenging his manhood. Steeling himself, he downed the hot liquid in one fell swoop. His eyes watered, but he managed to swallow the bitter liquid. The cup was snatched away as his world circled a drain, and his stomach heaved more forcefully one last time, then nothing. His pain stopped and his head cleared, though he didn't remember it being hard to think before that moment.

“What was that?”

“Willow bark tea, deadly in large doses. But for things like headaches, it does just the trick.”

Cornelius took the initiative to sit up. “That can’t be all that was in it.” The woman stood.

“You’re right, but you’re not to learn that right now. Come,” she patted his leg almost like she would a dog, “To the kitchen.”

Cornelius swung his legs over the side of the bed experimentally. When the sick feeling failed to return, he stood. This test complete, and with no mishap, he followed the pudgy lady out of the room, down the hall, and into an intimate kitchen.

Small as it was, the kitchen seemed to have a life of its own. Painted cream and covered in red-fired brick in places that seemed to have no rhyme or reason, it gave off the air of someone’s crazy old aunt who refused to match her clothing.

The windows were small and were located at the top of the walls, as though the kitchen was in a basement of some kind. It smelt of cooking herbs, and he vaguely noticed leaves and roots hanging to dry by some cord. Against the wall next to the door he had come through was a small, nondescript wooden table; the chairs matched this décor seamlessly. He couldn’t seem to find the source of the light that lit the room, and shrugged, as there was a plausible explanation for everything.

“Now,” She placed the teacup down on a counter and turned, revealing an old cast iron stove that Cornelius was sure didn’t exist past the 1800s. “What were you doing in that alleyway?”

Cornelius looked away, “None of your business.” He could almost feel the

look she was giving him.

“It is too, and you shall tell me willingly or I will make you tell me.” He didn’t doubt that threat for a minute, and he had received more than enough blows for a while.

“There’s this jerk, Dirkson, from my school. He thinks that everyone is below him and that he can pick on anyone. I fought him- I lost.” Cornelius suddenly was very angry, “People like him don’t belong in the world- bullies who only exist to cause everyone else pain. I wish he would just disappear and take his goons with him!”

The woman was quiet during his rant, but now she looked at him with that aged feeling. Cornelius, feeling younger than ever, shrugged away from the look, “Who are you to decide who belongs?”

“Don’t give me that religious bullshit about it being God’s choice. God doesn’t exist, and if he does maybe he should do a better job creating people.”

Cornelius hated God; it was all his parents ever talked about, and it made him sick. They wanted him to be a good Christian, kind to everyone and possibly join the seminary like his older brother, but that just wasn’t the life for him. The old woman studied him, and Cornelius felt as though his layers were being peeled away with each millisecond.

“I wasn’t going to say that, Cornelius Favrik Henderson. Sit.” She flicked her fingers and his body obeyed, sitting. “I was going to say that it takes all sorts to make a world.” He opened his mouth to protest. “Even bullies have their place and purpose, and people who love them. There is a balance to maintain, a balance in

nature, that if ever all those people were to disappear, would become uneven and the world would turn to chaos.”

He stared at her.

“First, I thought you were just some old hag who needs new clothing, now I think you’re a crazy old hag who needs new clothing and mental help. I’m leaving.”

She flicked her fingers again and the forgotten teacup shot up and stuck to the ceiling. Cornelius tried to stand, but found he was attached to the chair. “Hey! Let me go, you witch!” He struggled against the invisible bonds that glued him to the chair.

“What did you do?” He finally asked out of desperation.

“I changed the balance.”

“The what? ”

“The balance. The cup that was once subject to gravity is now repelled to the ceiling at my command. To balance this force, an act against nature, your gravity was made stronger in repercussion. In effect, you have become the balancing force that keeps that cup on the ceiling.”

“Witch.” Was that a smile on her face?

“You don’t believe me do you.” It was a statement, not a question and Cornelius had a feeling he would not like what was going to happen next. She flexed her fingers, and he shot to the ceiling, and for a brief moment he and the cup were level to each other in the air. The cup then placed itself gently on the floor of the kitchen, while he stuck awkwardly to the ceiling, body parts splayed most disgracefully across wooden beams that crossed the ceiling.

“Do you believe in the balance now?”

“Yes! Yes, you win! Now let me down!” She smiled again and he felt himself lower. Vaguely, he noticed the cup rise until it set itself down on the counter. They were even now, with no extra gravity or anti gravity. He stared at the woman who stared back with all the patience of a monk.

“The balance,” she said at last.

“The balance,” he repeated, without thought.

Chapter 2: A Strange Knocking Noise



Cornelius didn't like the look of the dented cola can that sat defenseless on the side of the road. He kicked it and shoved his hands into his pockets with a sigh. That witch, that stupid old hag, he spat. He sat heavily on the sidewalk edge and hitched up his pants at the knee. Leaning forward, he put his elbows on his knees to support himself.

Yes, she did make a lot of sense with the whole balance bit, but that didn't mean he had to like it, or that he had to agree. He thought back to the cup, the evidence was pretty damning that it did exist. A car drove by and Cornelius found himself reflecting back on that fight, being outnumbered by a bunch of brutes with nothing better to do with their time than to pick on those smaller than they were.

No, balance didn't necessarily need to include jerks like Dirkson. That decided, he stood and brushed off his pants and continued on his journey home. Hitting the nearest subway station, he trotted down the worn stone steps and swiped his student rate pass across the turnstile sensor. It beeped and the small metal doors sprung apart, and he was able to step through.

A subway car was pulling into the station, and Cornelius shoved and elbowed his way through the crowd to ensure a good seat in the car. Finally entering, he slung his bookbag down onto the seat next to him and ensured that no one would sit there, despite it being rush hour. Some would call him discourteous, and maybe he was, but he had a right to be. Not everyone had to be a good person, and Cornelius found that he was particularly good at playing the bad seed.

Slipping his hand into his pocket, he froze and then swore violently. A woman near by gave him a dirty look, which he returned. That dirty rotten piece of dog turd had stolen his iPod! Cornelius sat seething for the rest of his ride; it was a long trip from 169th Street to Lexington Avenue and 63rd Street, but he made every minute worth it by thinking of ways he could dismember Dirkson's stupid, rotten head from his body.

It was with anger that he finally slammed closed the door of his family's apartment. This was not your average apartment, like those you'd see on some slum crime television show. His mother, an heiress, and his father, a law firm executive, made more than enough for a living (or inherited enough for a living) to afford the small mansion in the heart of America's most populous city.

The apartment was large, spanning three floors, with old mahogany trim and doors. He would never say it out loud, but Cornelius secretly enjoyed the old and educated atmosphere of the apartment. That wasn't to say that he enjoyed living there. When the apartment was empty and it was just him, which was a rarity, it was the perfect place to be: quiet; air-conditioned in the summer, heated in the winter, and completely his to do as he willed with it. When his parents were there,

especially his mother, Cornelius could tell the second that he entered, which was the case now. An invisible dark cloud of doom seemed to be suffocating him and misery stuck to every surface.

It wasn't that he hated his mother. All right he did, but she seemed to bring out the worst in him on a daily basis. A "sick" woman, she refused to lift one of her dainty manicured fingers to do anything, hence the large house and the even more impressive staff who worked there.

The slamming of the apartment door drew the beast out of her hovel, and Cornelius flinched upon hearing her screech at him.

"Cornelius! Do not slam the doors of this household." She was on him like a tick, sucking his very life force from his skull. She followed him, seething, and though he did not turn around to see, he was pretty sure she was foaming at the mouth. His mother followed him up the stairs and down the hallway until they reached his bedroom. Without turning, Cornelius swung open the door to his room and stepped inside, and, nodding with satisfaction, he closed the door promptly in his mother's face.

She would continue to froth and stew, but as long as it was out of his hearing range he was satisfied. He would pay for this later he knew, but right now doing this was the only thing that would give him peace. Throwing himself onto his bed, Cornelius buried his face into his pillow. The day had been too much, and he didn't know how to process it.

There was the fight, which his parents would undoubtedly hear about; that stupid woman and her stupid teacup; and finally having his iPod stolen. Rolling over

in his bed, Cornelius stared at his ceiling and tried to find some mental peace in counting the marks that periodically appeared on the ceiling of his room. He let his mind wander idly as he used a hand to trace out constellations as he saw them. He had almost all of them memorized; these kinds of things always came easily to him. You know, the useless things that no one cared about. He was not a stellar student far from it, but when it came to the night sky he was held with rapt attention. When Cornelius was able to lie outside and look at the stars, it was the only time that he was able to feel at peace with himself.

His mother had gone away, most likely back downstairs to wallow in self-pity, when a light knocking startled Cornelius out of his thoughts. Pushing himself up on one arm, Cornelius looked around and the sound stopped. It had grown dark, though he hadn't noticed when, and his room was barely lit by the light of a streetlamp outside. The knocking starting again. It was closer than at his door, and Cornelius stilled his movements and held his breath. He needed to be as quiet as possible in order to hear.

There! He heard it again; quietly he sat up fully and turned to place his feet on the floor. The knocking stopped and Cornelius cursed silently. Holding his breath, he waited. The sound was coming from below him, but how could that be? Moving as slowly as he could, Cornelius slunk off the bed and pooled onto the floor. Listening, he put his head, as stupid as it made him feel, under his bed. The knocking was louder this time, and Cornelius brought his head back out.

Standing, he padded quietly to the door and turned the lock shut. Going back to the bed, it took all his self-control not to throw himself bodily under it. Steeling

himself, Cornelius got down on all fours before standing again. Moving swiftly, he went over to his dresser drawer and pulled out a small knapsack and filled it with a sketchpad and a variety of coals and pencils. If memory served from all the adventure books he'd read, maybe this would be the start of some great adventure, and if that was true he was going to go prepared.

Back at the bed Cornelius took a deep breath and crouched down to a kneeling position. One last breath and he was under the bed and letting his eyes adjust to the darkness. He got stuck for a moment, however he was able to shimmy his way through the gap between the bed and the floor. The knocking was still there, and Cornelius put his head flat to the wooden boards. Following it with an awkward crawl, he eventually found himself listening above a single wooden board by the wall. Pressing his ear against it, he pulled back sharply as a particularly loud rap sounded in his ear.

He ran his fingers along the edges of the wood, however there was no way to lift the board. Cornelius, not the least bit deflated, tried all the magic words he could think of from "Open-Sesame" to "Alakazam." When these phrases ran out, he was at a loss. Maybe this doorway wasn't really meant for him kind of like a wrong number. That thought made him more cross than he would like to admit, he wanted this chance more than anything. Slamming his fist down angrily, Cornelius found himself shamefully weeping. It wasn't fair! All he wanted to do was leave, to find a different life away from his parents and away from the expectations, and away from Dirkson. Was it really that difficult?

A light shown through his closed eyelids, and he opened them to find the

floorboard glowing. He didn't know what had changed, or why it had changed, however the board was now warm to his touch, and when he ran his fingers along the edge, he found a smooth divot he could grip. With a small wish (he would never pray), Cornelius lifted the board swiftly and was instantly blinded. The last thing he remembered was hands grabbing him and a falling sensation, followed by pain.

Chapter 3: The Citadel



There was whispering, and most of the words were none too kind. Cornelius could make out a few words like “weak,” “wasteful,” and “human”. When the voices spoke the word “human,” it sounded as though it was the greatest insult. The word oozed off of their tongues as though the word was distasteful to even mention. Something deep inside, most likely his sense of self-preservation, commanded him to stay silent and to feign unconsciousness, and so he did. Cornelius concentrated now listening to the conversation more closely.

“This is ludicrous, Ulrich, there hasn’t been a human Guardian in over two thousand years.”

“They are too weak,” Another voice called out.

“Deceitful,” another said, and so on until Cornelius counted ten separate voices all gabbing and discriminating against the human race.

“Enough! My friends, I am, as you are, displeased with this unfortunate turn of events. However the Ancient Ones are never wrong in their choosing, so we must train him.” This voice was new and commanding, and Cornelius took a shot in the dark and guessed it belonged to this “Ulrich” character.

“And when he’s too weak, and he dies?,” one of the voices asked.

“Then that is just what is meant to be.”

Though Ulrich’s words seemed almost accepting, Cornelius wasn’t fooled. Any person with half a brain could tell his words were forced through gritted teeth. He didn’t want Cornelius there anymore than anyone else did, and Cornelius agreed, he did like him being there either. Sure, he wanted an adventure, to get away, but this was ridiculous. He had been taken under extreme pain, and then he’d awakened in some place on a rather uncomfortable piece of stone, and then had to listen to people tear him apart without knowing him!

The prejudgement, Cornelius didn’t mind so much, since he was used to it. However, being used to it, didn’t mean he necessarily had to like it. Being himself, naturally, he had to prove them wrong. He would become the best, whatever it was that they wanted him to be. His teachers often told him that if he were any more stubborn he could be used as building materials.

“Let’s wake him. Uselessly lying there whilst others are waiting patiently for him.”

It was a woman's voice, and Cornelius was vaguely reminded of the snooty girl in his grade at his school, and this meant an instant dislike and aversion to whoever it was. Before he could so much as react, a flash and stream of cold water suddenly blinded his senses to everything around him.

Cornelius yelped in surprise and jumped upwards on the slab.

"Good, you're awake." It took a few moments for Cornelius' eyes to adjust to light, when his vision returned he almost wished it hadn't. The world had played some cruel joke on him, and Dirkson really had killed him in that alleyway. Before him were eleven human-like people in a semicircle made up of a stone slab of a table and eleven high-backed chairs of impeccably carved wood. He took almost no notice in the design of his surroundings and focused on the clearly deformed humans that were placed before him- no wonder they hated humans so much, they were obviously lacking in the normalcy department.

"Speak, boy."

Cornelius found that he couldn't, no matter how much he wanted to.

"Are you deaf, boy? Are you mute?" The speaker was a man with a horse of a face, elongated with large features, dark skin, and wide eyes- or what would normally be wide eyes. They were currently small slits that portrayed an angry expression.

"I ain't deaf. I ain't mute, and you should watch your manners." The man- if you could call him that- sat back sharply and stared down his long nose at the boy in front of him with nothing short of complete disgust.

"Ulrich- this boy is nothing but a disgrace and a miscreant. Are you sure we

cannot simply send him back to the curs that whelped him?” The statement was directed from the black-haired man to an older grandfatherly character seated in the center of the half circle. With broad shoulders, a long beard braided neatly so that not a hair was out of place, and large coke bottle glasses, the man looked as harmless as a fly.

“Calm yourself, Luzon. You know as well as I the great laws pertaining to training of the chosen few. Although he will most likely fail, he has been selected and thus must stand the trial of training.”

“And when he dies?” A woman asked this question, and it would have seemed out of concern, if one could ignore the sniveling tone of her voice.

“Then he shall be disposed of properly, Arlit.” Ulrich’s words settled on Cornelius, and his hair stood on end at the implications.

“This is kidnapping- send me home now and I won’t tell the police.”

“And, what, pray tell, will you say, boy?” Luzon questioned Cornelius with a mocking smile. “That you were taken from your room and you woke up here-“ He spread his hands in a grand gesture to the people surrounding him, “We’re not exactly humans. Will you claim that aliens took you?”

Luzon’s words stung, for there was truth to them. He couldn’t just go waltzing into a station shouting about this experience. No one would believe him for one, and such an attempt would likely end him up in a loony bin. Cornelius stared down at the hands clenched tightly in his lap.

“What do you plan on doing with me, then?” Cornelius backpedaled slightly. Maybe if he played the good boy, they would become lax and he could make his

escape.

“Train you.” Ulrich sat forward and leaned onto the slab that served as the table in front of him. “Tell us your name.”

“Cornelius,” he paused, “Cornelius Henderson.”

Ulrich nodded. “Well, who here in the council will take on Cornelius as his or her charge?” No one spoke. Cornelius knew better than to look around for a friendly face- he would find none in this crowd.

“How about you, Arlit?” Cornelius did look up at the woman who’d asked about his death. If she was going to reject him, she would do it while looking at him. She was young, most likely around her late twenties, with dark almost chocolate-colored skin and hair a soft mint green. Her sensual mouth twisted, whether in thought or in distaste, Cornelius couldn’t tell. Finally she sighed, relenting to obvious political pressure.

“Of course, Ulrich. You are ever so wise in your decision.”

Ulrich smiled to himself slightly before his lips dipped down into his ever-present frown. “Arlit will be your mistress and master. You will follow her lead and do as she says: you owe her your loyalty.”

This statement ended the council, and the attendees started to disperse. Cornelius sat on the cold slab, feeling awkward and out of place. He had been hated before and thought of as a burden before- but never had he felt the outright hatred that had been expressed at this meeting. He didn’t even know them, and they were already judging him. Cornelius looked up when a pair of brown leather boots appeared in his vision.

They weren't like any kind of shoes he'd ever seen. They were obviously handmade, without the same tiny and precise stitching he was used to seeing, and they laced up the inside of the ankle. The boot reached just above the ankle, and tucked into the boot was a pair of well made and tended brown cotton breeches. His gaze continued upwards, mesmerized by the oddity of the clothing here -- everything was loose and handmade and obviously not from his era. A deep red tunic started just above the knees and was belted by a large and well worn belt. A sleeveless overrobe of dark brown fabric covered the shoulder area, though he could see a peak of a high red collar.

Arlit's face was something he could prize forever. It was simple, with an upturned nose that fit seamlessly with her high cheekbones and thin bone structure. Her eyes were bright, almost the same color as her hair, which was odd, but he wasn't complaining. She scowled at him, though even that expression couldn't mar her beauty.

"Stop staring, and let's go." She led him out of the chamber and into a hallway like nothing he could ever have envisioned. They were traveling through hallway after hallway that opened onto many different types of rooms, most more grand than the last. The entire place was carved neatly out of one piece of stone, and Cornelius could not discern with any certainty where one piece of marble started and another ended. Glancing upwards, Cornelius was startled to see that the ceiling was made out of millions of pieces of different colored glass. He could make out several different shapes that were well hidden in the rest of the overall image. He saw several tiny animals and other creatures, seashells, glass plants that looked so thin,

they would surely break if he were to touch them. Caught up in the images, Cornelius didn't notice Arlit stopping until he had walked into her. She shoved him back.

“Don't touch me.”

Cornelius opened his mouth to argue, but found that he couldn't. There was nothing he could say to these people he could already tell that. Instead he took the hit and stayed silent- self-preservation was a bit more important than his pride at this point. She had stopped at the top of a set of hallways filled with wooden and glass doors. The wood and glass alternated in a spiral pattern on each of the doors; the glass was frosted so he could not see the inside.

“This is the initiates' wing. This is where you'll be staying with your fellow guardians-in-training for the next three years-“

“Three years!” Cornelius cried, unable to contain himself. He didn't want to stay with these things for any longer than he had to. They were horrible and miserable creatures who cared nothing for him.

Arlit continued as though she didn't hear him. “You will study all that it to be a Guardian, and if you don't die, then you'll be connected to your partner. Your third year will be spent working with your partner, learning all there is to know about maneuvering in in-flight combat situations, working in conjunction with both yours and your dragon's magic, as well as everything else it takes to ride and work with a dragon successfully.”

“Alright, lady.” Cornelius had had enough. “I've had it just about up to here,” he gestured to above his head with his hand, “with all of this crazy talk. I want

answers.”

Arlit stared at him without saying anything, before she turned and started to walk down the hallway. Cornelius silently fuming followed her. They stopped in front of a door marked with the number “13.” She took a key from her belt purse and opened the lock. The room had a bed, writing desk, small heating stove, a wooden wardrobe, cabinets with the doors securely closed, and another door- most likely to some kind of a bathroom.

He followed her in and closed the door when she motioned. She took the seat at his desk leaving him to either sit on the bed or on the floor. Cornelius chose the bed. Although he didn’t really want to sit on anything that belonged to these people, it was a better option than sitting on the floor looking up at her. Arlit crossed her legs and laid her hands gently across her lap as if all she wanted to do was to have a nice conversation between friends.

“How much do you know about the Guardians?”

Cornelius scowled at her, “Nothing. Nothing at all.”

“Nothing?” The surprise was clearly evident in her tone of voice and facial expression. After taking a moment to school her features, Arlit couldn’t completely hide the scowl that twisted her features.

“The Guardians are a noble order, though it seems like your species doesn’t remember that.”

Cornelius stared at her when he heard the word “species”. He inspected her features: yes her eyes were weird, as was the color of her hair- but those could be altered with makeup and dye. He continued to scan her body until he reached her

hands, and then found himself unable couldn't look away. On each hand there was three fingers, not like Oh, yeah, I lost these fingers in a woodworking accident. there were just simply three fingers. Cornelius stood, surprising Arlit, though he took no notice, and proceeded to grab her hands to examine them.

No matter how he turned them, it was simply undeniable: there were only three fingers and had only ever been three fingers. After a few moments, Arlit wrenched her hand away. "What are you doing, human?" She clutched her hand to her chest as if his touch had burned her.

"You only have three fingers." His astonishment and shock seemed to placate Arlit.

"I am a Magi," she said simply as if explaining everything.

"Like, 'Gift of the Magi'?"

She frowned, "No, like a Magi. You know, born in magic with the natural ability to use and control magic better than any other race?"

Cornelius shook his head, "Never heard of them."

It was Arlit's turn to look shocked. "The Magi?" He shook his head, "The Elves?" Cornelius shook again, "Elementals, Faeries, Trolls, Dwarves?" She listed off a few more species and with each one that he shook his head at, her frown deepened. "Don't they teach you stupid humans anything about your history?"

Cornelius shot up like something had stung him, "I am not stupid. And we only learn about the truth, about creatures who exist."

Arlit leveled an eye on him, "Don't I exist?"

Cornelius couldn't think of any response.

She sighed and reached up her hand- all three fingers of it- and rubbed the bridge of her nose. That sign, Cornelius was relieved to note, was universal for stress. “I had hoped you were part of the educated humanity.”

Cornelius bristled at the attack, though Arlit didn't give him the chance for a comeback. “I don't mean educated in the sense of mathematics or anything along those lines.” She paused before speaking again, her face as weary as her voice, “A long time ago all the races lived together on Earth. We all benefitted from alliances and used each other in the normal way of politics. Something happened, let's call it a war, and then the humans were segregated from the rest of the races.”

Frowning, Cornelius asked, “Why?”

Arlit closed her eyes asking for strength, “It is said that humans caused a great destruction that cost many lives from all the races. Not a single species was left untouched by this betrayal. Humans stole power they should not have, and tried spells they should not have and people died.” She opened her eyes and looked at him. Hairs rose on the back of Cornelius' neck at the severe expression that seemed to envelop not only her face but also her entire body language.

“You will find none who want you here, Cornelius. I do not even want you here.” Cornelius felt like he'd been slapped, though he did his best not to show it. “In the best-case scenario, you will be left alone to muddle through this experience. You will not bond with a dragon, and then you will be left to go home.

“Worst case scenario is that you'll be tortured and killed by your peers and teachers. Not in outright attacks, mind you. There are specific rules a Guardian and an Initiate must follow, but they can choose to torture you in other ways, through

cruelty and harshness.”

Cornelius looked down at his hands and alternated clenching and releasing them. This wasn't fair, he hadn't asked for this adventure. Worst-case scenario, best-case scenario- it didn't matter. This was just another group of people willing to judge him before knowing him; only this time he had no support from anyone, and no relief.

Arlit spoke a little more about each of the races before standing to leave.

“Supper is at 1800.” Cornelius made a face.

“When is that, again?”

Arlit stared at him, “1800.” She paused again before giving him a look that might as well have screamed that she thought he was stupid. “Six in the evening. Just follow the other initiates to the main dining quarters.”

Chapter 4: Truce, Peace, and Learning



When the door closed behind her, Cornelius took the time to examine his new quarters. After a brief search through the desk and drawers, all containing the usual student paraphernalia he took the time to look through the wardrobe. That the clothing all seeming to fit him was concerning enough, though the old fashioned nature of them concerned him slightly more. A brief check beside the stove showed two pairs of shoes, one made of a hard leather with some wood placed in it. He surmised that it was for combat learning. The second pair was a softer leather, obviously not for outside use. It was as though he'd stepped through a portal and gone back in time.

In a way he had: hadn't these people ever heard of electricity? On the other

hand, had he ever seen such beautiful architecture? He spotted the knapsack he'd taken with him, seemingly forever ago, and scoffed. A knapsack filled with art supplies, that would surely be helpful here! Stalking over to the bag, Cornelius picked it up and hid it in the bottom of one of the cabinets. He continued to search through his quarters, and found a warmed bathing and bathroom area, though everything seemed to be made out of metal and stone (finding out how to work the toilet was also difficult). Cornelius only stopped searching when he heard talking in the hallway.

Resigning himself to supper, Cornelius turned and left his room. The hallway was filled with twelve others, all varying in age, sex, and physical appearance, some more interesting than others. The most interesting, it seemed, was the girl who stood taller than every other person in the hallway. Her height was more accented by the two white birds that sat on her shoulders. As Cornelius drew closer, he noticed with a start that there were no birds on her shoulders, and that the feathers were hers.

Her forehead was long, longer than average, but it held a strange beauty Cornelius couldn't deny. Her skin was an olive tone, not unlike his own, though it was marred by her dark hair that continued down from her hairline, through her forehead in a triangular form and ended only at the beginning of her elongated, one could almost say beaklike nose. Her ears were normal enough, all round and fleshy like any humans'. However was what was on the ears that was most alarming.

The small beak and eyes of a bird rested on the top curve of her ear, and he supposed the same for the other one, though he was unable to see. From her ear sprouted long, white feathers that added more than a few inches to her height.

Suddenly, someone shoved him roughly from behind, and Cornelius spread and swung his arms wildly in order to avoid careening to the floor.

There was loud snickering as others walked past him. Cornelius heard mutterings of, “humans”. Did these people have nothing else to do with their time than torment others? A hand touched his arm and Cornelius’ eyes met with Arlit’s. They blinked, and upon closer examination, Cornelius realized, with a start, that it was not Arlit. Taking a step back, Cornelius examined the person in front of him.

She was almost the spitting image of Arlit, though much younger and smaller, and she could not have been more than five feet tall. In place of Arlit’s red robes, the girl wore bright-yellow ones, securely fastened with a black leather belt that contained a red gem in it. “Don’t mind the others, they weren’t taught manners.”

Cornelius stared at her, a bad habit he was starting form.

“Who are you, and why are you talking to me?” Not waiting for her answer, he stalked by the girl fuming. This was an old trick, pretending to be nice and then surprising the victim with some kind of underhanded assault.

“I’m Beira, and I’m talking to you because you’re the first human child I’ve ever seen.” The girl was keeping pace with Cornelius’ long strides despite the height difference.

“First human child, as in you’ve seen others?”

Beira nodded, “Adults. My family is in the merchant class. As a rule, we don’t care about who we sell our wares to, so humans do come calling every so often.”

“I thought humans had no contact with your lot. That we’re evil or something.” It sounded childish to even him, though Cornelius couldn’t help the

sting and bitterness from the treatment he'd received thus far.

“Mostly, yes, you're correct. However, those of us, mainly Magi, who want to make a decent living by the borders of the worlds, have to make do. Not everyone is so blind and old-minded as elves.” She paused, “Or, even worse- Elementals. They'll be sure to want to get at you during your time here.”

“And won't you get into trouble if you're seen with me?” Cornelius questioned with an almost light tone.

“I'm already going to get pushed around. I'm the youngest initiate in over two-thousand years, maybe three. Not many people have the amount of natural power needed to get a call at the age of thirteen.”

Cornelius stopped outright, not far from where he heard a large congregation of talking and laughter. “You're only thirteen, and they've allowed you into this- this,” Cornelius paused, “this hornet's nest- this scorpion's hole.”

Beira shrugged, “They could try to stop me, and either way, my second cousin, Arlit, was chosen last Guardian generation, which comes along ever fifty or so years, if you didn't know. She'll look out for my best interest.”

“Did Arlit tell you to befriend me?” The stubborn push of her chin was the only way Cornelius could tell that this strong-willed youth was really thirteen.

“No, she didn't. I make my own decisions- thank you.” With that said Beira led the way into the dining hall. There were the other youths from his wing, the Masters whom he'd met earlier- including Arlit, and then other adults in various states and styles of dress. “The Citadel is a center for learning in all of Alytaus and in the surrounding lands.”

“The citadel?” Cornelius questioned, as he followed Beira into the mess line and picked up a tray.

“That’s where we are. The Guardians Citadel was established thousands of years ago to be a center of protection and knowledge for all the races.”

“Except humans,” Cornelius replied bitterly.

Beira shook her head and grabbed a plate of what looked like grilled vegetables, like a grape leaf, of some kind. “Humans were once welcomed here too. You aren’t the first Guardian to be a human, you know. There just hasn’t been one in a very long time.”

“How long?”

She paused, “When the humans betrayed the rest of the races, the backlash of magic and the transition of the world from one to two left the humans back where they started- what you all call the age of prehistory. Your Neanderthals are actually some of the other races that chose not to leave. All of your buildings and your collective memories were destroyed.” She reached forward and grabbed a plate of vegetables, “Well, I suppose not all collective memories; you still all fear the dark and the supernatural. The things that happen without cause or reason. This is what a small part of humanity remembers is magic.”

Cornelius followed suit in taking different things to eat without really paying attention to what he was grabbing; food was food after all. Only when he sat down at a long table- conveniently emptying out on his arrival, did he look at what was on his tray. “And this is?” he asked warily to Beira.

Beira looked up with slight confusion, “Just your normal food.”

“Where is the meat? Was there any up there, and I just missed it?”

She shook her head, “Right now is the time of fasting against any and all life taking.”

“Fasting against life taking?” It was the most ridiculous thing Cornelius had ever heard.

“Absolutely, in order for us to give thanks to those who’ve died before us, and to make penance for the lives we will take as Guardians, we must fast once every sixth month for a week- no meat at all.” Beira spoke as if it were the most normal thing in the world.

“Is there usually much killing here?” Concern shown through Cornelius’ best attempt of hiding it.

Beira paused and put down her utensils. “There didn’t used to be, and for a long time it was just tradition. War and peril had become a figment of the imagination, nearly, before the last ten years or so.”

“What was different about those?”

She shrugged. “It just seems, to me like every person has lost control of their senses. Alliances are going bad; people are fighting for rulership of this or that. The only battles we used to fight were battles against trolls and dark elves. And those really aren’t battles, they’re most like housekeeping.”

“Fighting and killing is housekeeping?”

“Most don’t view the other lesser species as anything more than microscopic specks on the proverbial battlefield. They mean nothing, they’ll always mean nothing, and only their people will mourn their deaths.”

“That’s barbaric!” Cornelius was horrified at Beira’s remarks. People were people, always. Once you started making decisions on whom was superior to whom, it was a slippery slope not well accustomed to be transversed. He knew, the human world was full of it.

Maybe in this way, he thought, with all of humanity’s lack in the art of magic and all these great forces finally the humans were better versed in a subject. Humanity is, and has always been, very good at deciding when someone was lesser than someone else. The key to how humans operate is taxonomy. With this thought plaguing him, Cornelius set to finish off his odd meal of assorted vegetables, not all recognizable.

After the initiates all headed back to their rooms, Cornelius found that someone had taken the time to pee on his door handle. Turning his head, Cornelius glanced around and with a grimace, found that he had no choice but to wrap his hand in the corner of his shirt and open the door with it.

His rooms were, thankfully, untouched, though a small portion of the urine had leaked under his door. What should he do about that? Did they have custodians here, and if they did, Cornelius wondered, how could he contact one. With even more remorse- he would get those guys back later- Cornelius stripped off his shirt and mopped up the floor with it.

Holding the now offending bit of clothing away from him with a sneer, Cornelius brought it to his dressing room and threw it into the laundry hamper. Exploring his room, Cornelius opened his drawers and discovered more clothing, if you could call it that. Pulling out a very long shirt, he tugged it this way and that

trying to figure out just how to wear it. Thinking back to those he saw this evening, Cornelius shuddered slightly and put it away. He'd subject himself to fashion suicide tomorrow; tonight he would sleep bare.

Climbing into bed, Cornelius discovered it was quite soft and warm, much more comfortable than his bed at home. Tucking himself in, the lights turned themselves off at their own accord once he was settled. It was at that moment Cornelius felt the deep heaving sting of homesickness.

He would give almost anything at this point to be home; hell- he would give Dirkson a big kiss on the lips. Dirkson might be a bully, but he did it because he has nothing better to do with his time. These people bullied because of some racist grudge that went back centuries. Thinking back on the woman who had found him after his fight and her words about people and bullying, Cornelius decided maybe she wasn't as crazy as he first thought she was. Closing his eyes, Cornelius fell into a deep but dissatisfying sleep.

Chapter 5: *Horse of Different Color*



Something moved against the light, and Cornelius strained to reach for it. He didn't know how, but he knew that if he didn't reach whatever it was covering the light, then he and many others would perish. Reaching up again, Cornelius strained his fingers towards the top and then tumbled from his bed at the sound of a loud gong. The sun was barely peeking over the horizon; he could barely see it through the crack in his shuttered windows.

A knock sounded at his door and Cornelius reached for blankets to cover himself as the door opened to reveal a foot servant. The skin of the foot servant was sap green, almost as though he came from the wooden trees in the forest himself. His servant's uniform was made out of well-maintained grey cotton hose and tunic synched with a key laden leather belt. In his hands, separated by cloth holders, was a

steaming bowl of water. “The Masters say you’re to wash and meet in the main hall for breakfast.” Putting the bowl into the washroom, Cornelius watched him before checking underneath the sheets- thankfully, he still wore his pants.

Entering the washroom, Cornelius stuck a cloth into the bowl and began to wash himself despite the protest from his skin at the temperature of the water. In his bedroom, the foot servant stoked up a small fire that heated the room, which was cool despite it not yet being past the fall equinox. With that being done, the serving man left. After washing, Cornelius stripped himself of his pants and underwear before entering his rooms again.

At his cabinets, Cornelius deftly pulled out what seemed like the tights the men wore in a warm brown color, some kind of baggy pants that tightened and ended at the knee which were also in the same tone, as well as a long sleeved white shirt with tight cuffs. He finally grabbed a long brown tunic to go over his ensemble. He managed to put on the hose and figured out through a series of deductions how to tie the strings he would later learn were “points”. Pulling the tunic on over the long sleeves made him feel like a prissy boy- there was a chance he would have to kick his own ass.

Another gong summoned even the deafest person from bed, and Cornelius sat on the hearth and tied his shoes- not those old leather things- but his rather good, blue converses. Closing the door behind him, he turned and followed his peers to the dining hall. Beira met him at the door, and Cornelius once again followed her to the mess line, and, unfortunately, once again no meat. Slamming his tray onto the table Cornelius sat heavily in the chair and mourned. His kingdom for some bacon! “Is it

so hard to have some meat in here?”

“I told you, this is retribution for the lives that we will take,” Beira said patiently, whilst chewing on what looked like steamed spinach.

“I don’t plan on taking any lives. Maybe you all are stuck in the Stone-Age, but I am not.” Beira shook her head at him, and Cornelius felt angry. Here he was refusing to become a killer, standing up for life! And Beira was sitting there, shaking her head at him as if he were the uneducated one.

Shoving his tray away, Cornelius stood. “Where are you going?” Beira asked glancing up at him.

“Out- away.”

She shrugged. “Alright, just remember to be down by the stables by 700.”

Cornelius scoffed at her and brought his tray up to the cleaning crew, shoving it into the hands of the workers he turned and left the mess hall. The bell was ringing the seventh hour when Cornelius stumbled into the stables nearly late. The teacher glanced at him with a gruelingly lazy but still hateful look.

“Some of us need to learn punctuality.”

Cornelius bit his tongue. This looked like a man he would not want to tango with. The man stood not over five-feet-five inches, which in itself was not intimidating, but it was the man’s build and overall appearance that stilled Cornelius’ comeback. The man had pale skin and the brightest red hair Cornelius could ever remember seeing. Not red like, ‘Oh, there goes a cute red head’, but red like, ‘Holy crap, that guy could be a crayon’. The hair was long, starting in a shaved head with a mohawk and reached mostly down his back. His face was thin and fierce

with lines that spoke of someone who took no nonsense and looked for a fight.

Beira glanced at him before keeping her eyes firmly fixed on the Master.

“As I said,” each word was spoken with painstaking effort as though the words were precious jewels that were being ripped from his mouth. “My name is Luzon. I am the horse-master here and expect to be given the respect I deserve. You are here to work, and everyday you will work your mount, and then you will groom and feed your mount. All your gear will be maintained by you, and only you. Violating any of these rules result in punishment. Failure to complete your punishment will result in worse punishment.” The man smiled, “It is one of the greatest examples of the circle of life.

“Right here are the horses already taken by the Masters.” Luzon pointed down the far end of the stable. “The horses available for your use are down at the end.” He pulled out a long, golden pocket watch on a chain and light flashed on the watch.

He was at home- well his home world. He was leaning over one the steeples of the school he attended- Saint Joseph’s on 42nd Street. The sky went dark as the sun was eclipsed. Something large- extremely large moved behind him claws rested on his shoulder and then he was jerked back violently and the world shook.

The moment was gone and everyone else was already sprinting down the hallway.

“Run, boy!” Cornelius, startled, took off on a desperate run. When he got to the stalls on the far end all the Initiates were already there “making nice” with the

horses they had chosen.

Going down to the end of the stalls, Cornelius eyed up three horses: one looked desolate and pooped- even someone with no horse experience like him could see that this thing would die before running. One was good looking, sturdy, and he liked the look of it. Cornelius walked toward it when he heard a chuckle behind him.

“What are you going to do, Human? Ride the pony?”

There was a round of raucous laughter and Cornelius turned to see a boy with dark-brown skin and dark-green hair in the same tall and longhair fashion. It seemed like everybody was out of a seventies hair band.

Cornelius pet the horse with a small smirk, “I think this guy and I will get along quite nicely.”

There was more laughter.

“He can’t even tell a male from a female.” The female who scoffed at him was beautiful with blonde hair and porcelain skin.

A hand gripped Cornelius and pulled him out of the crowd of ridiculers and down to the final horse. The small hand let go, and he saw that it was Beira.

“You are the dumbest person I have ever met.” She was nearly irate, “You want people to make fun of you- I swear it.”

Cornelius became angry at her statement, “Who asked you to help me? And I’m not stupid.” He crossed his arms and something small in him stung- the only person who’d been nice to him here was now one of those bullies.

Her eyes softened slightly, “Here, you’ll ride this horse.” Beira pointed to the horse in a stall. It was of medium build with a deep, rich coat that was a shiny gray

with an even distribution of white. The mane was black and long, well maintained as far as he could tell with no snarls. “She’s a Morgan, and her coat is a blue roan.”

There was admiration in Beira’s voice. “She’ll go forever if you treat her right.”

Cornelius mumbled something, and he saw Beira cocking her head to the side. “Come again?”

“I don’t know how to.” She stared at him questioningly, “Where I come from we don’t really have, you know, horses.”

Her stare turned from questioning to incredulous, and Cornelius felt even more isolated. “We don’t need horses- we have cars.”

“Cars?”

“Cars are- ah- forget about it. The point is I know nothing, and I mean nothing, about horses.”

She nodded and left the stall. Cornelius stared helplessly at the horse, and the horse curiously stared back. With hesitance, he took one step forward and then another. Finally, with an act of pure courage, he lifted a hand and stroked down the neck of the large animal. The horse shifted, and startled, Cornelius stepped back. After a few seconds, with his confidence regained Cornelius attempted to pet the horse again. This time, as he stroked the horse he murmured to her, “We’re going to be working together, I suppose. So, get along with me, and I’ll do my best to do well by you.”

Beira was back at the door of the stall. “I moved my horse next to yours,” she informed him before tossing him a series of brushes- he caught one and dropped the rest. “That’s a soft brush, hard brush, and a curry. Curry first to remove set in dirt,

hard brush to move it off the horse, and then soft brush to make the coat nice.”

Cornelius looked down at the brushes murmuring each name to himself so he would remember them.

This done, he set to work currying the horse. “No, no.” She was there at his elbow standing tiptoe in an attempt to reach his arm. “Circular movements, firm. You won’t hurt her.”

Cornelius nodded and started his work again on the strong muscle at the head of the skull that traced all the way down to the shoulders. His hands became dusty and grimy, his arms hurt, but she leaned into his work. “You’re a pretty girl, Utica.”

“Utica?” Cornelius groaned internally. Beira needed to work on her own horse and stop listening in.

“My grandparents live there,” he mumbled, not even caring if she heard him. “It was my favorite place to go before, well, before all of this.”

Beira didn’t say anything in reply, and Cornelius began his work on the opposite side of the horse. Quickly, he finished his work with the hard brush and then again with the soft brush. For good measure, to keep his new ally clean, Cornelius neatly braided the mane and tail as only a devoted brother with sisters could.

When it came to saddling his beauty, whom he was already mostly in love with, Beira had to give him a step by step process that left him feeling all thumbs and humiliated. She managed to saddle her horse, something called a ‘gelding’ (whatever that was) named K’az-rd. When he asked what the name meant, she smiled and said it meant ‘celestial warrior’. He informed her that she was a

persnickety youth.

The entire experience took nearly forty-five minutes and Cornelius was the last person to lead his horse into the outdoor riding arena. Luzon eyed him as though he were no better than a bug to be crushed. “Well, mount up.”

Cornelius stared at the horse, and feeling his stare, Utica turned and looked back at him. Feeling somewhat pert and mostly lost, he mouthed the words ‘Mount up’ at his horse, as if she would tell him the answer. He figured that Luzon wanted him to get on the horse- but how? There were no stools or stairs available. Something glinted, and Cornelius’ gaze caught on the weird half-circle thing Beira called a ‘stirrup.’

Shrugging Cornelius tried to raise his foot to it and failed miserably. Immediately there was laughter, and Cornelius turned to look at Luzon. He failed to say or do anything to help him, and thus it was clear to Cornelius that he was on his own for this one. Going up to the saddle, he felt along until his hand slid under one leather area. Lifting the flap, Cornelius saw that the stirrup was on a leather strap connecting it to the saddle. There was a buckle, and Cornelius undid it and lengthened the stirrup to where he thought he could lift his leg. Gripping the edges of the saddle, Cornelius took a deep breath, and hoisted his leg into the stirrup.

Miraculously, he was able to get his foot into the offending item. Another steeling breath, and Cornelius gripped the saddle, and with a jump and feat of strength, he lifted himself into the saddle- or he would have had his foot not caught onto the side of the horse’s rear end. She threw her head up as a warning, but otherwise she stayed calm. Cornelius was sure at this point that he had the most

mildly mannered horse to ever exist. She'd have to be to put up with him.

He tried again to do the same motion, however he put more force into it this time. Next thing he knew he was arranging himself on the saddle and turning to look at Luzon. His face was marled in a scowl.

“Walk them, counter-clockwise.” The command was gruff, and Cornelius took pride in the fact that he was the cause for it. Watching his peers Cornelius managed to turn the horse through clucks and gentle movements. Getting in line behind the other horses, he would rather not be at the center of this mess; Cornelius followed them at a walking pace. His horse kept getting further and further away from the group and for the life of him, he couldn't figure out why.

“Boy! Do you not know how to ride a horse properly?”

Cornelius bowed his head, “Where I come from, we have cars.” In a moment of spite and will, he raised his face and stared directly into Luzon's eyes. “You know, technology. We don't rely on making horse slaves in order for us to get anywhere.”

“Insolence!” There was a burning pain in Cornelius' cheek- the Luzon had whipped him in the face with the long riding whip he held.

“Get off the horse.”

Cornelius stared mulishly at him and got another whip.

“Now boy.” It would take three more whips for Cornelius to finally get off the Utica. “You are not fit to ride a horse. Bring her back inside, rub her down, and then start mucking out the stalls. That's all you're good for.”

Two hot flames of shame burned in Cornelius' cheek whilst his brain was

aflame with anger. Leading Utica back to her stall, he managed (with great difficulty) to remove the harness and other trappings, brush her down, and then went in search of someone to tell him what 'mucking' meant.

Chapter 6: Encounters



The Initiates all lined up for Arlit to look them over. She often whacked them across the chest, arms, or legs with the broad of her sword, making comments about the physical fitness and appearance of whoever was unfortunate to have her attention. Cornelius wasn't spared; he got three slaps, one for every offending area. He didn't mind so much, since he already knew that he wasn't physically fit by any means. They were given long pieces of wood with a crosspiece to keep their hands from slipping forward.

"No swords," she began, "until you've mastered the basics. I don't need you lopping off limbs and more importantly, damaging precious swords. Eventually, you'll all forge your own." She tapped her blade absently on her leg. "Your sword is your best friend and your worst enemy. If you're good you can defend your life and the lives of those around you. You can also take the lives of others, sometimes

this is filled with the sick pleasure of killing. Other times,” she shrugged her shoulders, “you get to enjoy the sheer pride and pleasure of being the better swordsman.”

She paired off the initiates with each other, all except Cornelius.

“There are thirteen of you.” She told him, “One of you, thus, has to work with me, and I doubt you’ve had any training.” Cornelius nodded in admittance before working through the tiring process of practicing high, middle, and low blocks. His arms ached and his back screamed with the effort. Most of the weight, he was surprised to find, sat in his forearms. They strained and Cornelius set his mouth in a firm line of determination. This, he would learn.

He was leaving when Arlit stopped him. “Come here directly after your last class for a bell’s worth of work. You’re behind all the other Initiates due to lack of instruction.” She did not speak with a kind or gentle tone, merely one that stated this as a fact.

“I won’t have you sully my name as an instructor. You will become a credit to me, or I’ll know why.” The threat lay hanging in the air and Cornelius swallowed. In her own way Arlit was scarier than Luzon by a trifold. Nodding, he left the classroom with the hairs standing on the back of his neck- she had a way of terrifying him without doing anything particularly threatening.

Cornelius found himself only a few dozen feet behind his classmates, but unable to catch up as four youths stood in his way. The first thing that Cornelius did was look down at the hands of his adversaries. Three of them had four fingers on each hand and one had five. ‘So, I have three elementals and one elf,’ Cornelius

thought to himself. He had managed to determine this by watching the hands of nearly every person that he had met since coming to this place. Humans and elves had five fingers. Elementals had four fingers, and magi had three.

Looking at the hair he had a general idea of what he was facing, an elemental who controlled fire, another who controlled water, and finally one that controlled air. The elf didn't have any outward signs of what he controlled.

"Hello friends!" He called, while silently cursing his own stupid need to be cheeky as often as possible. One of them, who seemed to be the leader, was an elemental with brown skin and green hair. He raised a slim eyebrow at Cornelius mockingly. His face was slightly heavy set, with a heavy jawbone and widely set eyes. He was big, almost like a mountain himself.

"I would hardly call us friends, human."

"Really?" Cornelius' tone had a forced brightness as he slowly inched towards them. "That's a shame. I do try to befriend most everyone I meet."

A smirk settled on the heavy features of the boy in front of him.

"I am Kiel, human. No-" he held up his hand in a cautionary way when Cornelius opened his mouth, "I don't need your name, human. Simply put, you don't even deserve the honor of me speaking to you. Let alone me committing your foolish name to memory. It is a shame that our most prestigious Guardians and Masters must remember yours. In any case," He opened his hands- all four fingers on them- and said trying to seem benevolent but failing viciously, "I am merely here to give you a warning: leave."

Cornelius shrugged and looked as though he had not a care in the world

despite the utter rage boiling on the inside, “I’m afraid I can’t leave.”

He tried to sound as sorry as possible, “The old laws state that every person who is marked and brought here must be trained.” He smiled brightly at them, “Who knows, maybe weak old me will die from this training, I am human- you know.” He doubted that the brute realized that Cornelius was making fun of him; the boy was too assured in himself to think that anyone, let alone a human, would make fun of him.

Kiel nodded, “Indeed, you are correct. Thank you for reminding me.” He seemed to think for a second, “Yes, I do believe that you are right, you’ll just have to die, but the masters will take care of that.”

With a turn that the others followed Kiel left Cornelius alone in the hallway. Cornelius’ shoulders slumped as though he had no more energy to hold himself erect. That had been a very dangerous situation, by feeding into Kiel’s own narcissism he was able to come out alive and unthrashed, though he doubted that would always be the case. He rubbed his hands over his arms, trying too soothe the raised goosebumps, too close.

Cornelius grabbed his lunch tray and found Beira sitting at a table in the corner. Placing the item down as if it offended him, Cornelius sank into the seat and let his head fall onto the table with a resounding ‘thump’ sound.

“I didn’t think that your day went badly enough to warrant this show of behavior.”

Cornelius twisted his head towards her slightly so that he could glare at her with his table crushed face.

“I just ran into my new best buddy Kiel and his train gang.”

Beira winced, a reaction he wasn't necessarily expecting. “He'll give you trouble.”

Cornelius picked up his head this time, actually curious, “Why?”

“Well, he's an elemental. All elementals hate humans because they believe that humans are magic stealers.”

“That is absolutely ridiculous.”

Beira shrugged, “Not entirely. Humans draw magic from everything around them. They can drain another creature dry of it, if they know how to. However, the idea that humans are the reason why some of their children cannot conduct magic is ridiculous. They are simply inbred.” She sounded so haughty that Cornelius snorted and broke into a smile. His mood lifted, and he tucked into his meal.

After a few mouthfuls he asked, “So, what exactly is the schedule around this place? I've just been following you around.”

Beira looked at him for a moment before realization lit her face, “That's right, you were the last to wake up so you missed the orientation process. There are five classes a day, from 7:00 to 9:30, 9:45 to 12:15, 13:00 to 15:30, 15:45 to 18:15, and finally from 19:00 to 20:00.”

Cornelius nodded, “Alright, now in real clock time.”

Beira stared at him, “You know, one am, one pm?”

She continued to stare and Cornelius was beginning to feel self-conscious.

She was shaking her head now, “You'll need to learn to tell time this way. However, in the mean time the classes run from 7 to 9:30, 9:45 to 12:15, 1-3:30,

3:45-6:15, and from 7-8. The larger time breaks are obviously meal time.”

Cornelius nodded, “And what are the rest classes of the day?”

“We have mathematics, history and law, and finally warding and magic.”

“And then I have more swordsmanship.”

Beira gave him a questioning glance, “I must go there for a bells worth of work after my last class- whatever that means.”

“A bell is an hour,” Beira answered, “And she only does it so you don’t kill yourself or someone else.”

“I thought the point of learning to use swords was to kill someone else.”

Beira shook her head and he could see that she was disappointed at his statement. “The sword is there to protect. If the only way you can use a sword is to kill then you aren’t a very good swordsman.”

The rest of the meal was held in silence. Cornelius felt bad, but mostly sheepish. He just got told off while simultaneously looking like the human ass everyone thought he was.

Silently, Cornelius followed behind Beira when she stood headed towards the servants who were collecting the lunch wares. They placed their trays in the hands of the cleaning staff and left the dining hall. Cornelius chose not to strike up a conversation, still reeling from her chastising. He followed her up stairs and down hallways, making him completely and utterly lost, finally they came to a stop in front of a door.

They entered a classroom that was set up unlike most classrooms he had seen. As far as he knew classrooms were supposed to be desks in rows, and regimented

like some factory meant to create mindless parrot drones. This classroom, on the other hand, had no chairs, merely tables that were a small height off the ground.

Glancing around Cornelius spotted no chairs, not even

Beira strode to a dark wooden cabinet in the corner of the room and pulled open the heavy looking door. The walls of this classroom, he noticed, had old intricate carvings. The one that he noticed most vividly was that of a face with closed eyes and a closed mouth. The forehead, however, contained one large open and staring eye. The ears were that of a fox, perched precariously atop the head as though listening carefully.

Beira turned, breaking his concentration, and handed him pieces of wood. The pieces were folded and attached at the corners with firm metal hinges.

Demonstrating, she unfolded hers into a small single person bench that had just enough room to slip your calves through the bottom. They took their benches and sat in a corner; per usual he was now starting to see, and stretched his legs out in front of him. He winced at the complaint of a particularly sore muscle.

“I’m sorry.” He said finally, swallowing his pride.

Beira merely nodded and lifted up the lid of her section of the table. Pulling out a piece of chalk and a slate board, Cornelius copied her. The other Initiates trickled in and soon the classroom was filled. Across from Beira and Cornelius sat two youths.

“Cornelius,” Beira began, “this is Gomel and Wien.” Gomel, a brown skinned youth though he was older than any other student he had met so far, with sap colored hair reached out, three fingers Cornelius noticed, and shook his hand.

His grip firm, Gomel's skin was rough almost like stone or bark. Cornelius looked into Gomel's eyes suppressed the urge to shudder. The elementals irises were a bright mint green that could almost pass for white, "Pleasure."

Cornelius nodded, "Likewise."

Wien was a bit older than Cornelius. Her hair was a bright eye smarting orange that Cornelius internally cringed at. She chose not to shake his hand and merely nodded silently. It seemed as though she disapproved of him, though he couldn't sense any hostility that could compare to what he felt when confronting Kiel.

"What is that thing?" Cornelius asked.

"What thing?" Gomel seemed to grunt as he opened his desk and retrieved his learning tools.

"On the wall, that face." Cornelius frowned as he stared at the large eye on the forehead.

Gomel glanced up this time and then sent Cornelius a look that clearly stated, 'You're either joking or stupid.' "That is Bavtar, the God of Honesty and Perseverance. He is present in all classrooms to discourage cheating."

Cornelius did not get the chance to answer because the Master in charge of the class entered. Porth, the Master of mathematics dressed in full robes of a deep blue color gained the class' attention by whacking the board at the front with his cane.

His face was old and withered and his voice rasped as he began the mathematics lecture as though no other person was in the room. Cornelius was in luck that his math was ahead of the math being taught, thus his work and the homework that Porth assigned was easy. He supposed the honest thing to do would

have been to tell the teacher that he already knew the material, but whoever said that Cornelius was that honest?

History and Law followed in much the same fashion. Xalapa, another male with seemingly endless wrinkles and an equally raspy voice took over the same room. This was not always going to be the case. His room was being repaired due to something he referred to as a 'grispe problem'. When Cornelius asked later what a 'grispe' was, Beira laughed and answered that it was a flying pest vermin with a talent for biting and cursing.

After supper, Cornelius reflected that his day had actually not gone entirely to hell and now he only had one class left. He followed Beira into a classroom, where the smell almost made him stop in a dead faint. All he could smell was an overwhelming amount of herbs and all other sorts of things he would rather not try and identify.

The woman sitting on the table at the front of the classroom, seemingly unaware of anything else, was so hauntingly beautiful that Cornelius stopped short. With a not so gentle push he was shoved forward and allowed to walk again by his hormones. Finding a seat near the front, as most of the males did, Cornelius examined her more fully.

Her hair was blonde as most elves were, and she had not a single wrinkle adorning her face, no matter how serious she seemed. High cheekbones with egg white smooth skin led down to a voluptuous mouth that Cornelius couldn't help but stare at. His eyes traced her beautifully sculpted neck and down to the cut of her robes that he was sure hid two perfect breasts and everything else that made women

tempting. He traced his way back up her form and was caught staring by a pair of highly disapproving electric blue eyes. He immediately looked down and away. She had caught him.

“I am Gemena, as most of you should remember.” She uncurled her body from its seated position with all the grace and sexual appeal of a cat.

“Others should press my name to memory so that no mistakes can be had.” She paused and Cornelius once again felt her heated gaze on him. “I will be teaching you warding and magic. Some of you shall do fantastically. Others shall, let me just say, that some species are better than other species when it comes to magic and warding. I expect nothing less.” His cheeks flamed with two red flags of shame and anger churned in his stomach.

She was beautiful, all right, but that didn't make her an even halfway decent person, and if he could help it he would not be caught in her gaze again. The class started with meditation, something that he had never been taught and had no clue as she was not inclined to repeat what the 'Initiates should know already'. He was supposed to be meditating and reflecting upon their journey to the future and how his magic will help to shape this path he was supposed to carve.

He wasn't exactly sure he had any magic. He had never done anything he could deem 'magical'. He had never blown up his aunt or divined something in the fire, nor had he ever, ever made something explode or combust into flames. Thus he sat and tried to find it, he tried to coax this thing that he wasn't sure he had and wasn't sure what to look for, out of his 'core' and get it to obey his every order. Yeah, right, he couldn't even get the neighbors dog to sit, let alone something as

powerful as the notion of magic.

Gemena deemed him a failure by the end of meditation and sent him to copy scrolls of spells from now on to as not waste the class' time.

Cornelius wanted to explode with anger by the time that he reached Arlit's classroom for the extra practice. Finally, the last thing of the evening before homework. She seemed to look right through him and tossed him a sword he scrambled to catch it. By the looks of the weapon it was a real one, a real sword.

“Strike at me.”

The command was so simple he couldn't believe it, “I could hurt you.”

The facial expression that met his statement was dubious and haughty, “If you could land a hit on me I wouldn't be fit for my post.”

This made Cornelius even angrier. He knew that he could not possibly match her in swordsmanship. This was the first time he had actually touched a real sword. He struck at her with a yell. He struck again and again never stopping because he wasn't sure if he actually could stop even if he wanted to.

He was already so tired of being pushed around and being a joke or being in pain, emotional or physical. It was time to cause some of his own. His rage didn't last long and after only a minute or two of constant attacking he was exhausted and sweat covered. Arlit hadn't even broken a sweat and was looking down her nose at him though it didn't seem to have much to do with bias or personal opinion.

“Your anger served you one purpose tonight, it made you too tired to do real work. From now on you will control your temper.”

Cornelius, from his spot lying on the floor panting with exhaustion, flipped her

off despite her rank over him. He got slapped on the soft tissue by his ankle with the flat of her sword. The pain made him inhale sharply, but other than that he didn't have the energy to do anything else.

“The heft of that sword is too much for you, by the way.” She picked up the sword and examined it from all sides, “Good length though.” She grabbed a cloth and wiped the length of the blade with the quick efficiency that came from years of doing the same task repeatedly. She then sheathed the sword and placed it off to the side.

“You're too tired to do anything else, we're going to meditate so that you can work on controlling your temper.”

“I can't meditate.” Cornelius answered angrily and sat up.

“Have you ever been taught?” She asked blandly.

“No.” He answered after a few seconds of embarrassed silence.

“I see,” she paused, “well, we'll just have to fix that.” She went to her closet and pulled out two of awkward chairs from his academic classes and unfolded them.

“Tuck your legs under or stretch them out in front of you, however it is most comfortable.” The lesson began and she woke him almost an hour later and sent him back to his room.

Beira was waiting for him by his door, “Work time.”

He slated her with a well-earned glare and let them into the room.

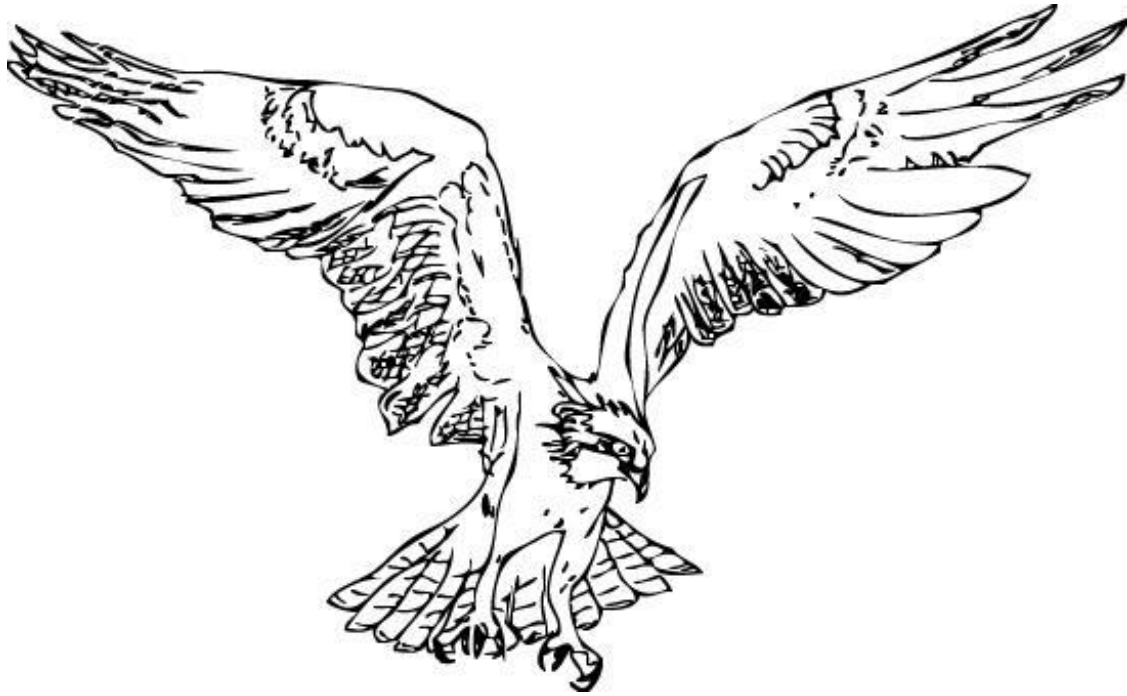
“You are evil. Has anyone ever told you that before?”

“All the time, it is part of my charm.”

They set to work, helping each other in areas of weakness. Her company

wasn't horrible and Cornelius found himself enjoying their time. When he closed the door behind Beira, Cornelius found himself smiling; it wasn't a bad end to an evening. Changing into his sleeping clothes he was surprised to find that his muscles didn't hurt yet. Tucking himself into bed the lights switched off and he fell into an uneasy sleep.

Chapter 7: *Fight or Flight*



Life settled into a pattern after that. Three days a week he had horsemanship, swordsmanship, mathematics, history and law, warding and magic. Alternating with these three days, were another set of two days doing language, herbs and healing, archery, swordsmanship, and finally etiquette. The sixth day of the week had him doing horsemanship, swordsmanship, archery, and finally a lesson in stratagem. Everyday except the seventh day of the week, which was saved for prayer, had an extra lesson of swordsmanship to try and catch him up with his peers. The seventh day he stayed in his room and didn't leave for anything. He hated religions in his own world, why would he hate them any less here?

It was one of these seventh days that he actually left the Citadel. One of those days of prayer that he despised. Cornelius supposed that he had been there for a

good three months, though it was hard to tell. The day started out ordinary except for this nagging in the back of his head.

The nagging was persistent, like a voice telling him, urging him, making him need to run and find a way off this accursed island. It had been a particularly bad week, he had already been deemed hopeless in most of his classes.

In horsemanship he was nothing but a stable boy, in history and law he was a joke, he was still copying scrolls in magic and warding, in herbs and healing he was cooking in the kitchens, in archery he now had the wonderful job of fletching arrows, and finally in etiquette he was a bumbling fool who would get any diplomatic party killed, and thus his job was to help with the palace tailors and seamstresses fixing and mending clothes and other linens. The only classes that he was still allowed to do the original work was swordsmanship, which he still sucked at, mathematics, and stratagem because he just never spoke up.

With that voice urging him, reminding him of every fault and every slight, Cornelius ran the two miles from the Citadel to the cliff. Without a single thought he threw himself off the edge not even stopping to catch his breath. His intention was simple: to finish this miserable excuse of a life. Things did not go as planned.

He was at once grabbed by what seemed to be the largest bird of prey ever. It was an odd feeling, being carried off into the sky by the world's biggest parakeet. His reaction was immediate and expressive: he screamed loudly and started to desperately grapple with the talons that held him tight. Dying by jumping off a cliff is one thing, being carried off to be surely ripped apart and eaten was another thing entirely.

The bird, he examined fearfully, had a razor sharp beak that made his blood thump heavily in his ears despite the cold feeling in his heart. He examined the chest feathers and saw that they were a mottled mix of white and brown. If he was in a less fearful situation he might have named the bird for being a osprey, a very large osprey.

As it was, the bird was just a large thing wanting to eat him and Cornelius wasn't going to go down without a fight; this was the last time he was going anywhere without carrying a knife- morbidly he considered that it was probably the last time he was going to do anything.

That fighting feeling didn't last long, slowly a feeling entered him, the feeling of resigned 'so what' and 'who cares'. The world would be better off without him, so how he died didn't really matter. Abandoning himself to his fate, Cornelius let himself dangle and took a glance down. His stomach dropped, his ears roared, and he at once grabbed onto the bird.

The feeling of languid acceptance vanished and his head cleared. He held on tightly and deliberately, if they touched down he might have the chance to get away and he was ready. On the other hand, if this over sized chicken decided to drop him it would be lights out, game over, all down hill from here- emphasis on down.

Cornelius did get dropped. He landed in an ice cold and relatively shallow body of water. his head hit, rather unceremoniously, the bottom of the brook. Pain made him inhale sharply and his lungs filled with the water. Panic filled him as he kicked off the bottom and swam to break through the surface. He crawled to the bank sputtering when he finally was on good dry land he vomited out the water he

swallowed. After his stomach finished rebelling he turned back over and stared at the sky panting.

“Well, that was dramatic.”

An old man’s wrinkled face came into view blocking out the sky. Wrenching his body up in surprise their heads collided. Cornelius rocked back clutching his forehead and cursing. After feeling over his forehead to see if there was any damage, Cornelius cracked an eye and took a glance at the old man.

His skin so papery thin that Cornelius could see the veins coursing throughout his face. The man’s body was equally thin and gangly. He was wearing dark brown robes that were stained and smeared with things Cornelius would rather not identify.

The old man was examining his own forehead with long spindly fingers. Standing to his full height, Cornelius immediately caught sight of the disturbing image that was the man’s missing leg.

“Was that really necessary?” Cornelius asked, his voice strong despite his worn and tired appearance.

“Was it really necessary to be in my face like that? Look what you did, old man.” Cornelius was in a bad mood, black is the word he would actually use to describe it. He couldn’t even kill himself properly.

“Look what I did?” He looked offended and placed a hand on his chest. “If my girl had not been sent to watch over you, we’d be in a real pickle right now. Well,” the old man paused thoughtfully, “I’d be in a pickle- you’d be dead!”

Cornelius crossed his arms, “You would be in a pickle and I would be dead.”

The old man nodded with a pleased look on his face, “exactly.”

“You’re nuts.”

The old man’s smile fell into a frown. “Now see here young man-”

“Wait- you’re human!”

The old man looked annoyed at being interrupted, but nodded, “Indeed, I am.”

“But,” Cornelius was at a loss for words. “How are you here?”

The old man shrugged, “That is a story for another time.” He patted Cornelius on the head, “Come inside, there is much to talk about and not much more time before those people discover that you are missing.”

Cornelius didn’t say anything instead he followed the old man into his hut- something out of the Sword and the Stone. Inside it was filled with all the books one could imagine in all shapes, sizes, and in various stages of decrepit decay. The furniture was mismatched, as though the old man couldn’t agree with himself as to what style (or time frame for that matter) he enjoyed and thus chose them all.

In a corner there was a large carved wooden throne like chair that Cornelius was sure had been created close to King Arthur’s time. In another corner was what looked like to be a lazy boy arm chair. Cornelius swore he noticed a Mets jersey, but his concentration was cut at the screech of a chair across the floor.

The old man was seated at a wooden table that had surely seen better days. As it was the table was currently a source for books, plates with scraps of food, and other odds and ends that didn’t seem to go together. The place screamed of controlled chaos, something that Cornelius could appreciate from his own life. The old man gestured to a wooden chair, though one far less regal than the throne in the corner and he sat.

“I am Barnaby Prasiltwine, I believe you have met my wife, Quentine.” At Cornelius’ blank stare the old man sighed, “She found you when you got your block knocked two days from Sunday in an old alleyway.”

“The Hag!”

The old man, now christened Barnaby, chose to ignore the hag comment. “She told me that you had been taken here and that I was charged to look after you. I have not been able to keep that close of an eye- as you can guess those fat heads in the big stone phallic symbol don’t like me much- well they wouldn’t like me much if they knew I was here.”

“How can you be here, um, sir?” Cornelius felt odd and yet the term ‘sir’ just seemed right for this Merlin looking man who called the Masters ‘fat heads’.

Barnaby shook his head, “There are a couple of us around. Always have always will be and those imbeciles choose to forget that we’re here.”

“Your wife, so you’ve been on the other side,” Cornelius became rather excited and his chest tightened with this unbridled passion, “And that means you can get me out of here.”

The old man shook his head again, “Alas, lad. That is not the case. I can get myself there and back through certain channels, but the laws on you and other Initiates are irrefutable.”

Cornelius slammed himself back into the chair, heart broken and once again filled with an unending sense of dread and despair. “Now, now. I know that life can be difficult, but surely isn’t life better than death?”

Something burned behind Cornelius’ eyes and he was ashamed to find himself

crying. "Life isn't worth living if everyone hates you." There was something in the look that Barnaby gave him that made Cornelius sob harder.

"I can't much argue with that point. A life without the love and affection of another person or persons is lonely and desperately dull."

It felt good to have his feelings justified, because it seemed as though nothing in his life was justified at the moment.

"However, there are people who can and do care about you, though they are not here currently."

Cornelius shook his head unable to see beyond the black mood that seemed to have permanently stationed itself on his heart and mind, that dark whisper that had driven him to the cliff.

"Your parents, ah," Barnaby held up his hand and Cornelius closed his mouth despite the need to protest. "When you return no time will have passed. You will simply exit the door to your room and reenter the world of their love and affection- which you know you have." He smiled sadly, "Isn't it weird that now you realize: all their nagging isn't all that horrible and overwhelming."

Overwhelmed with emotions, Cornelius buried his face into his hands and sobbed uncontrollably.

"I even miss Dirkson! He hates me because he's a bully with nothing better to do. We're equals and we fight on the same level. These people hate me for something that happened thousands of years ago, and they are supposed to be my teachers and my peers. Even the servants hate me, I am just scum, disgusting scum." He hiccuped and a hand soothingly ran circles along his back.

“Love them.”

“Love them?” It was the most preposterous idea Cornelius had ever heard.

Barnaby nodded and pressed a cup filled with water (where had that come from?) into his hands. Cornelius took a shaking sip and felt his body start to relax from such an emotional outburst.

“Don’t let their anger, and worse, their fear get to you. Keep yourself pure from their taint and love them for their faults. They are nothing but ignorant people who have chosen not to look outside their immediate surroundings for answers.”

“Is this more religious mumbo jumbo?” That was one of the first things that Cornelius had noticed about this place: how into religious values the inhabitants were.

He bobbed his head, “Somewhat, yes. However there is also something to be said for the peace of mind of someone who does not involve themselves in the hatred or pontification of others.”

Cornelius took another sip and now noticed there was a slight taste of crushed mint. The herb helped to calm his nerves and relieve the pounding headache that always occur whenever he wept.

“What now?” He asked.

“What now, indeed? You have to go back.”

His hands gripping the mug turned white, as his grip tightened exponentially, “No,” he exclaimed vehemently.

“You must.”

The world seemed to swim before him as Cornelius reviewed what his life had

been like in the months since coming here. Beira was no help in his despair. The voice was back, whispering, telling him that he should never go back. It confirmed his fears that he was not strong enough, and that these people would kill him- so he might as well save them the trouble.

Hands were shaking him and it took Cornelius a few moments to realize it was Barnaby. “It will be okay, trust me it will be.”

“Trust you?” He was both offended and disgusted at this instruction. Barnaby was treating him as though Cornelius was a child and had never been burned by the hand he trusted.

Barnaby nodded, “You must trust me. My wife would never forgive me if something were to happen to you.”

Cornelius closed his eyes and thought back to that day. It seemed like a lifetime ago. He thought back to the little old lady who seemed to strike fear and comfort in him. He had reflected back on that meeting many times before and had always wished that she would show up to set everything to balance.

It was chaos here, with no balance on either side. She would want him to correct the balance. Cornelius’ head cleared the the voice ceased. It was his responsibility as an informed person to solve these matters though they might not involve him.

“She would want me to go back and right the balance.” Cornelis said at last.

Barnaby’s face broke into a smile and it was the first real affection and happy smile that Cornelius had seen in a long time from anyone, his sorrow lifted.

“She would want me to fight and give them all hell, like they’ve been giving

me.”

Barnaby nodded, “That she would, she would be right in the throes beating nasty people with swords and having her horse stomp on vulnerable feet.”

Cornelius deflated slightly, “But I can’t do any of that! I’m no good with all this medieval stuff, I’m from the era of motorized vehicles and machine guns.”

Frowning the old man replied, “That is a bit of an issue. We’ll have to work on this. How have your swordsmanship lessons been going?”

“She has me working with practice swords right now. She practices with me every night.”

“Good, we’ll have you in working order in no time.”

They sat in silence for a long time before Barnaby stood and began to rummage around through the chaos that was situated in the shack. “You won’t be able to achieve what they want through meditation alone. The people who you have been exposed to have been meditating since they were children and have disciplined their mind.”

“I have discipline.” Cornelius started, mildly offended.

“I must be mistaken, have the human race been spending generations building up magical channels that can be passed from parent to child?”

Cornelius answer was grudging, “No. I’d never heard of real magic or balance until I met your wife.”

Barnaby nodded, “And thus you can’t possibly reach where they are when they meditate, that is what I meant by discipline. If the Masters had half a brain in their heads, or even between them they would see the problem with your learning

immediately.” When Barnaby spoke the word ‘Masters’ it was though it was the vilest tasting word he could think to say.

“But, no they are too wrapped up in old prejudices to realize that you can’t do these things naturally because magic has been so far removed from your normal society. The fact that you were chosen at all deems that you have great magical potential-“

He held up his hands in demonstration, they were cupped like a ball, “Your core, is like this- a sphere and it is abnormally large for a human your age, for a human at all. Magic nearly doesn’t exist in your species anymore. You haven’t had the generations to build up channels and ways to get the magic out of your center, your core if you will. And without the proper guidance you will never learn. Bleat brained fools. Just they wait.”

He continued to rummage and grab vials of this and that until he turned around with full arms, “We will turn you into a decently passing, if not amazing, mage yet.”

It was hours later that Cornelius found himself walking back towards the Citadel. One of Barnaby’s birds dropped him off a short distance from the castle so as to not cause any alarm. The day had been spent learning. He had learned more today than he had learned in all of his time at the Citadel so far. His fingers ached deeply from the amount of pinpricking it took to create all the potions. His head had a deep and resounding ache that he was sure would never leave. All in all Cornelius wanted to do was lie down and never move again.

He and Barnaby had begun a series of potions that would help him achieve the

magical growth and stability that would be required for this type of training. They had even started a potion to help him gain physical fitness. Human muscle gain was not nearly as fast and extensive as the other species and they intended to right that balance.

Humans were behind in development to these people in every sense of the word except technology. Humans had gained in technology and no longer needed the magic or extreme physical prowess. Thus people like Cornelius came along: all stringy and with the muscle mass of a newborn kitten.

The other potions would take some time to develop, but he had been able to take one that would help him develop and open channels in his magic. They wanted him begin learning and participating with magic as soon as possible. Barnaby warned him that few days after taking the potion would be painful and furious. He wasn't exactly sure what to expect, but anything was better than feeling useless, right?

He was passing the stables on his way to one of the servant entrances when he heard someone call, "Human!"

Turning, Cornelius saw that it was Kiel. Despite the feeling of quiet surprise and apprehension he stopped. Usually where Kiel was Arak and Ankara were not far behind. Kiel beckoned him closer and Cornelius walked towards the elemental until they were both standing under the overhang of the stables.

"Where were you all day, human?"

Cornelius shrugged, "I was exploring the island. I haven't explored much before this and thought I would take the opportunity." His answer was a bit of

tongue and cheek, however it already seemed like a confrontation was brewing so he didn't see any reason to play nice.

Kiel nodded, "The island is very beautiful, despite the vermin issue."

"Vermin issue?" Cornelius' voice was laced with innocence as though he had no idea what Kiel was referring to.

Kiel nodded solemnly, "I have the right mind to fix it."

"Do you?" Cornelius spread his legs as though he was shifting into a more comfortable standing position. If it was a fight that Kiel wanted, Cornelius didn't want to be put at a disadvantage due to bad balance.

Kiel lunged at him and Cornelius stepped back and away. At the last second Cornelius realized that Kiel had not struck at him nearly deeply enough for an actual attack. A scrape sounded above him, however something told him not to look up. The same urge, different from his dark voice, had him swing his arms up to cover his head and just in time. A wet, thick, and gritty substance fell on him.

His senses were immediately attacked and he couldn't stop the gag reflex, though a day without most solid foods helped him in that respect. His knees had buckled under the weight. Cornelius came to his senses to find himself sitting in and under a pile of stable cleanings.

Raucous laughter from above him sounded, however Cornelius could not bring himself to even glance up at his peers. He'd been had. His tormenters left and it was a while before Cornelius could find the strength within himself to get up. Brushing himself off the best he could, he fought down the urge to vomit. Cornelius stood and changed his route so that his destination was the bathhouses.

“What? ”

“The bathhouse is closed. And even if it wasn't, I wouldn't let you in- wash yourself in a troth.”

Cornelius' tempered spiked at the novice's gall. It was the day of prayers and the bathhouses were closed for end of evening services. Usually there were always attendings willing to help you. That was, of course, if you were a regular Initiate. Cornelius, however, was a human. Furthermore he was a human covered in slop, and not partaking in paying allegiance to their patrons. At the end of the day this meant he had no dice to roll with them, and thus no bath.

Something sparked on his hand, distracting him momentarily. That moment was all the novice needed to close the door. Cornelius turned on his heel and resolved to get up early and wash then. There were simply some battles he couldn't win. He was mostly dry now, anyway, and if he put in a request for new sheets the world would be better in the morning.

Chapter 8: *The Learning Curve*



The world was not better in the morning. The smell was horrible and his entire body ached like he had never experienced before. Everything was one throbbing touch from the tips of his hair all the way down to each individual toenail. The bell for rising had already tolled, but despite this Cornelius had no strength to pull himself from bed. There was knocking on the door before it opened moments later. The service he requested the night before to change his bedding had arrived and he unfortunately had not left the bed. The assistant took one look at Cornelius, who was barely able to raise his head let alone glare, and left. Cornelius let his head collapse back on the pillow and felt himself drift back and forth out of sleep.

Cornelius' eyes snapped open as the door slammed open. Arlit swept over to him with all the grace and rage of a lion. Using swift and precise moments she checked him over and Cornelius had no strength but the lie there and take her prodding.

“Well,” She stated at last, “I have no idea what you took. It’s obvious that whatever it was, it was magical of some kind.” She paused and passed her hand over his prone form. He was bathed in a warm light and his mentor frowned, “obviously your overall energy channels have been affected.”

She dropped his wrist after finishing checking it for a pulse.

“I’ll make excuses for you, but you will be back up and on your feet by no later than day after tomorrow.”

Her nose twisted. “And you will have bathed beforehand.” She turned and spoke to the assistant, “Have a bathtub brought in here with hot water and soap. No tricks, no foolery. He’s in a lot of pain and will be treated like an Initiate, understood?” The man in question nodded with wide eyes and scampered out as though Arlit was a dragon herself.

Had Cornelius been in his right mind he would have protested, that particular man, a magi by the looks of it, had always been very kind to him and he didn’t think that the servant deserved that kind of treatment. His head swelled with pain and his eyes screwed shut with a groan. A hand was placed on his forehead and it was as though he could feel the heat being drained out of his skin.

“You’re burning up.” Arlit murmured absently. “I doubt that you’ll be able to eat anything until at least tomorrow. You won’t be able to get out of bed any time soon.”

She strode to his private privy and retrieved the heavy washing bowl and towel. After dunking the towel into the ice cold water Arlit deftly lifted and lightly wrung out the clothe before placing it on Cornelius’ forehead.

“I’ll send Beira to check on you later. Try not to die.” And with that she was gone, but not before placing a pitcher filled with water and a glass on his bedside table. Maybe Arlit wasn’t as bad and uncaring as he first suspected. She had come to him when he needed it.

Cornelius was thirsty. The likelihood that he had the strength to reach the glass was unlikely. Despite the pain he was feeling, Cornelius pushed himself up on one arm to reach. He still couldn’t reach and this time he didn’t have the strength to try again. Resigned, Cornelius laid back on his mattress until his heavy eyelids drooped and closed. With a heavy sigh his body relaxed back into the mattress and he slept.

Even in his dreams he was not excused from the pain of his waking state. Everything burned and pounded as though someone or something was drawing hot wire throughout his veins. The potion he had taken was intended to not only widen his channels, but make more of them for his magic to go through. Cornelius hadn’t realized that the reaction was going to be this painful or long lasting. Eventually the pain subsided slightly, either that or he just got used to the level. He found himself floating in the sea of his mental state and swam among the currents of his thoughts.

Cornelius dreamt of home, and of his family. He wondered if they would be missing him, or if they had thought he had run away. It didn’t occur to him that no time will have passed upon his return.

What of his friends? He would do anything if that meant being home. He knew that it would be two more years until he got to see them again, but what would happen then? Would they remember him? Would they still love him? A thought turned and made him shudder despite himself, what if he had changed too much to

love them in return? Already he knew that he could never go back to the person that he was before.

His body landed softly and he found himself in a grainy green and white clearing. Curious, Cornelius reached his hand down and patted the soft earth he landed on. It felt and resembled a soft green patch of velvet. He waved his other hand. It felt as though he was sitting in a cloud of soft wet air.

“Cornelius.”

He whipped his head to and fro, rotating it like an owl, but, try as he might, Cornelius could not find the source of the voice.

“Cornelius.”

The voice sounded again and Cornelius closed his eyes trying to pinpoint the location. Something about the voice was soothing, like he had always known it. He responded to it like a flower blooming to the sun.

“Who are you?”

His voice came out not as it did normally, but as the deep voice of a man. The timber was deep and the tone was soft and gentle something that he did not usually associate with himself.

The air buzzed, and though he could not hear it he was sure whoever or whatever it was that was speaking to him had laughed.

“I am part of you.”

Cornelius took offense to that- he was a man and this voice was definitely female. Being a feminine male wasn't a problem, elves were feminine males.

“If you are a part of me, why haven't I noticed you before?”

The question showed how vulnerable he was it at that moment and he felt unease at asking such a inquiry. In that one statement, Cornelius was admitting to not knowing himself, something that he had always prided in.

“You and I have not met yet. But when we do you will come to love me, as I already have and always will love you.”

The soft and warm reassurance. The warmth seemed to exist in the air and then travel through Cornelius, leaving behind this feeling of utter strength and wonder. He couldn't help but feel at peace for the first time in a long time.

“You and I will love each other?”

Was it his imagination or had he felt her nod?

“You and I will love, and rely on each other all of our days. We will keep each other warm and we will keep each other safe. And though I am not with you yet, I am with you here.” Something that he couldn't see pressed into his chest over where his heart resided, “I feel you, and believe in you and what you can accomplish.”

“But everyone here hates me!”

“Beira does not hate you, nor do I.”

Cornelius was silent for a long time, weeping openly for the loss of his family and the loss of his confidence and sense of self. Everything had been ripped so forcefully from him: his home, his life, and his dignity. Here he was no better than a slave. Here he existed for the sheer purpose of doing the work of others and getting kicked for it. He felt rather than saw the embrace he was taken in. She did not shush him, nor did she tell him at any point that crying was not okay. He was grateful. It had been so long since he had someone he could latch on to and then all at once

everything changed. Barnaby was there and she was there and he was no longer alone.

“That’s right, little one. You are not alone.”

Cornelius wiped his eyes forcefully with his sleeve and winced slightly as the coarse fabric chaffed his skin.

“But when will I meet you?”

“Soon, once the first year is over you will meet me and we will begin our journey together.”

He nodded and resigned himself for the wait. If this loving and hopeful feeling could continue if he only held on a little longer than he would wait and he would become worthy of this person’s love.

“You were worthy of my love the second you were born. You were born with the sole purpose of being with me, and I with you.”

Cornelius tucked his face into the embrace and just let himself be held. He didn’t even like his mother holding him, but something about this felt right and he for the first time in a long time felt home.

“I’ll get strong. I’ll stop just accepting the things that are happening to me.”

He once again felt he smile just as he felt her happiness bloom in his chest as though it was his own.

“That is good little one, though do not make yourself a target- be careful.”

Cornelius nodded and he felt the world that he had landed in start to slip away.

“No, I want to stay!”

There was a shushing noises and he felt a force press to his forehead in a

soothing kiss.

“You cannot stay, but do not worry, for I am here.”

“In my heart.” Cornelius said mournfully.

“Yes, in your heart.”

With that she was gone and Cornelius’ conscious faded away into much needed rest.

He would be bed ridden for two more days before he could so much as walk to the serving hall. When he finally made it there a marked hush fell over the people dining and Cornelius fought hard to ignore it. No one knew why he had been bedridden, though the rumor was just the he was a weak human and finally succumbed to the strenuous lifestyle that was lived at the Citadel.

He received more punishment work than he could possibly finish, but took it without a word. Now instead of just copying down scrolls, he read them and memorized their contents. Instead of just mucking out stalls he took the time to go over the horses and learning their ins and outs. He spent more and more time with Utica and was happy to see her bonding with him.

He had once asked Beira how a Morgan type horse was here- when they had only been bred and created in the fifties by humans, something that he had discovered in the library. She had simply shrugged and replied something about trade routes. This gave him some sort of hope of finding human contact in this world.

The encounter with Margaret, as he had come to call his invisible female counterpart, had spurred him to not just survive at the Citadel, but to excel there- if

only in secret. The potion worked, he noticed mostly when it came to cleaning the magic swords, which was part of his punishment.

Cornelius picked up a sword to polish it. Today was his third day out of bed and Ulrich, the leader of the Guardians, had assigned him to two bells a day worth of punishment work. Punishment work meant polishing and cleaning armament and swords. The sword he was currently holding was beautiful with a palm-sized pommel that held a small but vibrant ruby. It was not uncommon, he had learned, for swords to contain jewels because they could store power and act as conductors.

There was a flicker of light out of the corner of his vision and Cornelius ignored it, or tried to. After the fourth or fifth time of seeing the apparition did he finally turn and check.

Nothing.

He began twitching in an attempt to catch a glimpse every time it happened, but could never catch it.

He was now able to catch and focus on the glow. It was stemming from the pommel of the sword he was holding, or more importantly, from the crystal that was the center point of it.

“What?” He asked himself in surprise before releasing.

He picked up another sword with another jewel and once again saw the flicker. The flicker responded most favorably to a crystal or a sapphire gem. He couldn't get the glow to solidify or grow, but it was more than he could have done four months again when he had started this crazy journey. When he finished his work Cornelius all but ran to his room and washed his face and hands in the washing bowl that was left for such usage.

He had spent most of the day scouring away rust from armor and swords using sand and it was covering him extensively. Looking down and seeing the rust tracks on his clothing, he changed and then headed with all haste and purpose to the library located in the heart of the Citadel.

The Library was one of his favorite locations in all of this great drafty place. He was usually left alone there, as the ones who tormented him weren't really book learners, and the others didn't care. He searched high and low before coming across books on the subject he was most interested in. They were dusty and in the area called 'the stacks,' where books were stored that were considered to have no value or merit. Pulling out two large dusty leather bound volumes, one with a severe case of red rot, he brought them over to an equally dusty but sun lit table and stared at them.

These books contained knowledge of the magical workings of humans. They were obviously from before the separation. Books survived a remarkably long time here in the magically enhanced Citadel. Cornelius glanced around fearfully before holding his breath and opening the cover of the tome that was closer to him.

"Maginella Crossfire the III presents this most auspicious work to the Garavant and Guardian Councils. Ways of Magical Channeling and Growth by

Maginella Crossfire III.” Cornelius read the inscription and title carefully.

“What are you doing?”

Cornelius yelped and slammed book shut before turning. It was Beira and she was staring at him most curiously.

“Nothing, Beira, go away.”

“Go away?” She pouted, though now 14, still very much the youngest out of all the Initiates. She attempted to get past him to see what he was reading and they struggled, nearly knocking over the chair and table.

“Let me see Cornelius or so help me I will tell Kiel who exactly had put the extra hash rations into Beddington’s food.” Cornelius had, in revenge, put an agent into Kiel’s horse, Beddington’s, food. If that extra ration made the horse incredibly gassy, well that was Kiel’s problem.

Cornelius relented; he really didn’t need to deal with Kiel right now. With a sigh he moved to the side and let Beira see what he was reading. “You’re reading Maginella Crossfire? Don’t you know most of his theories have been debunked?” Cornelius frowned, he had gotten the name and book title from Barnaby.

“It might be for all of you, but not for humans.”

He had Beira’s undivided attention. “Humans gain magical channels differently than you guys do, and certainly aren’t born with them.”

“Really?”

She sounded shocked, and it occurred to him that whilst the Masters might be complete assholes, they really might not know. They had been isolated from humans, and had never seen one before him. They have no legitimate idea of how to

teach him, or what he could do.

“Yeah. We have to take potions and study before our channels are wide enough for us to have controllable magic.”

She picked up the book and held it up to her face close enough he had a thought or two about her trying to eat it, or throttle it for answers.

“I never knew that. I just simply thought that you were weak.”

The air let out of Cornelius’ chest, and he felt sad. He couldn’t blame her, even with her relative knowledge of humans he knew that she couldn’t help but work with the facts that had been presented to her.

Cornelius plucked the book out of her hands in order to hide his unhappiness at her admission. “I won’t be weak much longer. My magic has already begun to leak out.”

She looked at him curiously, “How so?”

He looked around to make sure no one was watching before reaching and grabbing her wrist. Around her wrist was a bracelet containing a small amber gem. He touched it and imagined a tentacle of power unfurling out of his core and reaching for the gem. It flicked on and off for a few seconds until he let go.

“How long have you been able to do that?” She asked him with wonder in her voice, she, out of everyone, had seen his frustration at not be able to do even what a baby could do.

“A week or so. I don’t really know when it started exactly, but I’ve only be able to get it to do it when I want it do in the past couple of days.”

She touched his hand and her voice held the same amount of wonder and awe,

“I believe you, humans can be powerful.” She looked up at him, “You’ll be powerful.” The look that her eyes held made him feel uncomfortable. No one had ever looked at him with such honest awe in his life.

He took his hand back as if she burned him. “I won’t if I don’t study and learn.” With that they sat down and began to study the tomes for anything that would help him. Cornelius learned that for right now all he could really do was wait and let his channels grow. He could help himself by learning to meditate properly and most importantly of all, learn to keep his temper.

Supper would begin soon, but Cornelius felt conflicts of leaving the books in the library where anyone could take them. When he voiced his concerns to Beira she looked at him oddly, “Then take them with you.”

“I’m not allowed to take things out of the library.”

The Masters had all but forbade him from entering, their reasoning was that he would steal their secrets and take them home to the humans.

Beira looked at him and sniffed, nose upturned,

“Nonsense, you are an Initiate and are allowed all the rights of someone of that status. Go, take the books and put them in your room, then we’ll go to supper.”

Cornelius clenched and unclenched his fist nervously before agreeing. He wasn’t exactly sure when he went from being the punk ass king of the hill to this neurotic little wussy, but he wasn’t liking the change.

When they walked out of the library doors Cornelius’ shoulders dropped, though he couldn’t remember tensing them. The books were out of the library, and the sky wasn’t falling, the world wasn’t ending. He began to walk with his back a

little straighter.

These people had seemingly almost broken him. It had taken until now to realize how much he had changed since coming here. This change would end, he would become the proud person he used to be, especially now that he was beginning to be able to play their games on their level. Cornelius slipped into his room and tucked the books safely into one of his cupboards. Closing the door behind him he gave Beira a large smile of relief. She smiled back at him.

“No more mister nice human?” She asked and he nodded in response. They fist bumped, something that he had taught her not long after he arrived and they went to the dining hall. The food had never tasted so good, and he had never felt so good there as he did at that moment. It was as though he was taking his life back one slow move at a time.

Chapter 9: *Sassandra*



“Come on Cornelius!”

Arlit’s blunt blade caught him on his left cheekbone and he heard a deep and resounding cracking noise. His face and head seemed to alternate between a sharp pain and a deep and never ending throbbing. He didn’t drop his sword and continue to hold it at an ‘on guard’ position. The only outward sign of his injury was the swelling in his face and the sound of his heavy breathing that fill the room.

“At ease, Cornelius. I need to see your face.” Arlit let her sword fall to the side and took a step towards him.

“No.” The sound was muffled and barely recognizable, his mouth and head felt useless, but Arlit got the message. She nodded and lifted her sword back into position and allowed herself to crouch once more. They circled despite his

difficulty in seeing. They began again with first a lunge, the proper parry, and then the riposte; his was a short counter strike that knocked her blade to the side. Arlit finally ended the battle when it was clear that Cornelius could not see out of his left eye. She fainted and retreated to the side before lunging up and placing her blade at the base of his neck.

“Yield, Cornelius. You need medical attention.”

It hurt his pride, however he did lower his blade in defeat, though he did not drop it despite the overwhelming pain he was feeling. It took two tries, but he did finally sheath his sword. He would have to oil and clean the blade after getting someone to look at his face.

Arlit led him to her office, a place that he had frequented in the past month, and sat him down in one of the plush maroon armchairs. With deft hands she turned his face in all angles so that she could assess the amount of damage.

“Your cheekbone is definitely broken. I’ll have to take you to get healing, otherwise I don’t trust them to take care of you properly.”

Cornelius let her lead him out of tower where they had been practicing; the main swordsmanship area had been booked that day for an exhibition match. He had not been to the healers in all of his time here, and he was quite curious. When they reached the quarters the rooms smelling heavily of burning smells and cleanliness. Arlit rapped her knuckles on the doorframe, announcing their presence to the small female elf with blonde hair and cornflower blue eyes.

She jumped at the sound and squeaked when she saw who it was.

“Master Arlit.”

She rose to her feet and bobbed a curtsy. “I’m afraid Master Jaipur is occupied at the moment, one of the Initiates had a nasty run in with an exploding cauldron.”

Arlit nodded, “I can smell that Sassandra. Tell him we are here and that we’ll wait for him to see us.”

Cornelius sat hard on the bench and stared at the door, which Sassandra had just gone through.

Arlit, seeing his dilemma smiled, “You’ll have a hard time with that one should you choose to pursue her.

Cornelius replied back something unintelligible due to the amount of swelling in his face. Sassandra had returned and was now beckoning them to another room that branched just off of this office and waiting room area. The room held very little but two chairs and long table like bed. Cornelius hopped up onto the bed and sat swinging his legs and glancing around his curiosity overriding his pain momentarily.

This room was unlike any he had seen in the Citadel, which was above all else built for beauty in these recent times of peace. This room was stone walled and ceilinged with high windows to let in the maximum amount of light. The rest of the Citadel looked as though it was made of different shapes and colors of blown glass, however this room looked like something a human had made.

Sassandra took his vitals with a very long wand with a circle formed at the end. It glowed certain colors and she wrote down the results on a piece of paper. She glanced at him in surprise, “You’re human?”

Arlit looked at Sassandra with a bemused expression, “You hadn’t noticed.”

She shook her head, “No, mum. He looks so elf like it is uncanny.” She raised

a hand and stopped short of touching Cornelius' ears. "Don't you see it?"

Arlit turned and stood behind Sassandra she frowned and squinted before cocking her head first left and then right, "I think you're right."

Cornelius made a very concerned sound; he did not much like the prospect of looking like an elf.

Arlit reached past Sassandra and put her hand comfortingly on his shoulder, "It's alright, Cornelius. This is perfectly normal. Humans and elves are very closely linked. I'm not surprised that with the continuous exposure to magic that you've begun to assume the traits of elves."

Cornelius stuck out his hand and waved it frantically. Sassandra, guessing what he wanted, removed a small hand mirror from the pocket of her robe, she handed it to him. Cornelius stared at himself before turning his head this and that ways.

His ears were much more pointed than they were when he first arrived, and he was, though it seemed conceited to think, more attractive now. His skin glowed with health, his hair was brighter and stronger looking. His eyes were the most remarkable change- they were the brightest and most alive looking grey he could ever imagine. While the changes were not necessarily a bad thing, he wasn't sure he appreciated looking more like an elf.

The more he thought about it, the more he actually appreciated the change. From a distance he doubted whether someone would be able to tell the difference between him and an elf. This meant he would stick out less in a crowd and that meant more protection for him in dangerous situations. The door swung open to

reveal Master Jaipur, who taught healing and herbs at the Citadel. Sassandra snatched back her mirror and moved to stand behind Jaipur, but not before giving him her scan results.

Jaipur barely looked at them, “So, the human has come for some aid, has he?” There was a sneer there, but it sounded more tired than snarky.

“Lay off, Jaipur.”

Arlit’s voice was just as tired as his. “I broke his cheek bone during an extra swordsmanship lesson.”

“Drop your weapon, boy?”

His voice was charged with that same disdain, however his hands were gentle as he performed his own inspection of Cornelius’ face. Cornelius shook his head in protest of the insult- he would never drop his sword!

“No?” The question was filled with surprise and he turned to look at Arlit without letting go of Cornelius’ face.

Arlit spared Jaipur a small smile, “He did not. In that respect, Cornelius might be the best Initiate. He takes a real beating here on a daily basis and doesn’t back down, or drop his weapon.”

It was obvious that both Jaipur and Cornelius were surprised by such high praise coming from the usually stoic woman.

“You jest.” Jaipur said, and Cornelius detected a small amount of fear in his voice.

Arlit shook her head, “You know I do not.”

Jaipur turned and gazed back at Cornelius with a look of new found respect,

“There might be hope for you yet.” He whispered to Cornelius whilst continuing his examination.

“I’ll need the two of you to leave, this will take some magical working and I don’t need an assistant or a silly sword waving woman to get in my way.”

Cornelius watched as Arlit hid a smile, which surprised him as she was not often a smiler- he was sure he could count on one hand the times he’d seen it happen. Sassandra and Arlit left the room and Cornelius regained his tense feeling, he was alone and injured with one of the Masters, and they had made it very clear that they do not like him.

“Oh, stop it.” Jaipur admonished and pushed Cornelius down onto the bed. “I won’t kill you, Arlit is out there and she has a mean hand with a sword. I wouldn’t cross it, and she would have to because killing you would be a grievous insult to her honor.” Cornelius stopped resisting and let himself lie down, though still not entirely relaxed.

Jaipur put his hands on the left side of Cornelius’ face and started whispering under his breath, Cornelius recognized it as a basic healing spell, he had copied that recently in his writing class.

Perspiration formed on Jaipur’s brow and he murmured to Cornelius, “Stop fighting me.”

“I’m not.” The statement came out garbled, but Jaipur seemed to understand it.

“Nonsense, you are and I already told you I was not going to hurt you.”

Cornelius frowned despite the pain, “I don’t know-“

“You don’t know how not to.” Jaipur stopped what he was doing and looked

down at Cornelius is surprise yet again. “No one has taught you.” Cornelius nodded. “Not even your family?”

“No human remembers magic.” Cornelius tried to tell him, but found it difficult with the swelling and pain. Once again Jaipur understood, but Cornelius guessed that he had plenty of practice being the Citadel’s head healer. He sat down on the chair that faced the table in shock and stared at Cornelius.

“No one uses magic?”

Cornelius thought about Barnaby and his wife and shrugged, “most don’t.” He said simply in response. Jaipur seemed to deflate. It was a long and silent few minutes before his shoulders rolled back and he stood.

“We’ll need to work together then. You are completely untrained in magic, and thus this will be hard. I could force my way through, but I don’t want to damage any of the channels that you are developing.”

Cornelius sent him a questioning look, “It was in the report that Sassandra gave to me. Your body is developing and widening magical channels.” He paused, “That should have been a sign.”

Jaipur put his hands back on Cornelius’ face and instructed Cornelius to breathe in. “We have to do this together. I need you to gather all your loose tendrils of energy into a tight ball, or some sort of object so that it is contained and I can work around it.”

It was painstaking. Cornelius found himself working ever so slowly on pulling his tendrils in, they wiggled and struggled like unruly children, but he fastened his grip and held. He forced them down and into the shape of the books he had been

reading about controlling his magic.

“That’s good, and breathe.”

The instruction was faint as though from far away. Cornelius breathed out not having realized that he hadn’t breathed in a while. They began to get into a rhythm of breathing and working, so when Jaipur leaned back and said that they were done Cornelius felt exhausted, but also slightly disappointed.

“You’ll need sleep and food, usually the first healing pulls a lot of you.” Jaipur paused, “Sleep first, I think.” Cornelius nodded, already feeling tired. Jaipur pulled him up into a sitting position before going to the door and opening it. Arlit followed him back into the room. “Take him back to his room, make sure he makes it into bed.”

Arlit nodded and all but picked up Cornelius off the bed, where he had become nearly asleep. She bid Jaipur her thanks and they left for Cornelius’ quarters.

“He was nice.” Cornelius admitted sleepily when they reached his rooms and were finally able to get inside.

His mentor nodded from where she stood at the door, “Not all the Masters are so set in their ways about humans.”

“Are you?” He asked. Had he been in his right mind he would have never asked such a question.

She smiled, “Good night, Cornelius. You will still have classes tomorrow.”

Cornelius nodded sleepily and waited for the door to close. He lazily changed his close for his sleeping wear and then climbed into his bed. Without much thought he was gone and didn’t have any recollection until the tolling bell the next day that

drew everyone from their restful states.

Experimentally he rolled and moved his jaw in all sorts of ways that first took daring. The healing seemed to have fixed his broken cheekbone and all that went with it. There was little to no pain, the swelling was gone, and all that showed of his excursion yesterday was an unyielding need for breakfast.

There was knocking at his door and his serving man came in bringing the steaming jug that was meant for him to bird bath with. The servant replaced the old one with the fresh one and then stoked the hearth in the corner, filling the otherwise cold room with warmth. He came and left silently, as usual, and Cornelius vaguely wondered what it would be like to actually converse with the strange green man. Never the less he cleaned and washed before slicking his hair back and getting dressed with the greatest controlled gusto he could manage.

It was not long after that he came sliding into the dining hall with his haste to get there. The oatmeal with a bit of honey and the slice of honeyed ham tasted amazing and he found himself going back for seconds, which was a rarity for him in the morning. A footman came and dispensed a letter to him at the same time as a bright and chipper Beira sat across from him. She was always bright and chipper in the morning and for once he did not feel like killing her and hiding her body in the stables.

“What does it say?” She asked whilst spooning some honey into her oatmeal and mixing deftly with some cream. Cornelius shrugged and opened the letter curiously.

“It’s a letter from Master Jaipur, that’s all. He needs to do a follow up on some

healing he did on me last night.” Cornelius said dismissively before tucking the note into his sash.

“What happened to you last night?” She asked curiously.

“I got walloped by a sword from your dear relative.” Cornelius replied dryly before forking another piece of the delicious meat.

Beira smiled, “Bet you deserved it.”

Breakfast continued and it was filled with good-natured battering between the two friends.

Cornelius knocked on the doorframe much like Arlit had, not even twenty-four hours ago, and then stood there nervously wringing his hands. Other than Arlit he could not remember a decent encounter with a Master, and Arlit was just curt- not even friendly.

Sassandra looked up and stopped scratching at her paper with her quill-pen.

“Cornelius.” She smiled warmly at him and stood, “Master Jaipur has been expecting you. I’ll inform him that you have arrived, if you’ll wait here patiently.”

She stood and bowed to him slightly, which surprised him. Most of the Initiates got this kind of treatment, but never him. She left the room and returned a short time later, “You can go in, he’s been expecting you.”

Nervousness gripped Cornelius in the pit of his stomach and he forced it down with a gulp. Steeling himself, Cornelius went to the door that led to Jaipur’s office. He took one final deep breath, and entered. He closed the door and stood awkwardly in the doorway, unsure of what to do. The office was neat and matched the rest of the Citadel décor by being made out of various pieces and forms of glass.

Everything in it seemed to be built for both comfort and for elegance.

“You wanted to see me, Master Jaipur?”

The Master was sitting hunched over a stack of books and was ferociously scribbling down notes, stopping here and there to dip his quill into the ink well that was submerged into the side of his massive oak desk that seemed to have grown directly out of the floor.

The Master had the deep chestnut hair that Cornelius had come to associate with elves- they were either a chestnut or a blonde, but always way beautiful. His features were just as breathtaking as any woman’s and it made Cornelius’ insides squirm. He waved Cornelius to sit in one of the deep blue armchairs situated in the space at the front of his desk. The office was filled with bookshelves filled with tomes and rocks as well as lit crystals. The shelves themselves were the same glassy consistency and seemed to just be a singular part of the wall.

Cornelius sat and his breath caught in his chest when Jaipur’s eyes lifted off the paper and fixed on him.

“How are you feeling, Cornelius?”

His voice was surprisingly kind and it allowed Cornelius to both tense and relax at the same time. He was slightly afraid that this was just another mechanism to get Cornelius to let his guard down.

“All right, the pain is gone.”

Jaipur nodded having heard the results that he was expecting. He lifted the page he was working on and blew on it before taking all the papers and tapping them on the desk to straighten them. That task done, he tucked them into the fold of the

book he was working on and closed it. Jaipur stood and allowed himself to stretch back as though he had been sitting for a long time.

Cornelius took that moment to take in the full beauty of the elven form. Jaipur was wearing a soft blue set of over robes over an even softer golden cream tunic. His leggings and points were a deep navy blue, something Cornelius noted as Jaipur came around the desk to lean on it with a single leg, letting the other soft leather soled shoe dangle off the desk, the perfect pose of repose and comfort.

“Lean forward so I can take a look at the healing.”

Cornelius nodded and scooted to the edge of his seat and suppressed a shudder when Jaipur gripped his face firmly but gently.

“Don’t fight me.”

He murmured and Cornelius ruefully thought that he could never fight such a person. Internally snapping out of his dreamlike state, Cornelius hardened and focused on trapping his power once again in the book that he had been working away on reading. Jaipur released after what Cornelius was sure was an eternity.

“Good, the break has healed up nicely, though it will undoubtedly tender be until it has healed completely.”

Cornelius nodded dumbly as Jaipur sat back and watched him. “It has come to my attention that you have no training in magic.”

Cornelius frowned, “I’m learning, I found a book in the library and it is very helpful.”

“Maginella Crossfire the Thirds’ book?” Jaipur asked not unkindly.

Cornelius nodded, his frown deepening.

“That is a helpful book, but nothing works quite as well as a real tutor.”

Cornelius opened his mouth and then stopped, he had almost talked about Barnaby! Since he had met the man they had spent extensive amounts of time together going over the history and decorum of the strange land he had found himself in. Cornelius relented; it was obvious that Jaipur was not going to take a ‘no’ for an answer.

“You will become my second assistant and will report to me during your free bell, as well as during the evening three nights a week, and finally on the days of prayer.”

“The days of prayer, sir?” Cornelius’ hair stood on edge, he used that day to go to Barnaby and they worked together to improve his skills. Without that day, without a day to just be a human with another human, he wasn’t sure if he couldn’t handle this place.

Jaipur nodded, “I’ve heard from my sources that you do not go to our prayer services. This must stop. Whilst you are here, you need to work with us.”

“Like you all work with me?” It was cheeky and angry and Cornelius found himself ducking involuntarily afraid of a hit for his insolence. Instead he heard a tired sigh and a shift on the desk.

“While we have not exactly been good to you,” Cornelius couldn’t help the snort that popped out, “I am different and I will treat you better. I had no knowledge that you had no magical control, I doubt anyone else does either. It is a wonder that you have not blown this place up with your temper.” Cornelius glanced up and saw a small smile on Jaipur’s lips, “That too has been talked about. You will attend with

me and pay tribute.”

“I can’t.” Cornelius said in a last ditch effort to avoid going.

“And why not?” Jaipur’s drawl was bordering on impatience at this point.

“I use that day to train,” Cornelius found this to be the perfect moment to examine his leather shoes, he had stopped wearing his cross trainers some time ago, “I need the extra time to work on stuff and get better because I’ve never had any training in any of this.”

“Any of this?”

There was a shocking surprise that made Cornelius turn his head up and meet the eyes of the Master seated in front of him.

“We don’t have horses much anymore, we have cars. We don’t have swords, we have guns. We don’t have magic, we have technology.”

There was silence for a long time before Jaipur spoke, “I suppose every other prayer day will be sufficient, if we have that as an agreement.”

Cornelius nodded.

“And whilst I don’t understand some of the words that you used, ‘car’ or ‘gun’ I am learning that your culture and your society has developed radically different from the one that has developed here. I am sure you will teach me about yours, and I will teach you about mine.”

Cornelius nodded again and that sealed the deal. Cornelius was made official apprentice to Jaipur in healing, though to him it seemed like he was more of an apprentice in cleaning wraps and bandages and laundry. Sassandra got to do most of the cool things, but he was assured time and time again that his opportunity would

come. And it was a week later when Jaipur along with Sassandra and a reluctant Cornelius made their way to one of the temples dressed in slightly itchy undyed robes of cotton.

Chapter 10: Pray for the Desolate



It was the day of prayer, the first one of many to be spent with Jaipur and Sassandra. This was of course much to Cornelius' chagrin. The first thing that they did was separate to bathe. Sassandra to the women's bathing areas and Cornelius and Jaipur to the male areas. Cornelius was instructed to scrub every inch of himself from his scalp to the soles of his feet with a cleansing soap that made his nose itch almost uncontrollably. He did a thorough job begrudgingly, because he was sure Jaipur would make him come back and then scrub Cornelius himself. He had learned very quickly that the man was not to be trifled with. Once he had finished and did a quick rinse with ice-cold water, Cornelius made his way past the regular bathing pool and into the smaller and much warmer pool that signified the second part of the

cleansing process. It was packed with nearly every male from the Citadel and Cornelius felt very exposed.

He was very much a modern male from New York. All these naked bodies and more importantly all these male naked bodies made him feel very uncomfortable. He had been raised to never really look at another naked body, that it was wrong, and that seeing other males naked probably meant that you were gay. And while he was having questionable moments with Jaipur, a most recent example was how he had blushed the day before when their hands had brushed. He was pretty sure he was not gay- really. Speaking of object of his desires, Cornelius spotted Jaipur waving at him and Cornelius went and sat with his mentor.

Cornelius leaned down and slipped into the pool with a hiss over the extreme heat. It was like slipping into a liquid furnace. He bit back a yelp and saw Jaipur watching him with amusing.

“Hot?”

Cornelius shot him a glare, “If I could, I would kill you right now.”

Jaipur placed his hand on Cornelius’ head, “Ah, but you can’t. And now is a good time to begin your praying for penance.”

Before Cornelius could register quite what was happening Jaipur had pushed his head under water as punishment for his cheeky behavior. When Cornelius broke the surface he was half drowned and definitely water logged. Jaipur was an evil, evil elf and Cornelius swore to get him back.

When he got his bearings back Cornelius turned and leaned against the rim of the pool to think. This cleansing process wasn’t that bad. The cleaning hadn’t been

that bad and the pool was quite nice. It was when he was going to have to pretend to pray that would be problem.

This was just another society trying to force religion down his throat. He snorted, when one person talks to someone who isn't there, or an imaginary friend- he's crazy. If a large group does it, it is called religion. Was he the only one that saw a problem with praying to a big bearded Jewish man in the sky?

Or these people, who still had the practice of divine right and who took an entire day to devote to prayer. It was times like this he wished that he was in isolation, completely away from all the people who blamed a divine force for bad things and then praised that same force when things were good.

The only powers at be were the powers of the people with determination and will. The only reason things ever happened and the only reason things got done was because someone, somewhere became annoyed or frustrated with something and decided to change it. That isn't divine, if anything that is the sheer power of irritation as motivation. The more he thought about people thanking deities for what they did with their own two hands, the angrier he got.

A hand touched his shoulder and Jaipur was there with a concerned look on his face.

“What troubles you Cornelius?”

“Let the human alone, Jaipur!”

Cornelius didn't recognize the speaker, but he didn't need to as this kind of thing ran rampant through the Citadel and this accursed world. Jaipur did not even register that he had heard the jeer, his attention solely focused on his charge.

Cornelius felt his anger ebb slightly at the touching concern that the elf showed for him, “I just don’t have a very,” He paused unsure how to continue.

Jaipur nodded, “It is not a hard thing to notice about you. Right now the anger and misery is wafting off of you like steam off of this pool.” He lifted his other hand from the water, cupped and showed how the steam pooled and lifted off of the water.

“Why is it that you hold so much distaste for religion?”

The human shrugged shrugged uncomfortable with the topic.

“I just don’t believe in it. I think that people use religion to cover a lot of things and not shoulder responsibility, or blame.”

“Or they don’t take any credit for the things that they’ve accomplished for themselves.”

Jaipur’s eyes continued to hold an kind and understanding look that made Cornelius sick to his stomach.

“Exactly. The things that I accomplish are the things that I hold with these two hands of mine. No divine right, or force has anything to do with my failure or success.”

“But wouldn’t you want to have someone to look to in times of need?” His question made Cornelius frown.

“I depend on myself for success. The second I give that up, I give up the foundation of what it is to be me.”

They didn’t speak for a long time. The gong sounded, signaling that it was time to dress and make their way to the temples. Not every person went to every temple, they simply went to the ones that they worshipped most closely and felt the

deepest connection to. Jaipur, whose gift involved wind, went to the temple of Ymigur, the patron god of wind and air. Sassandra went to Ursuef, the patron goddess of water.

The four main gods and goddesses as Cornelius had come to understand it were Ymigur, the god of air, Ursuef, the goddess of water, Himishel, the god of fire, and Isuthul, the goddess of earth. There were two other ones that everyone came and worshipped Marsalleiul, the goddess of the moon and Pagonee, the god of the sun.

Cornelius was expected, like most of the Initiates who had not discovered their particular element of control yet, to worship at these last two temples. He had always appreciated the look of gold over the look of silver, so he chose to spend this particular day worshipping at the Pagonee temple.

The temple itself was tall, with the high arches and peeks seemingly reaching up towards the sun and stars. The walls were the color of warm buttermilk and the stucco gleamed with all the majestic light and warmth that one could expect from a temple of light.

Entering with the long throng of devotees, Cornelius found a seat in the back and watched as those who dedicated their lives to serving the god raise chalices and spoke in a foreign tongue that Cornelius had not heard much outside of his magic classes. He had been told it was Old Elvish and not spoken very widely anymore.

There was warmth and light, and he wasn't quite sure where it was coming from, but it made the room comfortable and Cornelius found himself drifting in and out of sleep.

“Cornelius.”

It was that woman's voice again. Cornelius' sleep self smiled and ran towards where the voice was coming from. He wasn't quite sure how he knew which way to go since the voice seemed to come from nowhere and everywhere all at once.

"Cornelius."

He was once again sitting on that velvet soft sea of grass. The atmosphere hadn't changed much from the temple: warm, slightly damp, and completely soothing.

"Is this where I will meet you?" He asked with no real answer expected.

"Yes, it is. But not now, not yet."

He smiled, he was okay with that. Though Kiel and everyone else were still causing him discomfort and unhappiness he had Jaipur, Sassandra, Barnaby, and Beira and he was okay with that. Sometimes he just had to sit back and look at how things had so radically changed in such a short span of time.

It was now six months into his three year stay at the Citadel and he was beginning to understand that he could get through this. He could make it back home if only after this short period of discomfort. Three years was a short time, after all.

"I'm excited to meet you. Though, my life has gotten better- have you seen?" He found himself giddy as though he was a small child so eager to please his elder.

"I have, little one. I am proud of the progress you've made."

"I'm doing it for you, for us," He amended, "I want to be a strong counterpart, a strong partner for you." He could feel her smile.

"You are already strong, though you do not see it yet. But I am proud of the changes you have made in your behavior and the new studious nature you have

taken on.” There was a pause, “What would your parents think if they could see how hard you were working?”

He brushed her off with a sound, “They wouldn’t believe it even if they saw it themselves.”

“You are too harsh on them, Cornelius. They do love you.”

Cornelius shrugged, for some reason right now he couldn’t be angry even if he wanted to.

“Whatever, either way they can’t see me so that point is moot.” They were silent for a long time, just enjoying being together.

“Margaret, what do you look like?” Cornelius asked finally.

There was a pause and the mist swirled to form a young girl, most likely about the age of eleven, with uncharacteristic white hair for that age. Her eyes were the soft and gentle deep blue that he had imagined.

“This is what I can look like here. Does it suit your liking?”

Cornelius looked up and down at the petite form sitting next to him. She was wearing a dress of the softest powder blue, and yet it shone with the sheen he expected from a gem or a pearl.

“You can look however you’d like to look, I’m not your master.” This answer seemed to please her and they continued to sit together. “What is this place?”

“This is the place between your mind and mine, we are neither here nor there, but everywhere and nowhere at the same time.”

Cornelius snorted, “That was just about as helpful as a poorly written fortune cookie.”

Margaret shrugged her shoulders, “I don’t know other to describe it. We are neither here, nor there. We aren’t in a tangible place, what you see is our essence.”

“Cornelius.”

“Yes?”

“Cornelius?”

Their place began to fade as his name was repeated again and again. It was no longer in Margaret’s voice, but Beira’s. Cornelius opened his eyes and found his friend sitting next to him.

“Finally, you’re awake. It isn’t a good idea to sleep in temple.”

“I wasn’t sleeping.”

She gave him a skeptical look. “Oh, than what were you doing?” Cornelius was unable to give a response, and so she gave him a satisfied smirk, “Exactly, sleeping.”

By some unspoken, but widely understood cue everyone stood as one, except Cornelius who stood a beat behind everyone else.

“What’s going on?” He whispered down into Beira’s ear glancing around curiously, everyone was glancing towards a doorway expectantly.

She glanced up at him with a perturbed look before understand dawned across her face. “That’s right, you haven’t been to this before.” He gave her a rather rude look of ‘obviously’. “The high priest will soon be entering. He is the embodiment of Pagonee on this plane.”

“Like the Pope?” He asked curiously and she looked at him in confusion.

“The what?”

He never got the chance to respond because chimes started ringing out in an organized yet somehow chaotic fashion. A sea of heads bowed at once and left hands rose to cover the eyes. Cornelius just stared at the people surrounding him and then watched as a man clothed in clothes that seemed to be created out of gold leaf, wearing an intricate golden mask.

The man beneath seemed to be in a trance, moving as though he did not touch the ground. He seemed to glow, though Cornelius knew that it wasn't physically possible to glow. He took a deep breath and smelt a different series of heavy smells, incense.

The high altar made of golden marble in the center of the raised platform at the front of the room roared to life and fire, and Cornelius' eyes stung with the sudden brightness. He flinched and turned away momentarily before turning back. He sucked in his breath sharply.

The eyes, the high priest's eyes were locked on his. The unworldly power that they had made Cornelius shudder and want to look away, however he found that he couldn't. There was something behind those eyes that wasn't entirely mortal; something that was from beyond this earth and Cornelius was frightened by what he saw.

The moment ended and Cornelius was able to look away. He bowed and covered his eyes like everyone else. He now knew why they did it. While a part of it was out of respect for the man's status and power, it was also because they were afraid of what they might see and afraid of what they might find.

Cornelius got the feeling that he should never speak of the feelings and

emotions that had been occurring throughout him. The fear and the self-doubt that seemed to have happened, and yet he had no conscious recollection of those thoughts passing through his mind, He just knew that they had happened and that he had felt them.

The man behind the mask never spoke; he worshiped the chalices and fire in wailing tones that seemed to never hit the same pitch twice. The sound was so haunting that Cornelius wished that he could plug his ears, but he dared not remove his hand from its protective position. There was something so unlike anything he had ever experienced in what was going on.

Time seemed to freeze and accelerate at the same time and it didn't seem like a long time before the man embodying Pagonee left the stage and everyone made final prayers and murmurs of virtuous statements. Then, like cattle they herded as one out of the temple into the cool day air. The rough coolness made Cornelius stop in his tracks and only moved again when those behind him grumbled and shoved him to keep going.

"How long were we in there?" His throat was dry, though he couldn't remember it becoming that way.

"That worship is only about six hours long. There is another one in two hours and then there is a midnight service."

"And that man does all of them?"

Beira shook his head. "He is almost never seen. Today was a special service though I don't know why. Come on, keeping walking."

During their conversation Cornelius had slowed his walking pace to stare at

the bulb shaped stucco buildings that served as temples to the lesser gods and goddesses.

“What is the hurry?” He asked speeding up whilst rubbing his arms against the chills of the night.

“We need to eat and cleanse again before the second call to prayer.”

Cornelius groaned, “There are more of them that we have to go to?”

She nodded, “It is a day of prayer, Cornelius.” She said as though she was speaking to an exceptionally slow child. “We have only reached midday meal time, another four hour prayer service will leave us at supper time and then we have the midnight prayers.”

“And we go to all of them?” The whining tone in his voice was grating, and he knew it but couldn’t find it within himself to change it.

Beira shook her head, “No, we only need to go to the first two. As Initiates we are exempt from the midnight service as we have classes in the morning.”

Cornelius nodded his head. That was surprisingly sensible of the Masters. He could kiss them if he kissed stupid people, however he had a strict intelligence level restriction on those he made out with. After all stupidity is a definitely contagious disease.

They ate, much like his first day, there was no meat. Unlike the first day, however, the food was simple and barely cooked let alone processed. The food was mainly raw or nearly raw vegetables and thin broth soup that tasted of spices that were vastly different than the kitchens usually used.

“What is with the food?” Cornelius was notorious for not showing up to meals

on prayer day except for supper, when the meals turned back into the regular hearty fair.

“We attempt to keep the cleansing of our bodies throughout the day by eating only things that come from the earth with little to no change in them. It’s taking things as they are kind of like keeping-“

“Keeping a balance.” Cornelius murmured to himself and ceased listening to Beira in favor of staring down at his food in wonder. Maybe he was beginning to understand the necessity of balance and how it worked. Maybe it was just the mood he was in after that experience in the temple, but he no longer felt the need or compulsion to complain about the food or the worshiping.

‘It’s a game of give and take.’ Cornelius thought to himself and then took another spoonful of the soup. The spices, he discovered were the very smells he had come across in the temple. They were attempting to continue the process of worship and reflection even outside of the temples, smart if he was the type of person who did such things-, which he wasn’t.

Lunch ended and Cornelius found himself once again scrubbing and scrunching his nose as he prepared himself for the cleansing tub. This time he bathed alone, Jaipur nowhere to be found, however, he didn’t mind the solitude for there was a lot on his mind. The experience today in the temple was like nothing he had ever experienced before. It was something that he severely wished to never experience again. He was sure it was just another form of the magic he had begun accustomed to witnessing here. It was just that it was the single most powerful and effecting magic he had come in contact with.

He moved when the others did and found himself back out in the cool air. Winter had come to the Citadel and surrounding land, though he hadn't an idea of when that had happened. It was as though he woke up one morning and it was fast approaching midwinter and the midwinter festivals. This also meant he was getting closer to the summer, closer to when he was taken and that meant he was closer to being finished. He looked around at the temples and didn't feel any connection with the ones that people from all walks of life were approaching.

Cornelius wandered throughout the temple district until he found himself by a rundown temple. It was obvious that this place of worship was in seldom use. That was okay with him, he didn't need an audience to mock his humanity. The temple drew him in and he ascended the steps before finally entering.

This particular temple was empty but for a few prayer pillows, fixtures that hung from the ceiling, and a small altar. The altar itself was carved of stone with small gold and blue painted accents. It was of a woman, her face round and lovely and yet she looked solemn.

He kneeled down on one of the pillows, a deep and dark blue silk with golden silk tassels and sown up sides with intricate swirling designs. He bowed his head, something here made him show the smallest respect he had for religion. If only for the fact that lady in front of him seemed so lonely. The temple obviously did not have many visitors, something he judged from the weeks old bouquet of flowers and small crumbs from where food offerings had been eaten by the local pests.

“Dear, lady.”

He addressed the statue, feeling foolish and yet needing to show her the

respect that he didn't often show to others.

“Who are you?”

He asked and then continued, “Why does no one pay you tribute when all the other temples have throngs?”

“Because she represents the unease of travelers and the unease of time.”

It was the girl he had met first out of all the initiates; Cornelius believed her name to be Mardi, the faerie. He had spent much of his time in his classes examining her, from her height and slenderness to the abnormal length of her forehead and finally to the two birds that curled around her ears.

She walked past him and cleared a place from all the dirty and dead flowers. Removing them to the outside she came back and slid a handkerchief from her pocket and started cleaning the idol. Cornelius followed her lead and began to neaten up the altar area and even the pillows, fluffing them and placing them in organized rows.

“Why do you worship her?” He asked her finally and she paused, obviously unsure how to answer.

“Everyone fears me, even the Masters. I look to her for guidance in my travels and for strength against the travesties I will commit.”

Cornelius frowned, “Why would you do anything bad? And why do the Masters fear you?”

She turned an eye to him and he shivered, “Because I am a faerie.”

Cornelius stayed silent and waited for her to continue, something that was out of character, but he had the feeling that if he said something now she would never

say the truth.

“Faeries are evil creatures, unstable, and we often don’t know that we are until it is too late.”

“Why?” This he couldn’t prevent.

She sighed and kneeled on a pillow before clapping her hands twice and placing them to her forehead in prayer, she didn’t speak again until Cornelius copied her movements.

“You see on my ears? They are my curse. They speak to me as a good being and a bad being, an angel and a devil in your terminology. When a faerie is a small child, from the moment they are born, what side they sleep on decides if they are a good faerie or a bad faerie.”

“What side did you sleep on?” He asking and saw her go rigid, “Sorry! I didn’t mean to offend you, I am just curious.”

She sighed, “I suppose you mean no harm, you are uneducated in polite conversations of his world.” Cornelius bristled at the slight, but couldn’t deny it as the truth. “I slept on both sides, or on my back. That is the true problem.”

“But wouldn’t that make you balanced?” He asked in wonder, that seemed like the best of both worlds to have the dark side, the consciousness and the deviance, as well as the goodness side that gives a healthy dose of morality.

“No one can confirm if I am a good faerie or a bad faerie. Only time will tell who spoke more as I slept, or who I listened to more.”

She lifted her hands away from her forehead and he copied her action. She and then he lifted their hands away and up to the ceiling and then clapped there before

bringing them down to the floor. She bowed and pressed her forehead to the floor just behind where her hands were splayed, and Cornelius copied her. The position, while uncomfortable at first, grew comfortable and Cornelius found himself drifting in and out of sleep despite the cold and despite the company. They stayed like that for a long time and Cornelius couldn't help but feel at piece here. The first temple put him in alarm and on alert; this temple despite the connotations behind it felt more like home.

Maybe it was because no one trusted him, or maybe it was because he had been taken so far from home. Despite no definite reason the Temple of the Woebegone as he had begun to refer to it in his mind made him feel as relaxed as he did when he used to lie at home in his bed, and it had been a long time since experiencing that feeling.

Bells in the distance and the whisper of cloth on cloth awoke Cornelius and he saw Mardi standing to her feet and brushing off herself.

“What's that?” He asked sleepily whilst rubbing his eyes.

“The end of this prayer session.” She said simply and left without saying goodbye.

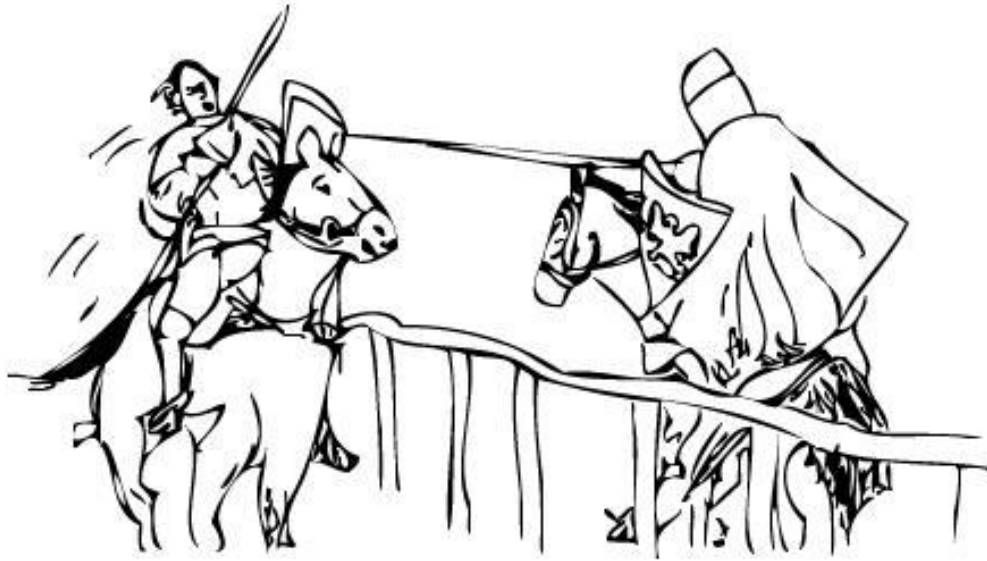
He supposed it was for the best that they parted ways here rather than where people could see them. He was getting ridiculed already. Being seen with Mardi would only make matters worse, as much as he hated to admit it. He was not brave enough to break the small amount of homeostasis that had set in as of late. She did not get picked on, everyone was too afraid of her. It was rather as though she didn't exist. He doubted that he would be as lucky if he was caught fraternizing with her.

At this point it was all about choosing his battles and trying to keep his head above water.

He stood and brushed off first his hands and then his clothes before turning and taking a final glance at the statue. He nodded his head slightly towards the lady, who he thought looked slightly better now that the temple was clean and tidied up.

Choosing his timing, Cornelius stepped out behind a group of serving women who were also heading back to the main part of the temple district. It would be better overall if no one knew that this was the temple he had worshiped at. Life would be even better that the others didn't know whom he worshiped with. In the back of his mind Cornelius knew that he would most likely meet up with her again, the next prayer day he went to, but for now forgetting was best.

Chapter 11: An Uncaring Joust



Cornelius encountered Sassandra and Beira right outside the dining hall.

“Where did you worship Cornelius?” Beira asked as they stood in line for their supper.

Cornelius shrugged, “A smaller temple, I didn’t catch the name of it.”

Beira frowned slightly, “No one was there to tell you it?”

He was saved from answering by reaching the serving area and having to order his food. Truth be told, he had forgotten to ask and never found out who the deity was, and he wasn’t going to go and find Mardi to ask.

The three of them sat together and was about to tuck in to their meal when there was a crash. The hall filled with the sound of shattering dishes and yelling.

“You imbecile!”

Kiel raised his hand with the intention of striking a serving man who had accidentally run into him. On closer inspection Cornelius found it to be the serving man who worked in his rooms. He was up and out of his seat before he had made a conscious commitment to do something.

“Stop!”

Cornelius’ voice held some of the same growth and authority that it contained when he met with Margaret.

Kiel looked at him and sneered.

“Or what, human?”

The elemental must have been in an exceptionally foul mood today. He usually kept his most racist actions to the private hallways where the two could swing punches without getting caught.

“Or I’ll make you stop.”

Cornelius’ threat hung in the air for what seemed like an eternity before the Masters descended upon them. Kiel was given two bells worth of work in the laundry for attempting to strike a serving man. Cornelius was given two bells worth of work for the next five days for attempting to start a fight with a fellow Initiate.

When Cornelius returned to his rooms he was furious. The absolute ignorance he was surrounded by here was inexcusable at times. There was a knock on the door and Cornelius opened it with a snarl. The serving man who he had helped looked up at him fearfully, flinching at the harsh way Cornelius had answered.

Cornelius’ heart constricted and his rage softened. Just because he was angry didn’t mean that he had to be a bully.

“I am sorry, I didn’t mean to startle you.”

His voice contained all the kindness that he could muster at the moment. The man didn’t respond and Cornelius internally sighed.

“Come in, please.” He held open the door wider for the smaller man, and then closed it soundly behind him once the man had entered.

They stood in silence for a long time. The man having refused a seat or to even look at Cornelius. Finally, unable to stand it, Cornelius moved back over to the door, “I have a long day tomorrow and would like to sleep, so if you cannot speak right now maybe we can speak later when it is a time of better convenience.”

“I didn’t need your help, human.” The serving man said and flinched, throwing his hands up expecting a blow.

“You might not have, but I take every opportunity to dole one out to Kiel. You just served as a convenience.”

Cornelius was not wounded by the man’s words. Pride was a difficult thing to swallow. Cornelius had stepped in to help fix a grown man’s problems. To make matters worse he was not just an Initiate, but also a human.

“It is my job as a future Guardian to protect all and serve fairly. If I let something like this go now, who is to say that I wouldn’t in the future?”

The serving man walked to the door as Cornelius held it out for him and kept his head bowed and looking away. He paused at the threshold to the hallway.

“You’re a good man. A lot better than those who are supposed to be of a better breeding and race.”

With that the man was gone, but his words stuck to Cornelius like a burr. It

was one of the best, if not the single best thing anyone had said to him since coming here. He was a good man, or rather- he was becoming a good man. If he had stayed at home, and had never come here, he might never have developed the same sense of nerve and morality that he was beginning to.

Cornelius shut the door and prepared for bed. Upon entering the bed and covering himself with the sheets, the lighting for the room disappeared. Cornelius was found himself laying in the dark with his arms clasped firmly behind his head. Today had given him a lot to think about. A large amount of growth had occurred within him, he would say. The people at home were crazy for believing in their religion, but maybe, just maybe the religion here was a bit more real and a little less removed from the original source.

Try as he might, and he had been unable to deny the transformation that occurred in the temple. As well as the feeling of true, deep, and old power that had emanated off of the idols and the priests. He had felt the truth of the matter down into his soul and he would never be able to deny it now. No matter how much he wanted to. This was something that he was having a hard time accepting, he had been anti religion for as long as he could remember, and in one day he wasn't. While he wasn't gung ho, jump on the good ship religion, he couldn't deny what he had witnessed today, and that frightened him. It took away something that had been at the very core of his being.

After what seemed like an eternity he slept and awoke with that same feeling of confusion, awe, and wonder that seemed to have settled permanently into his chest.

“Boy!”

A voice called from outside of the stable and Cornelius gritted his teeth.

“Human!”

The second call was in the form of a mocking singsong voice. He knew Luzon’s voice anywhere. With a sigh, Cornelius tossed the last of the muck he was working on into their version of a wheel barrel and then put down his shovel.

He exited the stable and shaded his eyes against the harsh light of the winter day. The light glared across the snowy landscape and Cornelius looked at it with longing. The snow reminded him of home and that was something that he had been wishing very much for in these days. He finally spotted Luzon who was tapping his foot at him impatiently. Biting back the urge to say, ‘Yes, your worship’ Cornelius merely waited for instructions.

“Boy, go and saddle up your horse. You do know how to at this point?”

Cornelius gritted his teeth until they ached, but nodded, “Well, get her out here and grab a shield from the general store. I need you for a demonstration.”

Cornelius nodded silently, wanting nothing more than to flip the man off in a rather vulgar manner. With the self-control of a saint he turned and went back to the stables. He tacked up Utica and groomed her thoroughly on the crossties. If Luzon wanted to use Cornelius he was going to have to wait for him.

Twenty minutes later Cornelius exited with his shield and horse to find Luzon waiting with steam nearly coming from his ears.

“Sir?” Cornelius questioned leading Utica out into the ring.

Luzon stared at him as though Cornelius was something dirty that he wanted to

scrape of his shoe.

“To the jousting lines, human. We’re at a point in the curriculum that the Initiates will learn to joust, thus you will be the demonstration of what not to do.”

Cornelius’ cheeks burned with flags of shame, however he kept his peace and walked his horse to the starting end of one side of the run. It was a dirt way that was about the length of a football field, or a little shorter. There was a wooden bar down the center that would prevent the horses from crossing over. He thought it was rather cowardly of Luzon to not even allow Cornelius to have a lance. It much didn’t matter because Cornelius had already done this kind of exercise with Barnaby a month before then.

He hitched up and swung into the seat with a substantial amount more grace than his fellow Initiates thought him to have. He had already lengthened and sorted everything to the right amount in the stable.

Cornelius signaled he was ready with a sarcastic salute to Luzon. The Master was wearing a padded jerkin that would protect him, despite Cornelius having no lance. Cornelius was wearing no such protection, yet he hefted his shield to the correct position and waited. Luzon yelled out instructions and other insightful know how to the Initiates, with the occasional insult thrown Cornelius’ way about the uselessness of humans unless it was as a dummy or a shield.

Finally, when Cornelius was ready to dismount and go back inside did Luzon address him and say that it was time to begin. Cornelius nodded and settled the shield and then held onto the reins in the proper form. This brute would not unseat him. A sharp whistle sounded by one of the Initiates signaled the beginning of this

match. Cornelius kicked slightly at the sides of Utica and whispered commands to her to get her up to speed.

She surged forward like a mountain and Cornelius relished momentarily in the love of riding his horse. The moment over, Cornelius lowered and settled into the saddle for the best possible withstanding method. Luzon came at him and they stuck, his lance shattered on impact and Cornelius' side went numb.

They rode back to their respective starting points. Cornelius took his shield off his arm and shook it to relieve the numb feeling. Turning Utica back into position Cornelius reattached the shield. Finally, he gripped and released his hands a few times to stretch out the tight muscles. The whistled sounded again and Cornelius wasted no time in getting Utica to a good strong speed, though not her greatest. He jumbled slightly in the saddle as he was expected to, and when he was hit he actually became surprised as he flew out unceremoniously. Turning Cornelius did his best to take the fall on his arms and legs rather than his ribs and torso. His face struck. Fire burned everywhere and Cornelius gasped, unable to do anything else.

No one came to his assistance, and he was just fine with that. Tears ran from his eyes from the pain and from the shame. He truly hadn't thought that Luzon could unseat him. It was arrogance and pride that held led to his downfall. He was only just learning to joust, and Luzon was the person who was teaching them. He also had many, many, years on them and the subject.

When he could finally function on his own Cornelius tucked his legs up under his chest slowly and then pushed off the ground. His head swam and he was sure that despite his efforts, he had concussed himself in the fall. Utica pushed her face to

his back and Cornelius reached blindly behind him to grasp on to his companion.

“Move, human! Back to the stable where you belong.”

Luzon was on him for taking too long to get up. Ironic seeing as he was the one who knocked Cornelius out of the saddle in the first place.

He was able to raise his head and look around; though he immediately wished he had not. Keeping his mouth buttoned shut Cornelius headed back to the stable resisting the urge to be sick. He wasn't quite sure how he groomed Utica; he was pretty sure that he had pretty much laid against her and let the horse do most of the work. He gave her extra food and fresh water before sitting on the blanket box in front of her stall with his head in his hands.

His stomach was swimming somewhere around his knees and there was a sure chance of him vomiting. He just had to hold on for when he was away from Luzon. He wasn't going to give the man the satisfaction of knowing that he had actually hurt Cornelius.

Who was he kidding, really? He most likely had walked in here with all the grace of a less than steady rotating top. He had Arlit next and would just make up the hours with her later. She would understand that he would not skip unless absolutely necessary, if only because she knew he was terrified of her. It was hard to think, hard to breath, hard to really do anything except clutch his head in severe agony. When he heard the others coming in to unsaddle and care for their mounts Cornelius ducked out the back of the stable, having the presence of mind not to make himself in a target for his less than likable peers.

It was a long and hard walk to Jaipur's office and the infirmary. Many times

Cornelius had to stop and rest before carrying on. The stairs were the worst and in a Citadel that was built upwards instead of out there were a lot of steps for Cornelius to climb.

“Cornelius.”

Sassandra’s voice held emotion and concern that he was not used to hearing since coming to train. He couldn’t find it within himself to respond and just slumped down in the doorway. From that moment on Cornelius had no conscious recollection of what was happening to him or what was being said. He was told later on that he had in fact fractured his skull and had severe cranial bleeding. This injury would be the one that would separate the Masters. Having Cornelius joust without any kind of protection and then not checking to see the injury status was something that most of the Masters could not condone.

Nothing much could be done, however, as Ulrich did not see it as any more than a gross oversight in Luzon’s part. Arlit and Jaipur along with some of the other Masters took it as a personal offense. Not necessarily because of fondness to Cornelius, but out of principle of what an Initiate owed to the Masters, and vice versa.

Later Cornelius would consider this a step towards balance. Later, but not now. For now Cornelius spent his days in the bed in the infirmary. They had put a shunt into his cranium so as to drain the pressure out. In the days to come Cornelius would gain his most pressing and valuable knowledge via the spending of his time with Margaret whilst his body healed.

Chapter 12: Standing Still



“No, no, no.”

Cornelius had fallen onto his back in a show of extreme lack of grace.

Margaret was staring at him and if he was a betting man, he would have bet that she would have been tapping a foot if she did such things. They had gone over doing a round-off, simple enough, with it just basically being a cartwheel and landing on two feet. He could handle that. Now they were on the back-spring and Cornelius had been thus far unable to attempt it successfully.

She had him stand and place his arms straight above his head.

“You’re going to swing your arms down and bend your knees at the same time as you have been doing. You need to keep your shoulders open and your arms stiff so that when you throw yourself backwards, you can hold yourself up.”

She squatted and held out her arms, pressing them up and to his back. “I’ll spot you.”

He stepped away from her like her touch burned and stared at her with wide

eyes, “You will what?”

“Spot you.” She didn’t look at all perturbed by his nerves.

“Not going to happen, you’ll drop me.”

She stood up again and dug her hands into her hips, the perfect image of woman indignance.

“I’ll drop you?” Cornelius gulped, he knew that tone of voice from his sisters.

“Never mind, forget I said anything.” He sputtered out speedily and got back down into the crouch position.

“No, we are solving this right now.” She pushed him over.

“Hey! I’m injured!” Cornelius cried from his crumpled form on the ground.

“Not in here you aren’t.” She looked down her nose at him, and Cornelius had never felt smaller than at that moment.

“You must trust me, Cornelius. If we don’t trust each other, our partnership will never work.”

“I don’t even know what we’re going to be partnered for. Someone won’t tell me.”

It was unfair, and he knew, but so did her keeping things from him. He knew that if she could tell him, she would. However, he couldn’t take back his words and he doubted that she would forgive him any time soon for such a remark.

“I see.”

With a pop she disappeared.

Cornelius called after her multiple times to no avail, she was gone. With a kick, a curse, and a sigh Cornelius crossed his legs and dropped to the ground,

crossing his arms as he went. She was so moody sometimes. He knew that he wasn't the easiest to deal with, however she should have been able to deal better with him.

Cornelius lay back on the grass, still velvet soft, and sighed. She wasn't asking him to do the impossible, just something that was difficult, and he was behaving like a spoiled child. He stayed lying there for a long time, reviewing steps, moves, and more importantly mess-ups, since they began working on his acrobatics. He knew that learning to bend and move his body in these ways could only benefit him. Holding his hands up above his body, Cornelius moved and turned his hands as though they were his actual body. It was a method he used when trying to figure out mechanics visually.

He pulled himself up onto an arm and looked around. If this was some place inside of his mind, than he could make anything happen. He thought hard and waited for his practice dummy to appear, it did not. With an angry and frustrated sigh he once again flopped back down, dejected. Sighing, he clasped his hands on his chest, linking his fingers and pressing the pad of both of his thumbs together, leaving a wide open and empty circle in the middle of his fingers and palms. Taking a deep breath, Cornelius closed his eyes and breathed out, imagining his breath snaking around and blowing through that circle. Once the air went through circle it turned into gold shine and radiance as though his breath was created by some other force.

He continued to mediate in this fashion, disciplining his mind and breathing until he felt calm, cool, and collected. Most importantly it made him feel ready to try again. As if compelled by something that was beyond him, Cornelius sat and rose an arm, while saying the elvish word for conjure.

Pointing a finger and with an internal twist of his magic, a black figure the size and shape of a human appeared. He paused for a second in shock and the dummy shuddered at the lack of his concentration. Steeling his will, Cornelius fastened down and concentrated on keeping this being in the physical world.

“You aren’t going anywhere....” He murmured clenching his hands.

In his mind’s eye he saw the dummy do a roundoff. A moment later the dummy before him did the same thing. A wide grin broke and seemed to split Cornelius’ face in two at his success. He scrambled hastily to his feet and got closer to the dummy. He made the dummy do the back handspring again and again so that Cornelius could study the mechanics up close and personal. This was a great change and Cornelius finally felt confident in what he was seeing.

This time when he attempted the back handspring he landed it successfully before pitching himself forward and onto the ground. The dummy vanished, Cornelius’ concentration broken, however this barely mattered as he laughed in relief of his accomplishments.

“I saw that.”

Margaret’s face appeared above his head.

He grinned widely up at her.

“Oh, you did, did you?”

He reached up blindly and pulled her down onto the ground next to him. “I’m sorry about what I said.” His voice was quiet and unsure after the long moments of cheerful silence.

“I know you are.” She paused at an unusual sign of nerves, “and I suppose I

can't just expect you to automatically trust me."

Cornelius nodded. "Trust is difficult. It is something that we have to build, rather than something we can automatically expect from others."

"Duly noted." She replied and they fell back into their silence.

"When do I have to wake up?" He asked turning on his side to look at his friend after they had been lying there for a long time.

Margaret shrugged, "Never, I suppose. Theoretically you could stay here, in this place forever."

Cornelius couldn't deny that the idea was tempting and sorely wished he could take it.

"But then you and I will never meet, out there in the real world."

A hand clenched Cornelius' heart and squeezed- he couldn't bear that, however he also could not bear the real world.

"But there are things in the real world that I'll never have an answer to. Things that I'll never be able to do anything about. The real world is only about struggling and failing, and then, maybe, every once in a while, having a triumph."

"But that is what makes life so beautiful." Margaret's statement hung in the air.

"Life is hollow."

Rather than hang in the air Cornelius' statement sunk and laid heavily on his heart, with a feeling of absolute despair. "You try, and you try, but at the end of the day you are just tired with nothing to show for it." He paused, "I would rather stay in a world of constant peace, because there's no way every person is fortunate enough to have a good life."

“Why do you feel this way?”

“Because power and happiness corrupts. You will feel good only for a moment’s time and then it’s over and you’re disappointed or angry, or anything but that good feeling.”

The more that Cornelius spoke, the more sure of a decision he had not put conscious thought to: he was going to stay in this place. He was going to seize control of his life and stay in a reality where happiness and sadness never crossed. The dark voice in his head returned. She spoke soothingly to him, urging him to give into this want, this need of absolute oblivion. Cornelius was more than happy to oblige.

He stayed that way for a month. Margaret never left his side, but also made it clear she did not approve of his decision. She understood Cornelius’ reasoning; the world had never been overly kind to the boy. Especially since coming here. There were bright spots, yes, but overall he just seemed to struggle, not only against others, but also against himself.

Cornelius ‘awoke’ one day in his own reality to see Quentine sitting in a rocking chair. He was once again in her apartment back in New York. Cornelius knew that it wasn’t real, but he couldn’t help but weep in relief.

“Sight, sound, reason, happiness, sadness.”

Her words were slow and calming and Cornelius felt his tears lessen, though his chest still heaved with pent up emotion.

“These are things necessary to create a balance.”

“Leave me alone, Quentine, you old hag.”

He rolled over on the bed to face away from her and gripped his arms to protect himself from the world.

“I will not leave you alone, you must wake up and overcome this.”

“Why? So I can be your savior? So I can right wrongs and triumph over evil and all that comes with it?”

“Precisely.”

“Well, I don’t want to. Job vacancy available.” He squeezed his eyes shut.

“There are people who depend on you, Cornelius.”

Though her voice was solemn Cornelius felt a surge of anger at her words.

“Depend on me? That miserable excuse for a living being was going to let me die. I almost did!”

“So what are you going to do about it?”

There was a long pause, if he said ‘nothing’ than he was a coward, however he just didn’t have the energy, or the want to continue. He wanted to stay here; he wanted to stop being in a world where he had no control. Instead of replying, Cornelius chose to stay silent and resolute.

“You need to come back, you need to succeed. You were meant to lead these people into a new age.”

“Lead them?”

He couldn’t lead anyone, and he doubted they would let him. He turned slightly so that he could see her face, needing some reassurance in her words.

She nodded to his question, “You have spent much too much time fighting them and feeling sorry for your situation. You need to build bridges, make alliances, because when the time comes, you will need to lead them if we are to survive.”

“Something bad is coming?” Fear clutched his heart, yet he forced it down with a gulp.

“Something worse than what had been seen in years. A metaphorical flood, or a storm, and you will need to lead the charge against it all.”

“But they won’t listen to me!”

He sat up and slammed his hands to the mattress, “I’m only one person, and on top of that, I am a person that they hate. I am weak, and useless, and-“

“And you truly believe none of that, you are only repeating what doubts lie deep within your heart.”

“But what if my fears, my doubts are true?”

She paused and placed a hand on his forehead, or rather she would have but it passed through causing him to shiver at the sudden cool contact.

“Questioning keeps us strong, don’t ever loose that need to question. However, your doubts are not true, at least not in this case. You need to prove yourself to be a cut above the rest, to be better than they are.”

“Your hand passed through me.” It was a statement rather than a question.

“Yes,” She nodded, “I am only here, but for my magic. I have penetrated your mind in the hope of bringing you home. To bring you back to life as it were. I cannot touch you here as I am but a figment in this world, where you are reality.”

“But I thought you just said that you are trying to bring me back to reality?”

Her statement confused Cornelius.

“Have you not figured it out by now?”

She smiled down at him not unkindly, almost in a loving and protective manner. The smile stood for a grandchild saying something infinitely amusing.

“There can be more than one form of reality, more than one choice. It is all a matter of what we choose to do with each reality, and how we choose to maintain control over the things that we can.”

“So, this is real?”

She nodded, “In a way, not as real as your body, however, if you were to die here your body would cease to function. Or rather, your mind would be forever gone.”

“So, all the things that I have been doing here, I could do there?”

“To some extent.”

“So that means I really can do magic- I really can do all the things that I’ve been wanting to.”

“Yes, Cornelius and isn’t that exciting.”

He nodded and stared down at his hands as though he was seeing them for the first time.

“I think I want to go back.”

A smile broke across Quentine’s face, a real and genuine smile of accomplishment and hope.

“And why is that?”

He met her eyes with his own, despite the unease that he felt.

“Because I can do all the things that I believed I couldn’t. I can lead these people, I can fight.” He paused and spoke quietly almost as though he was telling a secret, “I am more powerful than I believed myself to be.”

“You are.”

He stood off the bed. “I am going back, Quentine, I am going to live life in reality and push forward into the future, rather than staying here in this place, because I can’t move forward here. I can only stand still.”

Her smile turned sad, “Good, Cornelius.”

He turned and looked at her hearing her sad tone. “When will I be able to see you again?”

She shook her head, “Not for a long time, doing this takes a lot out of me. I shouldn’t risk wasting any energy.” Cornelius reached out to her and had his hand pass through. “Tell Barnaby I love him. I hear from him so infrequently.”

Cornelius nodded, “I will, and I’ll make it so that you two can see each other again sometime.”

“Don’t make a promise you can’t keep, Cornelius.” She warned raising a hand.

Cornelius smiled, one would say cheekily if not for the gravity of the situation, “I’m not.”

The world started to dissolve around him faster and faster until he was hit with pain and pressure. The sounds around him were too loud, even though he was sure that they weren’t normally. With great effort Cornelius opened his eyes, he was back.

Chapter 13: Blood and Power



Cornelius woke alone in a small room by himself. The wall that his bed was against wasn't a wall at all he was surprised to find. A window filled the wall space and allowed the maximum amount of sunlight to stream through onto the bed and the rest of the room. Cornelius looked out over the grounds and he breath caught in his chest- it truly was beautiful here.

He forgot for a moment all the pain and anguish this place had caused him, he became lost in the grandeur that he was witnessing. The way the afternoon light fell across the sloping fields, the old coliseum off in the distance where he would be tested at the end of the year, and finally the deep dark forest where he knew Barnaby resided. It was a relief to be in this room, he considered it his favorite out of the infirmary. Jaipur must have remembered. The healer had once told him that this

room was meant to seal off the magic's necessary used to heal. Runes made out of stone were placed throughout the infrastructure. They existed to channel the power of healing.

The room was warm and he was in the thin comfortable silk clothing of a long-term patient. Silk conducted magic better than most fabrics. He clenched and unclenched his hands experimentally and felt his hand form a tight ball around something. Cornelius lifted his hand and glanced down. Uncurling his fingers Cornelius released a small, but deserving smile. In his hand was small wooden carved bird of prey. An Osprey.

This was how Quintine had gotten into his mind she had used this archetype as a catalyst to enter his brain. Later he would have to ask Barnaby how he did it. How had he managed to sneak into the Citadel to drop this off? Right now, though, he was starving, in pain, and feeling not all too well rested. He hid the figure under his pillow as the door burst open and Jaipur and Sassandra entered.

"I wasn't sure if my monitoring spells were working effectively, but you're awake!" Jaipur sounded both confused and excited. He and Sassandra conducted their basic battery tests and figuring all the while updating Cornelius on the happenings of the Citadel in his absence.

"What is your pain level?" The Master finally asked.

Cornelius grimaced, "I don't know, a six?"

Jaipur nodded and continued to work, "I'll adjust the pain medication, we weren't sure how much to give you."

"You scared us, Cornelius," Sassandra's words were scolding.

“I couldn’t quite help it.”

Sassandra’s frown deepened, “I know. I just, it is different when it is one of us in these beds, rather than your average person.”

Cornelius reached out and grabbed her hand, “I’m sorry.”

“I don’t care.”

Sassandra ripped her hand from his grip and left unceremoniously. Cornelius stared at her retreating back until he could no longer see it.

“She was really worried, you know.”

Jaipur’s words were soft and comforting. “We all were,” he added. Cornelius remained silent, unable to respond after so long of living without conflict.

“What were you doing in there? I tried to reach you, but every time I tried, I found that I couldn’t make it through.”

Cornelius wasn’t sure if he should say anything, however in the end he chose not to. He couldn’t unsay things once said, and he wasn’t sure how much he wanted to tell just yet.

“I don’t know why you couldn’t.” Cornelius replied truthfully. If Quintine could reach him, he didn’t know why Jaipur could not. “I just wasn’t ready,” The boy looked down and away, “to be here.”

Jaipur nodded, understanding his charge’s predicament. “It is a hard life that we make you youths lead here. Even more difficult for you because you weren’t raised to view this as the ultimate honor.” The elf paused, “you have been treated less than favorably here.” He paused again and stood straighter, “Luzon received punishment for his actions, by the way. Not very much, mind you, however he did

see some repercussions for his actions. I doubt that will sweeten his disposition towards you. If anything he might become angrier, however he is unlikely to try the same stunt.”

“I guess I can’t expect him to get a fitting punishment.” ‘At least not yet.’ Cornelius finished darkly. If he was destined to lead these people, things would change, he would see to it. His intent was that the next time these people encountered a human they would think twice before treating them as they had been treating him. “Never mind, he is of no consequence to me.”

Jaipur’s surprise was evident in both his voice and his facial expression, “That’s quite the high way to look at it, Cornelius.”

Cornelius shrugged, “I can either complain and make a fuss about it with no power, or I can move on and work and gain that power to make people listen.”

“That kind of talk is dangerous.”

Jaipur gripped the human’s shoulder in warning, “I would be careful to who you speak such words to. We’ve had peace for far too long for anyone to pay kindly to an upheaval.”

Cornelius put his hand over Jaipur’s, “Dark times are upon us. Jaipur, something is coming, and we need change in order to survive it.”

“How do you know this?” Jaipur sounded scared, however not the unbelieving that Cornelius initially expected.

“I was told it in a dream. Until now, I guess I didn’t realize how often I’ve dreamt of what’s coming. It took basically a billboard for me to realize that my dreams weren’t just dreams.” Cornelius paused and collected his thoughts. This was

his first time speaking about trouble and dreams, and he had to do this correctly in order to gain purchase with these people.

“I dreamt of searching for light. And I’ve dreamt of drowning battling towards the surface- trying to survive. I remember vividly a dream of a battle field in flames.” Cornelius paused as he thought of the most disturbing one, “I dreamt of me and my dragon fighting this evil across the border and in the human world.” He paused again and wrung the sheets in his hands, “I just never realized that my dreams were real.”

“You have the power of prophet, of divination.”

Cornelius frowned, not liking the tone of voice Jaipur spoke with. It shook with fear.

“Has anyone spoken to you of these things before?” He held up his hand, “Forget I asked that, of course no one has. It is dangerous for you to divine these things without the proper shielding or guidance.”

“And who would teach me?” Cornelius’ words were bitter, “I know of no one here that would do it.”

Jaipur was silent, having no answer. Though there had been change, and though there were more Masters willing to give Cornelius a chance, the Master dedicated to Divination was not one of them.

Cornelius was released the next day with strict rules on what he could, and could not do. Jaipur and Sassandra wanted to keep him longer, however Ulrich was very clear that Cornelius had to return to his normal schedule. He had so fallen behind due to his month long sleep. He was not to participate horsemanship or

swordsmanship, or anything that required him to exert himself physically until further notice.

That suited Cornelius just fine, still feeling weak. He spent his time, instead, focusing on growing his magical power and catching up on his academic work. He had not been able to conjure worth a damn since leaving his mental reality. He supposed that it was acceptable, as conjuring was an intense and high form of magic, and while he was more powerful than before, he was not close to the amount of discipline it would take.

“That should do it.”

Cornelius was in an old unused classroom, most likely potions judging by the ventilation system. He had just finished drawing a series of connected circles and swirls with chalk. Kneeling he grabbed a log of dried wood from where he had made a pile. He placed first some kindling and then the long down in the center of the design. The rough bark scraped against his skin and he took a deep breath of the rich smell. He was attempting another magical working that would open his channels.

He was frustrated. He had all this theoretical knowledge, thanks primarily to copying scrolls in class. Not that he would ever thank the Masters. However, he had no real power to perform any magic with. His channels had been developed and widened, yes, however they still weren't as wide as the other Initiates. He was hoping that this ceremony would widen his channels further. His core was large and filled with potent magical abilities. This meant absolutely nothing if he could not get to them.

Cornelius lit the kindling and watched as it caught the logs and small bits of

paper he had crumpled and put in to help the fire along. When he deemed the fire large enough and warm enough he stood back.

The heat of the fire felt comforting and familiar, like summer at home. Seeing the fire glitter against the dark room he was able to relax. This was the right thing to do, Quintine had warned him that he needed to lead these people. In order to do that he needed to excel and become stronger no matter the pain.

Stripping off his shoes and shirt Cornelius stood in nothing but a loose pair of pants made of rough and undyed fabric, much like the cloth worn on the day of prayer. He went over the words of the spell one last time. Everything seemed to be in place and ready except for one thing: him. He padded softly over to his bag and withdrew his dagger; a standard one that all Initiates received. It was kept in a black rough leather sheath and his showed hard usage. Walking to the edge of the fire Cornelius turned the object over and over until his hands, feeling trepidation. It would only take a small amount of blood, a tiny small amount, and yet he was hesitant to even prick a single one of his fingers.

He unclasped the buckle and gripped the hilt of the dagger that was made of the same rough black leather as the sheath. Slowly, and with care, he slid and removed the blade from its confines. Gazing at the steel with reverence that he rarely held for anything he felt his hair stand straight up on the back of his neck.

This object, this small object with the blade being only the length of his hand from palm to finger tip, could really do damage with its sharp edge- it didn't seem real. Experimentally he ran a finger along the edge and brought it away smooth and unblemished. Of course it wasn't as sharp as it could be, it was just a standard issue

and even still, most of the Initiates had their own equipment.

‘They were given warning,’ he thought ruefully.

Cornelius steeled his will, if he didn’t man up and do this than a lot of people who were depending on him, whether they knew it yet or not, would be in trouble. His mind firm and unyielding, Cornelius brought the blade down the underside of his arm as lightly as he could, but still with deliberate force. He was barely breaking the skin, yet going deep enough for the blood to well.

It hurt, burned really, and Cornelius dropped the knife in favor of clutching his arm. The pain was more than he imagined it to be as he was not in the habit of cutting himself. Still, it was done and Cornelius released his arm to stare at the hand that had held the appendage, it was covered in blood. Leaning even more forward Cornelius held his arm over the fire and let the blood drip and hiss into the flames.

He was not allowed to bandage his arm until the ceremony was over, so it was time to continue. Cornelius kneeled so close to the fire that his knees ached with the heat that they were experiencing. The young man held out his arms to the fire hands palm to the fire and fingers erect. He spoke a word of power from the section of the book he had memorized. The flames turned a deep purple color, delight, excitement, and pride filled Cornelius. He grabbed a small bag of powdered herbs from the side of the ceremony space where he had placed it earlier. He threw the contents, bag and all, into the fire. This was going exactly according to plan.

He began to chant, softly at first, with his voice rising gradually until it was loud and yelling. Jumping to his feet, Cornelius pushed all the power he could muster and control out of his body and into the fire. The flames grew higher and he

could almost see the power running through the runes he had chalked on the floor. The design lit with a blinding light and Cornelius' body pitched forward and he should have smothered the fire.

Instead the flames engulfed him, and yet, did not physically burn him. His core lit aflame and his veins boiled with power and change. Cornelius was sure he was screaming, yet, no one heard or came to his aid. The world darkened and Cornelius knew no more.

He awoke some time later and sat up experimentally. His body seemed to pulse with energy. His cut was sealed with a small scar that was raised and pink with anger. Cornelius grinned in relief, the ceremony seemed to work, but now came the real work, the real test. He moved and sat in the small folding stool that he had borrowed from another classroom; clapping his hands twice Cornelius closed his eyes and clasped his hands together in the open circle with thumbs touching.

In this position Cornelius concentrated on controlling his breathing and clearing his mind. The time it took was longer than normal, though he wasn't surprised due to his excited state. He eventually got his mind under control and started with the long and tedious process of pulling the power back inside of his body. He stored it, a mechanism that he had come up with. He contained the power in several different objects that he had created and kept in his mind.

Extra power for healing went into a box that was meant to hold dried herbs, power for fighting and battle he placed into a sword, and power for defensive measures he kept in a shield, He continued with this process of control and segregation, however tedious it was. His thoughts were that if his power was ever

bound, his attackers might not get all of it, if it was split up.

When it seemed as though the power was no longer leaking from his body, Cornelius released the iron grip he had kept on his strands and core. Opening his eyes, the world seemed different, more alive, and he felt as though he was beginning to see and feel everything unadulterated, for the first time.

Now that his channels were open it was time to work on control, and what he could do with this new power.

Reality told him that he would most likely never be the most powerful magic user out there, however he was going to give people a run for their money. Right now he would settle on being the most learned, and that was a new want for him. Before he came here he never cared about learning, he didn't honestly believe he was going to go to college for academics.

Quickly, for fear of being caught, as he did not know how long he had been out, Cornelius cleaned up the mess as best he could. He put things into bags and brushed the chalk away with a broom that he had borrowed for that exact purpose. He struggled slightly under the weight of the bags of wood and ashes, however managed to make it out of the classroom and to the bottom more levels of the Citadel.

He walked past the tailors and the laundry rooms and finally down to where the large castle was heated from: the furnaces. Going up to one that he had specifically chosen before hand for its unusually high temperatures, Cornelius opened the small side feeder grate and poured in everything, even the pants he had worn, making sure to not leave a single piece that could tie the ceremony back to

him.

He would get in trouble if someone caught him doing blood magic, it was not necessarily dark, however, he had no doubt of the strict and harsh repercussions if someone were to catch a human doing such a ceremony. As though Cornelius had never been there, he left. Determining the time to be around supper, he joined the throng of people heading for the dining room. Beira caught him outside of the hall and dragged him to an empty corridor.

“What did you do?” She asked, sounding both angry and scared.

“I don’t know what you mean?” Cornelius began to sweat in fear and nervousness.

“You have power and spell markers all over you. You practically smell of strong magic.” Cornelius rubbed his hands over his body as if he could find and touch the offending particles.

“I was just doing some basic spell work.”

“That’s a load of bull and you know it, Cornelius. Simple spell work wouldn’t leave these types of residues.”

Cornelius sighed, “I was just doing some experimenting with spells to help me with my magic.”

Beira’s nose scrunched, “I believe you succeeded.” She sighed, “Go bathe, I’ll make sure to sneak you out some supper.”

Cornelius nodded, thankful that she had stopped him. Taking off down the hall and out of the Citadel through a side courtyard door at a run, Cornelius burned with nerves. He was now very worried about all the people who had seen him, and

whether or not they recognized him. If he was really as cloaked in power as Beira had said than he was right to worry about the exposure.

Cornelius took his time in the baths, scrubbing every inch of skin as many times as he could. This left himself raw, pink, and still worried about the particles of magic that might be stuck to him. Though it was not a day of prayer the tub of cleansing was open, as it always was for those who had the urge to pray. Cornelius entered the pool area to find it empty of even an attendant, that wasn't uncommon as this pool was generally kept in silence.

This new power that he had obtained was going to be a huge change for him. Cornelius frowned, he had to make sure that the Masters did not discover the radical change in his abilities. That meant that the first thing, above all else, that he needed to learn and master was the art of masking his aura. Auras seemed to work on a pretty typical fashion, kind of like a battery: it would show a certain color when 'fully charged' though that color changed upon how powerful that person was. The haze would then decrease in size and color depending on tired the person was. A weak magical signature, like what he started here with, would barely be glowing outside of his skin and a dark and murky brown color.

For his plan to work, for him to not become a target until he was stronger than the others around him, he needed to only let that first level show. He had a hard time seeing auras but he could take a guess and say that his color now probably was at a deep purple color and was glowing a sufficient distance from his body. He had been studying the methods of controlling his aura using the old magic scrolls that Master Gemena had him translating. Cornelius frowned in thought, there was a big

difference in studying magic from a couple hundred years old scroll and performing it yourself.

The scroll had given him a silly rhyme to recite, and Cornelius felt some trepidation to recite it for fear of losing his pride. He supposed he knew why they chose silly rhymes for certain spells, if it sounded silly no one would know it was real or take it seriously. His frown deepened; it didn't make him feel any better. Cornelius swam to the side and sat down on one of the small underwater ledges so that he wouldn't slip under and closed his eyes.

Doing the incantation in here would prove useful because, for one it would mask the magical properties of what was going to happen, as he wasn't quite sure what to expect, and it also gave him privacy. The stone walls of the baths echoed fiercely, thus he would be able to hear anyone that was coming his way. Cornelius breathed out in a controlled manner, squeezing every last bit of air from his lungs before refilling them in the same manner, only filling them completely to the top. He set to work now pulling back all of his loose bits and ends until they formed a tight ball at the core of his very being.

It felt like Cornelius was flicking a switch, in fact that is exactly what he imagined himself doing, and he opened his eyes to see a bright purple glow surrounding his skin. He turned his arms back and forth, fascinated by what he was seeing. Concentrating on that glow, Cornelius frowned, and a line creased his forehead.

*“Fire and commingle,
Toil and twain
Hide the light
Conceal the flame
Becloud.”*

Cornelius felt, rather than saw the build up of power and then his skin suddenly ceased to glow, he turned and stretched checking every inch to make sure that no part was still glowing. Suddenly fearful for his magic, Cornelius turned his gaze inside of himself. There, glowing and pulsing in pure power, was his core still healthy and intact. It looked, though he wasn't sure how he knew, stronger as though keeping the glow on the inside had made him stronger. Maybe it had, maybe keeping it inside kept it from flying away or drifting off like steam off of water.

This would work, and Cornelius would lead the way to fight whatever storm was coming. Taking a deep breath he plunged his head under water. The heat was refreshing and Cornelius let himself relax for the first time in a long time. It seemed as though he was always on guard, or always trying to find a way to get stronger. Here, in the bath, it was like he could forget that he was so far from home and so far from normalcy.

Cornelius let himself float and relax until he heard the bell signaling the end of supper. Sighing, he dunked himself under one more time, before gripping the edge of the stone bath and hoisting himself out of the tub with ease that he would not have had back in New York. After getting changed back into his clothes, Cornelius headed back to his room where he found Beira waiting for him.

Chapter 14: My Prince



“So, are you going to tell me what you were doing?”

Cornelius opened his door and let them in. He refrained from shutting it, for the door had to stay open due to their different sexes.

“I can’t tell you right now.” She pouted. “No, I really can’t this time. It is better that you don’t know so that if word ever gets out you have plausible deniability.”

She crossed her arms and thumped down onto the chair that was situated at the desk.

“That bad?”

He nodded. “You have no idea.”

She studied him, “But this will help you? You didn’t just do it for some trivial reason?”

“Would I ever do that?” Something about Cornelius’ too wide smile and doe eyed look made Beira frown at him.

“I don’t know, could it be all the things that you’ve done to Kiel and his group, that makes me not believe you?”

Cornelius laid a hand across his chest trying to act a player that had been wounded.

“Oh, Beira, how you wound me with your harsh criticisms. It is as though you don’t know me at all.”

“Or too well.” Beira muttered under her breath. Cornelius, having heard her gave her an even wider smile. The magi sighed and reached inside her tunic. She tossed him a bundle wrapped in one of the linen napkins from the dining hall. “And, you’re welcome, cheeky mister.”

Cornelius smiled grandly at her. “Cheeky am I?” He asked before launching himself across the room and tackling her out of her lofty perch on the chair. They grappled on the floor, each trying to gain purchase in order to tickle the other one. A fleeting wish passed through Cornelius’ mind that his sisters had been more like Beira.

“Oh, excuse me.”

The two on the floor looked up from their state and saw Sassandra standing at the door watching them with wide and timid eyes. Cornelius swallowed heavily and stood, bringing Beira up with him.

The two brushed themselves off whilst greeting their visitor.

“Sassandra, what are you doing here?” Cornelius asked, not impolitely.

“You never showed up today to work with Master Jaipur and myself.” She stated still sounding unsure of what she had walked in on.

Cornelius cursed internally, but wisely chose not to aloud, as Sassandra did not care for foul language, “I was caught up in work today. I completely forgot about everything else.”

She frowned at him, “I see.”

Silence settled over the room until Beira cleared her throat, “I have to go, Cornelius. I have extra math work to do, as punishment.”

Cornelius grinned at her, “You have to stop antagonizing the Master, you can’t win.”

Beira smiled as she exited that door and leveled a lofty wave at him. “I can always try. Real failure is giving up or not attempting to try.” With that she was gone and Cornelius and Sassandra were left standing in his room in awkward silence.

“Come in, sit.”

Cornelius gestured to the seat at his desk. As she sat Cornelius situated himself on the bed cross-legged and reached towards the bundle that Beira had tossed him. “I hope you don’t mind me eating, I have not had a meal of any sort since breakfast.”

Sassandra stared at him, “You really were working all day.” Her words sounded surprised and this made Cornelius pause seconds after untying the knot that held the linen together.

“Of course I was.” He said with an incredulous tone, “I wouldn’t lie to you.”

She looked down at her hands and Cornelius decided she needed a moment, and he needed some sustenance. Releasing the corners the makeshift bag opened revealing an apple, a block of cheese, a few small rolls and another cloth napkin surrounding a few sturdy pieces of ham. Saying a silent prayer of thanks to Beira, Cornelius tucked in with gusto. After his third bite of the apple Cornelius stopped chewing and swallowed. “Are you hungry?”

Sassandra looked up startled, “Oh, no. Please eat. I only came here after I saw that you were not at supper.”

Cornelius nodded, “I spent supper in the baths, I was covered in all sorts of things that I didn’t want people to see me covered in.” Cornelius chose his words very carefully. He always tried his hardest to be honest with Sassandra, though he couldn’t for the foggiest figure out why.

Sassandra stayed and chatted lightly with him about Citadel gossip, something that she knew he didn’t care much for, but participated in anyway. From this alone he could tell that she was distracted. He chose not to pry for the time being; after all it was none of his business and all of hers. When the bell chimed meaning it was soon to be bedtime Sassandra bid him good evening and departed.

Cornelius smiled as she left and started on his last bit of food, the ham that he had saved for a delicious ending, when there was a knock at his door. This time he could not bite back the groan. He really didn’t want to see any more people. He looked up and was surprised to see that it was an elf from his year.

He was tall and slender, blonde as opposed to Jaipur’s brunette, and his eyes

glittered like minted silver in a way that Cornelius' could never. He had his hair plated and held back away from his face, a fashion that was popular among the elven nobility. As far as he knew, the young man standing in front of him was Torreon, a third or fourth son to an elven king, which meant he would never achieve the throne, but had tremendous political power nonetheless.

“Good evening,” The prince said politely, hands clasped behind his back.

Cornelius bowed his head in greeting.

“Your Highness.”

Normally he wouldn't care about the political power of an elf, however, since the revelation that he was supposed to lead these people, he knew he had to start playing their game if only slightly. And, after all, the prince had never done anything to him, in fact, he acted as though Cornelius didn't exist.

In Cornelius' opinion there were three types of Initiates here. There was the group that hated him- made up of mostly elementals: Kiel, Ankara, Vaduz, Kiffa, and two elves by the names of Arak and Daloa. The next group was a group of neutrals: Gomel, Wien, Zinder, and Torreon- all magi except the elven prince. The last group was his 'friends or friendly' group, this was the smallest at Beira and Mardi, on occasions when they prayed together, he had gone back to that temple twice since the first time.

“May we close the door and speak privately?” Torreon asked in a smooth and polite tone leaving Cornelius no choice but to nod in agreement. Torreon closed the door himself, and took the liberty of taking Cornelius' desk chair and placing it at the edge of his bed where they could look at each other more easily. “Normally I do

not involve myself in whatever petty rivalries embark around here, however, I feel as though I must intervene now before things get out of hand.”

Cornelius felt chilled to the bone, Torreon knew. “The others who you fight with Kiel, Ankara, and Vaduz have concocted a scheme that will undoubtedly cause excessive harm, even permanent damage, if not counteracted. And you, I do not know what it is you did today, however when you passed me in the hall you absolutely reeked of magic.” Torreon frowned, “this battle will end. Now.”

Cornelius bristled slightly, he did not need this jumped up pretty boy commanding him like Cornelius was no better than an air headed child. Though, he couldn’t help but feel thankful for the warning.

“What I did has nothing to do with them.” Cornelius could see that Torreon doubted him and so he relented. “I performed a ritual that would allow my channels to be expanded. Humans do not have natural magical channels like other species do- we have to do rituals and spells and potions in order for our reserves to be accessible and releasable in controlled abilities.” Cornelius stood and went to where he kept his books, running a finger along the shelf he selected one and tossed it to Torreon. “Read this, then come back and speak to me.” Cornelius paused, “Do you know when they are planning to act?”

Torreon stared down at the book that had landed in his lap with thought, he shook his head, “I did not hear that, though I know that it is not for a small while, at least.”

Cornelius nodded, “Well, read this quickly and come back to me. Then we’ll discuss what the stupid brigade is doing.”

Torreon stared at Cornelius unabashed, “I do not believe many people speak that way to me. I cannot think that you’d be unaware of my status.”

Cornelius smirked at him before walking to the door and opening it for the prince, “It is in my humble opinion that when a person does not have at least one person who is willing to say what they think and talk back, then that person is without hope for developing normally. Good evening, Prince.” Cornelius waited with his head bowed, almost mockingly, until the prince stood and left.

Cornelius closed the door before anyone else could come and talk to him. He was hungry. Magical workings left a person wanting in the food department. Once finished with his meal Cornelius washed and then slept.

It was two days later when Torreon found him again; Cornelius had taken some time to sit in one of the towers and sketch using the art materials that he had taken with him from home. Cornelius did wonder how the prince had found him, but shrugged it off and continued to sketch and map the landscape. Torreon sat down beside Cornelius. The tower in which they sat was floor to ceiling windows and allowed for a full view of the countryside below.

“I read the book you lent me.” Torreon said at last.

Cornelius stayed silent; he felt neither the need nor the want to defend himself to this person who was deemed better than him just by winning the genetic lottery.

“I hadn’t realized.” He continued when it was clear that Cornelius would not respond to him. “I now understand that my first judgment was not entirely accurate and I owe you an apology.”

This made Cornelius’ hand still, the idea of one of these great magical beings

apologizing to him, a prince of all the people it could be, was both gratifying and shocking.

“Apology accepted.” Cornelius responded when he realized that he was supposed to respond, and he meant his words.

They sat in silence, though Cornelius knew that Torreon was studying him, “Maybe, I misjudged you, human.” He said with all the tone of a lazy nobleman’s son.

“Cornelius,” Cornelius said not looking up from his work.

“Beg pardon?” Torreon said having clearly not heard what Cornelius had stated.

“My name is Cornelius, not human. How would you like it if I called you, ‘elf’ all the time?”

There was a shocked pause as Torreon absorbed Cornelius’ disrespectful tone, “I suppose,” he supplied slowly, “that I deserved that. I apologize yet again, Cornelius.” He paused “It seems as though you have much to teach me on the subject of humans.”

“What makes you think that I will do that?” Cornelius asked smudging a section of charcoal so that the shadowing was more natural.

“Because I am willing to help you, and thus you should return the favor.”

Cornelius stayed silent for a long time, contemplating exactly what it was that he was agreeing to. This could mean many things for both of them, especially the repercussions. People would accuse him of corrupting the prince, and the prince would be accused of things far worse than that.

“I accept.” He said finally and put down his art book.

Torreon spared a glance down at the work and lifted a hand to touch it before removing it away after realizing he could damage the piece.

“You are quite the artist.” He said finally, voice mystified by the beauty of the piece, the trees and the rolling hilly landscape seemed as though he had simply just superimposed the surrounding land right into the paper.

Cornelius shrugged, “It has been the only thing that I have been able to do consistently well my entire life.”

“It shows,” Torreon murmured. “You could use this in magic, you know.”

Cornelius was startled and it showed, “How so?”

Torreon glanced at him, “You could put life into your drawings, and make them become real, or draw something into life on the page and it would show in the real world. It is a substantial form of magic, but if you were to master it, the results could be astronomical in what you could do.”

“I’ll think about it,” Cornelius said purposefully aloof. He wasn’t entire sure he wanted Torreon to know that he had spiked Cornelius’ interest.

“Do.”

Torreon stood and wiped off his clothing, though Cornelius was sure there wasn’t a lick of dust in this tower despite its disuse. “I believe I will be seeing you more often, Cornelius.” With that being said, Torreon turned and left without so much as a look back, something that he was sure the prince had practiced his room in front of a mirror. The effect was stunning.

This started what Cornelius wouldn’t call a friendship, or at least not at first.

The two young men began to work together both magically and physically. It was nice to have someone that Cornelius could work with that knew exactly what he had done. He didn't have to worry about someone heavily interrogating the prince, or forcing mind magic onto him and discovering the secret, no one would dare.

Chapter 15: Incessant Knocking



Torreon was especially helpful in the areas of horseback riding, history, and law. With the prince's help Cornelius now felt more assured in the saddle, if not actually confident. Today, though they were working on swordsmanship from horseback and Cornelius felt as if he had never handled a sword or horse before.

The two riders circled each other before swinging, Cornelius brought his sword up to block Torreon's hit, he missed and subsequently brought the flat of his sword down between Utica's ears. She reared, and Cornelius held on tightly so as to not fall off. When he finally got his horse under control he was met with raucous laughter that sounded more like some cackling bird than a person. It was Torreon, and Cornelius froze in shocked surprise, he didn't think that he had ever heard his peer laugh before.

“What’s so funny?”

Torreon lifted off his closed helm. His features looked completely different for two reasons, one was that his beautiful hair was covered by a cloth that was meant to protect the wearer from the inside of the helmet. The other and most striking difference was the look of undisclosed happiness.

“I must apologize, Cornelius. I mean no offense, however, you are truly clumsy with that sword.”

Cornelius studied the sword in his hand with a grimace, it was an old and dingy, barely scrap worthy piece of metal. The weight was off, the length was far too long for him, and the handle was meant for someone with larger hands than his.

“It’s one of swords that was in storage for public use. I have no sword of my own.”

Torreon stopped his chuckling and stared at Cornelius in surprise. “You do not have a blade of your own?”

Cornelius shook his head, feeling embarrassed. This was definitely a rich kid to poor kid conversation over the latest trends and fashions.

“We’ll have to sort this out, the trials will soon be upon us and we cannot have you doing battle without a loyal blade of your own.”

Cornelius shook his head, “I have no money to pay for a sword.”

“Master Ulrich was supposed to provide all necessary items at the beginning of your training, it is part of his charge as the leader of the Citadel.”

The frown that seemed permanently etched on Cornelius’ face deepened, this was yet another way that the Masters had failed him.

“I see. I believe that Master Ulrich has had much on his plate this year, and it must have slipped his mind.”

It was Torreon’s turn to frown. “Even so, he shouldn’t have let his duties go undone.”

If there was one thing that Cornelius had learned about his new companion, it was that the elf had an overwhelmingly naive sense of duty and honor. “Come, let us take care of our mounts and then we will see to you getting the proper equipment for the trials.”

Cornelius was unsure about his friend’s idea, however he chose not to show it. They rode from the field to the stables racing like the youths they so seldom forgot they were. There they watered and brushed down their mounts. Cornelius murmured praises and apologies to Utica for his clumsiness. She was a good match for him, he just wished that he could do better by her- she was a great horse and he was an average rider.

Cornelius met Torreon at the front of the stables and he followed the prince into the woods. They walked not in the direction of Barnaby’s house, but towards the deeper, darker, and untamed part. Cornelius had never ventured this far into the woods before. They walked in silence until Torreon started knocking on trees. Cornelius watched in a bemused fashion.

“Who are you, James Bond?” He asked shoving his hands into his belt, a sign of how at ease he was with the elf.

“James who?” Torreon asked and shook his head before moving on to the next tree and knocking again.

“James Bond- ah, never mind.”

These people didn't even know who James Bond was, if there was ever a sign he that was far from home.

“I know it is around here somewhere.” Torreon muttered softly and continued to move along trees knocking on each one and listening. Cornelius flinched at the sound and a memory flashed in his mind of the knocking under his floorboards that started this whole mess. With each new tree and each knock Cornelius flinched and drew himself in, making himself as small as possible.

That horrible knocking, that knocking ruined his life. The knocking continued until Cornelius couldn't stand it any longer. In a desperate attempt to block the sound he put his hands to his ears. His heart wrenched and his throat seemed to close. The bottom of his stomach dropped out- the knocking. He hated knocking now.

“Enough!” Cornelius voice cracked with despair. “Enough knocking!”

Cornelius fell to his knees and continued to hold his ears, “no, more knocking.” He repeated that phrase over and over again, though he had no conscious recollection of doing it. He watched that day over and over again, stuck in a memory. The fight in the alleyway, the hag, who he now knew was Quentine, coming home and hiding from his mother. And then that knocking, believing he was going on some great adventure. He went on an adventure all right, however he wasn't entirely sure if given the choice, he would have done it again. Every day was a torture and he was made to feel useless and ashamed of even being alive. There were some days that he longed for death, just so that he could have some relief.

He was being shook and Torreon was shouting. Cornelius finally remembered where he was and was able to see Torreon's face in front of his own.

"Cornelius!"

Cornelius blinked and gripped that arms that were shaking him.

"I'm here, I'm," He paused and took a slow breath, "I'm fine."

Torreon's beautiful face became marred by a frown, "I severely doubt that."

Cornelius pushed Torreon's arms away from him, "Leave me alone."

He stood unsteadily and pushed past the elf. Something hit him from behind- Torreon had tackled him. They grappled before Cornelius conceded to the superior physical strength of his partner.

"Tell me what is going on!"

Torreon sat on Cornelius and pinned his arms to the dirt. They were both sweaty and covered in mud from the recent rain.

Cornelius looked away. "Nothing." He said at last.

Torreon frowned and squeezed Cornelius' wrists tighter.

"Stop, you're hurting me!" Cornelius tried to fight back.

"And I'm not above hurting a little cry baby in order to get some answers."

"So, you're a bully." Anger burned in Cornelius' eyes, though Torreon didn't falter.

"No, there are just times when some things are more important. Figuring out why you reacted so strongly to some knocking is more important than a little momentarily pain for you. This is about your mental health."

Cornelius stared up at Torreon whose face was so stern, steady, and, most

alarmingly, concerned. He looked away again and traced his eyes along to where Torreon's hands gripped his wrists so tightly.

“The day that I was taken, I heard knocking.”

It was as though a flood gate had opened and Cornelius found himself explaining everything from his family to school, to Dirkson, and finally to the knocking and coming here and what his life had been like.

When he was finally finished Cornelius and Torreon sat on opposite sides of the same tree in silence.

“I never realized that we could be so,” Torreon paused, “cruel.” He said finally unable to come up with another word. “Cornelius, mark my words. When I become ruler, things will change.”

Cornelius turned his head and glanced around the tree. “You are a lesser son, you can't rule.”

Torreon shook his head. “We've been keeping it quiet, mother, father, and I. However, my brothers and sister before me have been deemed unfit to rule.” Cornelius slid around the tree after hearing the sheer amount of shame in Torreon's admission. “My siblings are good people, Cornelius, however- one can be a good person, and not a good ruler. I will inherit the throne, and then I will change things, I will change the laws.”

“You'll make a lot of enemies.” Cornelius warned, touched despite the silly notion of what Torreon was expressing.

“I would rather have enemies than rule over a kingdom that treats others in such inexcusable ways.” Torreon's voice was firm, and Cornelius found himself

actually believing him.

They sat for a long time before Torreon spoke, “You shouldn’t keep all your emotions bottled up like that, it is unhealthy. It will taint your magic and your control, having a temper also won’t help you in a fight.”

Cornelius shoved Torreon, “I can still beat you, though.”

Torreon laughed and stood, brushing off his clothing. He held out his hand to Cornelius. “In your dreams, human.”

Cornelius took his hand and pulled the elf back down into the dirt. “No, in my reality- elf.” They laughed, the gravity of the situation dissipating. “What have you been doing, by the way? Knocking on all the trees?”

Torreon stood. “There’s an entrance that I need to find, it is how we are going to get your weapons.”

Cornelius made an ‘ah’ sound and followed Torreon as he continued to knock on trees.

“How will you know when you’ve found it?”

Torreon knocked on another tree and made a sound of satisfaction.

“Like this.”

Cornelius leaned closer and listened as Torreon knocked again. The sound was hollow and metallic. Having found the correct tree, Torreon ran his hands up and down the body of it, pushing and feeling until he hit something and the side of the tree, a large one that Cornelius would not be able to grip even if three of him held hands to surround it, opened.

They looked down the shaft the opening revealed. It was dark and Cornelius

was not about to slide or fall down the chute.

“Princes first.”

Cornelius shoved Torreon and watched with humor as the prince fell into the hole, so much for elves being graceful. Pushing his unease away from him, Cornelius jumped in after his friend, and in the empty forest the doorway shut.

Cornelius landed on a just standing Torreon forcing them both back to the floor. They groaned and shoved the other with elbows and knees just trying to get away from one another. Torreon’s knee caught him in the chest, whilst Cornelius’ elbow hit Torreon’s collarbone and shoulder. They groaned more at these flares of pain, however they were eventually successful in separating themselves.

A sound made the two look up into several small swords and axes. Small men, and what Cornelius vaguely recognized as women made deep guttural noises that sounded a bit like a cross between German and Russian with a head cold. The same guttural sound came from Cornelius’ immediate left and he turned in surprise to see that it was Torreon.

Slowly the weapons lowered or were sheathed as Torreon seemed to introduce both himself and, Cornelius assumed, him. With hands up in surrender, Torreon slowly reached into a small bag that he kept on his belt and pulled out a long golden necklace on a chain with a circle of metal at the end of it. The whole thing glowed with power in Cornelius’ sight. He reached up and placed it gently over Cornelius’

head and suddenly he could understand what was being said.

“The agreement was for those of the royal family to use our services, not just anyone.”

One of the little people, dwarves Cornelius concluded said with authority that spoke of him being the leader of this small group.

“Of the royal family and their most trusted vassals.” Torreon corrected firmly but gently. “Sir Cornelius is one of my closest friends, as well as my sparing partner. I need my sparing partner properly attired for attack and defense.”

The dwarves argued and grumbled among each other before the small male spoke again. “We will lead you to his most royal highness, King Coxim, for him to decide what is truth and what is not.”

The dwarves started corralling Torreon and Cornelius into one of the shoots of tunnels that surrounded this cave like entrance room.

Now that Cornelius was given the time, without pain or threat of impalement, he was able to examine halls and tunnels, which he was walking through. It was apparent that these tunnels were highly trafficked. The ground and the walls were made of a deep rust colored stone that was lined with copper thread that shone brilliantly so as to compensate for the lack of actual lighting fixtures. Quite often there were shoots in either side of the tunnel that were darkened.

The lit area did not extend the whole hallway, it only lit the equivalence of a football field in either direction, then the light was gone. Magic, Cornelius realized with a start and reached a hand out to trace the wall. It was cool to the touch except for the veins of copper, which, as a whole, were a nice and gently warm feeling.

Every once in a while there would be a stone and metal arch that reached from floor to ceiling and wrapped around the hall. Upon approaching these arches the head dwarf would say something again in the deep guttural language and Cornelius felt magic flare.

“What is he doing?” Cornelius whispered to Torreon quietly, unable to take the confusion any longer after the fifth arch.

“He is expediting our progress. These tunnels extend for miles and miles; those arches bring us to other tunnels and cut off miles of walking. See, how he doesn’t always do it- not all archways lead to the same place.” Cornelius nodded intrigued by this system of travel.

The next arch brought them to a different type of tunnel. This one was more formal and much differently finished. The walls were plated with gems, most likely intending to show wealth. The floors were cobbled and well maintained with small patches of different colors that came from light shining through the jewels.

The hall opened up into a grand receiving room that had two large doors that seemed to span for three stories. The dwarf guards left them there with instructions to wait. Cornelius found a seat in a plush red armchair and enjoyed the heat from a large fireplace. It was so large that he could have stood in if he wanted to. The room was plush with large woven tapestries depicting battles and coronations; the jeweled look continued across the wall despite the threat of being tacky.

Torreon stood by the fire with his hands clasped behind him.

“You nervous?” Cornelius asked whilst putting his feet up on the footrest with a sigh. The merrily burning fire contrasted sharply with the prince’s taunt features.

The prince didn't respond and Cornelius snapped his fingers to get the other youths attention.

"You forced me to open up, the least you could do is return the favor." The prince sighed and sat down in the armchair next to Cornelius'.

"How would you feel if I said that I was nervous?"

Cornelius was silent for a few moments, mulling over responses, this would be a very important conversation for the two of them.

"I would say that it is smart of you."

"Smart?"

The response was startled, as though Torreon had expected some kind of harsh statement from Cornelius.

Cornelius nodded. "Only a fool goes into a situation blindly confident, you are being responsible by being nervous. It means that you're worrying about all the repercussions and weighing each option."

"I don't think I am doing all of that." Torreon said slowly.

"You are, not many people realize that worrying is a good thing- it means that you are paying attention and not taking situations needlessly light." Cornelius paused, "You are sitting there right now, going through every possible scenario you can think of, correct?" Torreon nodded in admission, "Then that means you are doing exactly what you are supposed to be doing."

"But what if I lead us astray?" Torreon asked sounding, for once, vulnerable.

Cornelius shrugged. "Then don't." He sounded completely serious and believing of his statement, as though it was the simplest and most obvious statement

in the world.

Torreon laughed, "I would have never guessed you had such a nature."

Cornelius made a face but was saved from responding by a short man with an impeccably groomed black beard with bright black eyes who was dressed richly in deep red fabric with silver linings.

"I am Hereford, I give you due greetings and hope for prosperity and prowess in your future." He bowed low enough that his nose touched the floor and stayed that way.

Torreon got to his feet and motioned for Cornelius to do the same, "I am Crown Prince Torreon Haylaan Sinjah Chiras the fourth of the Ayagoz Kingdom, I accept your greeting and return your hope of prosperity and prowess." Torreon bowed, though not as deeply as Hereford.

Torreon stuck a leg out and kicked Cornelius, who frowned and sighed, "I am Cornelius Favrik Henderson of Manhattan, New York City, New York." He strained his brain to copy the greetings that the other two had given, "I offer you prosperity and prowess." He bowed, not nearly enough, but the dwarf seemed to accept it.

"Well met, Crown Prince Torreon, Sir Cornelius." Hereford stood. "His most gracious majesty, King Coxim, will meet you now in the lesser chamber room."

Hereford turned and guided them not through the large doors, which must only be used for extremely important company or occasions, but through a smaller set of doors on the opposing wall that Cornelius had not noticed due to how dimly lit the room was.

They entered and walked down twisting hallways; twice Cornelius almost

stepped on Hereford, until finally they came to a door.

“Wait here, and I shall announce you.”

Hereford wasted no time and entered through the door and closed it with a decisive sound.

“You could have been more respectful.” Torreon said absently and didn’t respond to Cornelius rude come back, seemingly lost in thought or focused on what was to come.

Chapter 16: King Coxim



The door opened and Cornelius and Torreon stepped through. Suddenly Cornelius realized how they must look, torn up and covered in mud from their sprawl. With a twitch of his fingers Cornelius' magic flared momentarily and then he was feeling decidedly clean and mud free, even from within his shoe, where he was sure it would never get clean again.

Swords and spears were leveled at his throat.

“What did you do?” Torreon asked fearfully, and not without anger.

Cornelius glanced around hands raised, “I simply wanted us to be clean for this audience.”

There was a bark of laughter, “Young one, performing magic, even as slight as that in the presence of a king is not taken well.”

The laughter and statement came from a man sitting on a large stone throne. He was short and stocky, a true specimen of dwarfhood. His hair was a deep copper red that gleamed despite the low lighting, his eyes were a surprising blue and glittered like gems themselves. His beard was perfectly maintained and braided, though his clothes were relatively plain- though any could tell that they were expensive. They were silver and a dark blue in color and seemed to be made out of fine velvet.

“I just didn’t want us to look trashy in front of you, “ Cornelius paused and then added hastily, “my lord.”

Another bark of laughter and King Coxim waved his hand as a sign for the guards to let them go. He stood up off of the throne and came down the steps with an intensely curious look on his face.

“A real human.”

He seemed mystified and circled Cornelius. “Here on Alytaus.” Finally the king reached forward and slapped him on the back heartily, almost knocking Cornelius over. “Well met! How are the prissy boys upstairs treating you?” He asked not unkindly, sparing a glance over at Torreon, “No offense intended, highness.”

Torreon shook his head. “None taken, your majesty.”

Cornelius frowned, unsure of what to say, “That is my own business.” He said finally at the risk of offending his host.

“Indeed it is! Well met, well met again young human. It is good to be guarded, especially in these times.”

Cornelius wanted to asked what exactly ‘these times’ meant, but could not

bring himself to do so. King Coxim went back to his throne and sat. “Why have you come to my kingdom?” He asked, though he undoubtedly knew.

“Sir Cornelius does not have proper armament meant for someone of the Initiate status.” Torreon paused, obviously ashamed, “I do not trust the masters to do well by him in these respects.”

King Coxim’s eyes were not unkind, “I see your dilemma. There are not many people here who would take kindly to our Cornelius here.” He turned his eyes to Cornelius and looked him up and down, “I like your spirit, Cornelius.” He stood and made his way back to Cornelius where he started circling again. “You have a great deal of power, though you’ve managed to hide it quite successfully.”

King Coxim held out his hands to Cornelius. “May I?” Cornelius hesitated before placing his hands in the king’s. They both gasped as Coxim ran through Cornelius’ memories, searching for seeds of betrayal or ill intent. It seemed as though an eternity passed before they released each other’s hands and stared at each other, panting.

“You are chosen.”

Coxim stared at Cornelius in a new light. “Szun-da-klyn.” The king murmured so that no one would hear but the two of them.

“I don’t know what that means.” Cornelius was frightened.

King Coxim shook his head, “I cannot tell you, for it is not my right. However, there is a short time between now and the trial, so you will find out soon.” Cornelius nodded his head; it wasn’t as though he could argue with the king. “We will provide him with all the armor and weaponry he will need. It would be an honor.” Their eyes

met and Cornelius though still concerned, found himself able to relax slightly in the gaze of this benevolent ruler.

The room was silent over the King's statement and Cornelius felt immediately uncomfortable with the stares, especially from Torreon. The king clapped his hands twice and side doors opened to reveal more dwarves.

"See to it that the forges are lit and hot- we've a very special order to make." The reaction was instantaneous, movement and sound filled the hall and Cornelius found himself grabbed, poked, measured, and all other things he didn't particularly want to think about.

Cornelius and Torreon found themselves being corralled down hallway after hallway by incessantly chatting dwarves. The chatter and noise was relentless until finally the two were left alone in a comfortably furnished common room. A tray had been set on the table. The tray was filled with many foods and two large goblets that smelled an awful lot like beer but looked an awful lot like grits. Cornelius experimentally stuck a finger in it and saw the top layer of grits give way and show a cloudy yellow gold liquid underneath.

"What is it?" He asked Torreon with no small amount of wonder and concern.

"Mead." Torreon replied, with laughter clearly evident in his voice. He picked up his goblet and took a small sip, he sighed contently then spoke, "Dwarven Mead." He made a sound of enjoyment and satisfaction. "Taste it, Cornelius. There's lemon and honey in it."

Cornelius picked up his goblet and relished in how smooth they had gotten the stone to be. The silver grey stone seemed almost soft and Cornelius squeezed it

experimentally, there was no give. Lifting the liquid to his nose he sniffed lightly at first and then heavily. With a shrug he took a small sip and choked slightly. It was nothing that he had ever drunk before, the taste of alcohol was still there- but it was sweet and yet also bitter and tart.

He took a deeper sip. "This is very good." He said at last.

Torreon took a deep gulp of his and they grinned at each other before tapping the two stone orifices together. They both took deep draws and smiled more widely than before. The goblets, they would discover, would refill themselves once empty and if there was still a need. They ate and drank; Torreon refused to touch the meat, which was just fine for Cornelius because no one spiced the large turkey drum legs like the dwarves.

King Coxim came into the room after what seemed like a short time, but rather it had been hours. He watched the two young men from his spot at the door with nothing short of good-natured amusement. They had clearly drunk more than they normally would- something that was not uncommon when one does not have dwarven mead often.

"Hello boys!" He said grandly and clapped them upon the shoulders once he had reached them.

The king liked both of them, Cornelius for all of his wild and untamed passion and power. Once Cornelius was able to control his temper and once he was able to find the time to examine all of his options, he would be a worthy ally. The elven boy, on the other hand, the king wanted to study more.

Elves and dwarves did not get along as a rule. They had had a falling out a

long time ago, longer than any single dwarf or elf could remember. The prince seemed as though to be decent in more of a way than his parents and the rest of his kind were. His parents were good people, however the crown prince seemed to have more good-natured, natural well being. He could, very likely, rule and help the two races end the divide.

The elf in question sobered up upon realizing that the king was there.

“Your highness.” He said stiffly and stood. Cornelius just watched him, undoubtedly unused to the effects of alcohol.

“Sit.”

The King commanded firmly but gently. He turned an eye to the young princeling.

“Cornelius here seems to have trouble getting up and it would be rude to have him the only one not standing.” Torreon nodded, seemingly relieved and sat down on the bench at the table next to his friend. “You will stay here tonight. Neither of you are in any shape to travel nor, I’m afraid, do I want my men getting closer to the Citadel than necessary.”

Torreon wanted to protest, however a snore from Cornelius, his head firmly planted on the table, stopped him. They would take the punishment the Masters would hand out, however the king was correct- they should stay.

Torreon nodded. “We humbly accept your offered shelter for the evening.”

“Good, we will see about getting you two into some comfortable chambers and some properly fitted night clothes.”

Torreon nodded and then stood. He stretched to work out the stiffness in his

back before moving to pick up Cornelius.

“Do not worry yourself with him.” The king murmured softly, though he needn’t worry- Cornelius was not going to wake any time soon. The dwarven king whispered something Torreon could not hear, pinched his fingers and blew past them at Cornelius. There was a moment of stilled silence and then Cornelius’ body floated seamlessly out of the chair. “Come, follow me.”

Torreon followed the king out into the hall, being careful not to let the chamber door close on his floating companion. Catching up with the king they walked in silence through the copper lit hallways of the inner sanctum.

“Why have you been so kind to us?” Torreon asked when he found he could not bear not knowing the answer. “I am an elf, and he a human.”

“You will one day rule your kingdom.” The king said simply and brushed off Torreon’s sputtered questions for how the king knew. “Kings talk to one another. It is only right that I be informed of he who will one day effect my people so greatly.”

The king glanced at Torreon from out of the corner of his eye, “I am nice to you because I believe that you and I can lead our people into peaceful times. Our societies can gain much from each other, and I will see to it that I will leave a peaceful and whole world for my heirs.

“The boy on the other hand.” The king was quiet for a few moments before speaking, “That boy there will change the course of the history in such very important ways. Dark days are coming and it has been foreseen that he shall lead us and defend us- save us from ourselves and from the forces that would seek to destroy all living creatures.”

“There is a great darkness coming?” Torreon asked fearfully clenching and unclenching his fists. “Do the Masters know?”

King Coxim shrugged, “I have no doubt that they know that something is coming. However, they believe too much in their own myth to properly prepare for it.”

Torreon opened his mouth to protest that the king’s statement was too harsh, however he closed his mouth. The Masters had already proven to him that they had let prejudice and hatred blind them.

“We will help Cornelius in all his needs because he is our best hope at surviving the coming storm. Without him.” The king let his statement hang in the air, not needing any more elaboration.

Torreon understood that the king believed that his friend, he glanced back at the drunkenly sleeping youth, was to be a great hero. He didn’t have a problem believing that idea. Hadn’t he seen that upon his first contact with the boy? King Coxim’s words soothed a small part of Torreon that had been worried, nonetheless, about his association with the human and what it meant for him.

The King put Torreon in the green chambers, and Torreon graciously accepted. Since he was not there on formal business there was no need for him to be staying in the usual chambers reserved for visiting royalty. These chambers contained a beautifully stone carved bed with deep green velvet covers that warmed the elf considerably. Some lamented that dwarven chambers were often drafty, and Torreon agreed.

He removed his clothing and placed it on the floor outside of his door, they

would be washed and returned to him by morning. Going to the wardrobe he opened it and found simple grey sleeping gowns that his to his height perfectly. “Enchanted wardrobe.” He murmured before changing and entering the bed.

They would take whatever punishment was coming to them, though he knew that Cornelius’ would be much more harsh. He was now more certain than ever, despite his earlier trepidation, that bringing Cornelius to the dwarves had been the right decision, and, now he knew more about his friend. This would be good, having the dwarves as allies and having the prophesied champion as his companion would spell good things for the young prince, and he in turn would do well by them.

Torreon clapped his hands twice and the copper that had illuminated the chambers ceased to glow. Closing his eyes the prince slipped into the half sleep that elves accustomed themselves to sleeping as. An elf very rarely had to truly sleep, and when they did they slept in a special chamber bed that was covered with a shimmering golden noncorporeal shield of protection and nutrition.

Cornelius opened his eyes and groaned as light invaded them harshly. Though he had never experienced a hang over himself, he was not unaccustomed to the description of one. The sensitivity to light- sound; he cringed as something made a noise in the hall. Licking his lips, Cornelius found that his mouth was dry and tasted horribly. He opened his eyes more fully and was surprised to find that he was not in the Citadel, as he expected, but in a bedchamber that he did not recognize. Thinking back, Cornelius remembered sparring with Torreon, then the walk through the

woods- the knocking, and suddenly everything rushed at him.

“Dwarves.”

There was fantastic wonder in his voice. Most of the scrolls that he had translated spoke of the extinction of the feeble race of the dwarves. From what he had seen, that was anything but the case. Cornelius sat up and glanced down as the covers fell away and saw that he was not in the clothes he had been wearing the day before. Instead he was in a white sleeping gown. Cornelius made a face; he tried to avoid wearing a nighty at all cost.

He stood out of the bed and went in search of his clothes; he found them folded nicely and clean outside of his door. After getting dressed Cornelius exited the room and closed the door softly behind him as the hallways tended to echo. A throat cleared behind him and Cornelius jumped, seeing that it was Hereford, he relaxed.

“I am to lead you to the private dining room. You will dining this morning with his royal majesty, King Coxim.”

Cornelius nodded and followed, what else was he supposed to do, defy the king? He didn't really want to meet up with him, not that he didn't like the dwarf, he just didn't feel like meeting a small man with an abnormally large booming voice, that Cornelius was sure would split his skull today. Cornelius chose to stay silent, it might be the only peace his head would have all day.

It did not take too long before they reached the double doors of wood, stone, and gold that lead into the smaller private dining room.

Hereford bowed and pushed the door open with a large calloused hand.

Cornelius nodded his thanks and entered a small stone chamber with a copper colored and flame lit chandelier hanging over a flat, but still jewel encrusted round table. The table had eight high back chairs and sitting in four of them were two people Cornelius recognized and two people that he didn't.

One was a woman with a round faced and thick heavily braided hair; she was slightly heavy set in her russet colored dress. The other was a small boy with the same colored hair as the woman and a button nose. He smiled widely at Cornelius showing two missing front teeth. The other two Cornelius smiled and nodded his head to, they were Torreon and King Coxim.

“Morning Cornelius!”

King Coxim pounded his fist on the table, which made the plates and goblets to jump from the force. The king made quick work of introducing his wife, Corvallis and his son Girard. There were other royal children, however Girard was the heir and eldest- the other children were already with their nursemaids.

Breakfast was a quiet affair, with Cornelius sitting next to Torreon and across from Girard. It was obvious that the small youth wanted to ask questions of the human. It was unlikely that someone so young had ever met anyone who wasn't a dwarf, however the boy was exceptionally well behaved. Breakfast ended and King Coxim himself escorted Torreon and Cornelius to the chamber that they had originally entered in via their drop.

“Now, Cornelius. You will need to return three more times before what we have for you will be finished.”

“How will I know when to come?” Cornelius asked.

“Oh,” Cornelius wasn’t sure if he liked the smile that the king was giving him.
“You’ll be informed.”

They bid their goodbyes and King Coxim whispered something that Cornelius couldn’t quite catch, though he felt the results. They were shot up the tube and Cornelius felt the squeeze and pressure of their unnatural speed and descent.

The two Initiates were subsequently tossed up and out of the tree in a heap that was much like the one that they had found themselves in yesterday. They untangled themselves with the same amount of grace as the last time and started their walk back towards the Citadel.

When the pair finally reached the break of trees they stood and stared at the tall towers and dark stone in the distance.

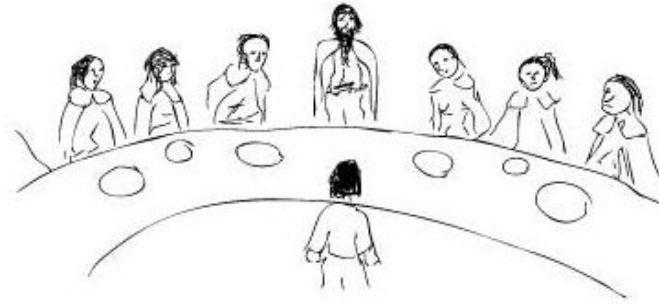
“Are you ready?” Torreon asked a nervous tone in his voice.

Cornelius shrugged, “They hate me anyway, this is just giving them an excuse to hate me more openly.”

Torreon laughed and clasped his hands on his friend’s shoulders and shoved him forward, “Then you wouldn’t mind leading us to our doom, oh fearless leader.”

Cornelius took a swipe at Torreon, but otherwise kept walking. A part of him wondered if he should just let Torreon go in first so that his disappearance wouldn’t be associated with him and the elf would get in less trouble. Torreon would never let that kind of thing happen though, chivalrous bastard.

Chapter 17: Punishment and Council



“Missing for hours.”

The lecture continued in front of the council of Masters. Cornelius stared down at his shoes. Nothing that he could say at this moment would make things better, so he thought it best not to agitate the Masters. Apparently it was unheard of for Initiates to go missing without warning. He scoffed internally at the notion, these kinds of things most likely happened all the time and there was only such a large hype about it because the human was involved.

In the end Torreon was dismissed with three bells worth of work and confinement to the grounds for a month. He tried valiantly to stay with Cornelius, stating that the disappearance was his idea. The prince insisted that Cornelius could not disobey his wishes due to the differences in social standing. The Masters informed Torreon that he was nothing but an Initiate here and that his superior social rank did not exist at the Citadel.

Thus it came to be that Cornelius found himself standing before the council

alone. Once Torreon had left Cornelius made the decision to defiantly meet the eyes of the council. They couldn't kick him out, and it was unlikely that they would enforce physical punishment on him- so it was looking like more duties and that Cornelius could handle with a strong chin.

“Human.”

Ulrich leaned forward and pressed his fingers together. “I have heard nothing but poor things about you from the other Masters. You are rude, impertinent, and do nothing but disrespect your teachers. Now you have gone and corrupted our prince. We've let you play Initiate for long enough, one more mishap- one more single step out of line and you will wish that we could disbar you from this order. You will wish yourself dead.” The last sentence was said so slowly and with such weighted deliberance that Cornelius felt a shiver run down his spine.

“You will no longer associate yourself with the prince, nor any other Initiate less they tarnish under your taint. You will remain silent in all classes and you will report to the servants chambers during your free time so as to not disturb those who are truly studying and working.”

Ulrich caught and held Cornelius' eye. “You are nothing but a turd, a stain on the history of this prestigious tradition and order. You are nothing, and will never be anything but a worthless little weakling scoundrel who does nothing but suck the life and goodness out of those around him.” By the end of his speech Ulrich was shouting and slammed his fist down onto the great stone table.

“No.”

Cornelius shook his head, “I am a better person than you are because I believe

in the good of all people and I believe in the balance. Being evil is just as natural as being good and it is obvious sir that you have both in abundance. I have no doubt that you were once a good leader, however time has tarnished your judgment and I am afraid that time will in turn judge you and find you unfit.”

Cornelius’ head whipped to the side as Ulrich, who had come around the table, slapped him.

“Insolence!”

“No, sir. Merely stating an observation.” Ulrich’s face turned blue with uncontrollable anger. He hit Cornelius again and again. Cornelius dared not lift a hand against the leader of the order. He did not cry out as the beating became more forceful, he would never give him the satisfaction.

Cornelius knew that none of the Masters could speak out, and he sincerely wished that they wouldn’t. He couldn’t lose his allies in Arlit and Jaipur and the two would be forced to leave should they try to stop what was happening.

“You shouldn’t have done that.”

Sassandra’s voice was stern and more distinctively concerned. She and Jaipur were tending to his wounds later in the evening. He had been beaten within an inch of his life, and definitely felt like it.

“Why did you antagonize him?” Something wet hit his arm and Cornelius realized that she was crying.

*“In the fell clutch of circumstance
I have not winced, nor cried aloud.
Under the bludgeonings of chance
My head is bloody but unbowed.”*

Cornelius recited from memory. He winced as the solution stung in his scalp. It was a poem that he had always enjoyed for its power and presence, and at this moment he found it quite fitting.

*“It matters not how straight the gate,
How charged with punishments the scroll.
I am the master of my fate;
I am the captain of my soul.”*

Sassandra sniffed and put the soggy cotton ball back in the tray of cleaning solution.

“Whoever spoke such nonsense was a fool. You can’t be captain of your fate if you are dead- which you could very well had been and rightly deserved it. You knew exactly what you were starting- you antagonized him.”

“William Ernest Henley,” Cornelius answered, “And the poem is right. I will be strong and persevere despite the will of my adversaries. Further,” he met her eyes firmly, “I will do more than survive- I will lead and triumph.” Cornelius caught her hand, “I needed to show the world how cruel he is, they needn’t follow him any longer.”

Sassandra stared at him, clearly frightened. “You speak of treason, and I will not hear of it.” Wrenching her hand from Cornelius’ grasp, she turned and fled the room without a backward glance.

Cornelius found himself staring at the space she had so recently vacated, and

his heart ached. While his words to Ulrich weren't very smart- he felt as though they had to be spoken. If he was going to lead these people, the first thing that he had to do was put a seed of doubt into their minds. They had to realize that something was wrong with the current administration. He knew that all of the Masters couldn't have been okay with what they witnessed tonight, and if he played his cards correctly, he could take these key players right from Ulrich.

“I'm afraid she's correct.”

Jaipur stood in the door with an odd expression on his face. “Ulrich will always rule here, and anything spoken of something other than this reality is treason.”

“He doesn't have to stay there!” Cornelius exclaimed frustrated.

Jaipur frowned and didn't respond, he simply cleaned Corenius' wounds and bound them. He sent Cornelius back to his rooms without much more conversation. Cornelius slammed through his door upon arrival and stopped short upon seeing Barnaby sitting on his bed.

“What do you want, old man?” Cornelius inquired bitterly, throwing his ruined tunic to a corner and heading to his dresser.

“I don't know what game you are playing, Cornelius, however, whatever it is, it is dangerous- undoubtably you have noticed.” Cornelius grabbed a tunic and replaced it onto his body. He shoved the drawer closed with more force than necessary.

“I am supposed to lead, and if I am to lead I need to debunk the former leader.”

Barnaby sighed and ran a hand over his face and through his hair with

emotion.

“That is not for you to do, the only thing that can remove Ulrich from his place of power is divine right or the relinquish of calling from his dragon.”

Cornelius came and sat next to him on the bed in silence. How did no one see his plan? The reactions that he had received made him doubt that his actions were the right ones. They sat in silence each lost in their own thoughts, Barnaby for peace and for his wife. Cornelius for his future and for the future of those whose lives were held steadily in his hands.

The door opened and Cornelius looked up to find himself alone on his bed and both Beira and Arlit in the doorway.

“That was the most deliberate example of stupidity I had ever hoped or not hoped to see.” Arlit’s words were bitter and angry. They closed the door. “I know why you did it,” she continued, “but I feel as though while your wants for outcome are just and true- I must protest to your methods.”

Beira stayed quiet though Cornelius found her standing in front of him with a hand held up to his face, yet not touching- something that he was thankful for in his sore state.

“Beira.” He said quietly, “I’m,” he paused, unsure, “I’m sorry.” She didn’t answer and he was thankful, he wasn’t sure he could take losing her as well.

The three spoke long into the night of the repercussions of his actions, and what it meant for those who cared for him. They concluded that it would be best if Cornelius was not seen too often with either Arlit or Beira. They would not abandon him completely, however they did need to distance themselves from him for self-

preservation.

Cornelius agreed with the idea and did not think of it as fair-weather friendship. Rather he realized that this was war at the Citadel and in order for them to come out on top, they needed to each survive to further their cause and that sometimes that meant separation in order to divide and conquer.

And so it was that Cornelius scarcely saw the people that he could consider his allies. He spent the next two weeks working with the servants preparing the Citadel and surrounding areas for the trials, which would take place in just two months. The trials were something that Cornelius was looking forward to, thus he didn't much mind working to prepare everything for it.

The trials were a series of skill and power showing competitions, which would signify the end of the first year of training. These would decide who ranked where in the Initiates, and more importantly their elemental powers and stones. There were four major elemental powers, fire, water, wind, and earth. Cornelius foresaw himself having the gift of fire, however those who weren't born an elemental couldn't tell without having the power unlocked in a ceremony.

As for the rank in class, Cornelius wasn't quite sure where he would rank. They weren't allowed to directly compete against each other for this first series of trials with the exception of swordsmanship. The real competition would happen at the end of the following year. This time around they would be competing merely against norms and standards. Each competition took place behind glamour's and clothes that would hide the identity of the competitor. For this, Cornelius was thankful, with all the precautions against bias he had a real and fair chance at being

ranked normally.

The trial itself took place in the old ruins of the coliseum. They would add a large tented dome over the top to seal in excess power. Cornelius thought that the design looked like a flower- which he supposed was intended to represent life. He didn't really like the idea of competing in due battle in a pansy.

Cornelius would not be meeting his dragon yet, that would again take place at the end of his second year, however Cornelius did hope that he could meet his partner before leaving. Once finding out which elemental power he controlled, Cornelius would be sent to live in a village of magic and elemental users who would instruct him and help Cornelius master his element. Each Initiate was sent to a different village and Cornelius was relieved on two levels.

The first level was that he would not have to deal with any of the Initiates, though he would miss Beira and Torreon. He looked forward to being able to work in peace without any of these people who put him down or treat him unfairly. The second thing that he was looking forward to was the villages and villagers themselves. The places where they were sent weren't villages of elves, elementals, magi, or anything along those lines. These villages were made up of creatures that were so mixed race that it was hard to tell what they were anymore, though one thing was for certain- most if not all of them, had human blood in there somewhere.

Cornelius was slightly unsure of how these mixed races would treat him, however he was sure it would be better than what he was facing at the Citadel. He would go there and learn and cherish the time of being away, and then most likely crash and burn a little upon returning to this oppressive atmosphere. It was a

depressing thought, though Cornelius wasn't going to spare himself any passing fancy that he was going to take going back down on the totem pole very well.

Cornelius tied off the string of the embroidered tunic that he had been working on. All the Initiates would wear plain undyed cotton. Everything was completely bare and raw except for around the neck, where in a series of swirls, what he thought of as squiggles, which represented the tree of life. The tree of life here meant the cycle of life and rebirth, and that was what the Initiates were entering. It was something that Cornelius could get behind, and he did. The embroidery was done in white and would color upon the elemental ceremony.

The stones also held most of Cornelius' interest. There were hundreds of stones and each held a distinct power and master. It was said that each stone had but one master, and that master continuously gets reborn into a different body. There were stones of different and varying levels of power and prestige, but none more than the Szun stone. Torreon would be a good match for the stone, as royalty yet, Cornelius felt a small portion of him cry out in protest of anyone getting that stone, but him. Time would tell and right now Cornelius needed to go and polish the alter ornaments for the services the following evening. Cornelius would not be attending, as it was a Barnaby weekend, for which he was thankful.

Cornelius returned to his room and found the place in a messier disarray than he had left it. Sleeping on his bed was a brown almost russet colored fox and Cornelius felt a twinge of annoyance.

"Scat." He commanded forcefully, waking the fox and pointing towards the open door. The beast stared at him almost mockingly before stretching and sitting.

They locked eyes for a battle of wills, Cornelius blinked when the small creature yawned widely and jumped off the bed to vanish out the door.

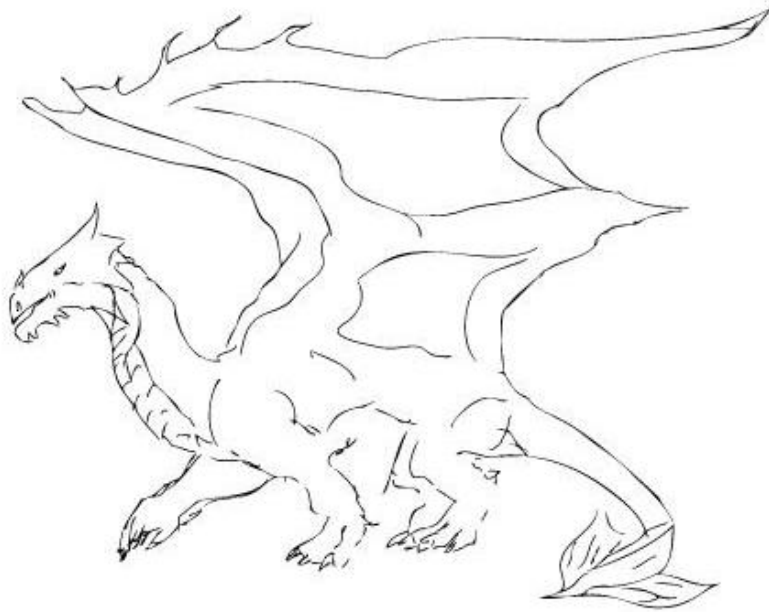
On the bed lay a small sealed scroll that looked perfect despite being crushed under the animal's sleeping form. Cornelius closed the door cautiously and cleaned up the mess somewhat all the while keeping an eye on the scroll. Finally, when he could not avoid the subject any longer he picked up the scroll and opened it.

'Cornelius,

We require your presence to continue with our makings and havings. Please come via the entrance you came through before at midnight tonight, bring the elfling.

C'

Chapter 18: Deceit



Cornelius read the note many times over before nodding and tucking it into his belt loop. He needed to speak to Torreon. The message obviously came from King Coxim, and if they were indeed going to go tonight preparations had to be made. He quickly left his quarters and sketched a note in a small scrap of paper from one of the pouches that he kept hanging off of his belt. Slipping it under the Prince's door Cornelius went back to his room to prepare for this evening.

He would need to imbue something in his room with enough power that if anyone came by they would think he was in there. He spent most of the evening working until a knock sounded at his door.

Focused on his work Cornelius waved his hand and the lock popped and swung open. Torreon entered looking perplexed.

“Did you just open that from your seat?” He asked in wonder, closing the door behind him.

Cornelius bit his lip in concentration, but nodded nonetheless. He had created a doll no larger than his forearm and was now slowly dripping his power into it so as to not overload and explode the mockrim. A mockrim was a physical representation of the person whose form and power could be manipulated by the maker. In this case Cornelius would expand and put the doll in his bed to take his place.

Torreon peered over Cornelius shoulder and exclaimed over the fact that Cornelius had been able to make a stable and functional mockrim. Once it was established that Cornelius had indeed done it and why he did it, Torreon was more than willing to help. Whilst they worked Cornelius explained the letter and what it meant. The two finished the preparations and headed out.

This visit was much different with Cornelius and Torreon working hard with magic and the dwarves to create a series of armors and weapons that Cornelius could always rely on. They were able to work on the pieces and return before anyone realized that they had left, and bid each other a sleepy goodbye.

This happened two more times over the course of the next two months and soon the time of the trials was upon the Citadel. Cornelius was studying in his room when Beira knocked on his door and entered excitedly.

“The trials are in a week, and I’m excited.” She proclaimed plopping on his bed.

“You aren’t afraid?” He asked her absently as he studied a particularly interesting spell that induced waterspouts.

Beira shook her head. “Not at all.” She paused. “Alright, maybe slightly, but not enough to really worried.”

Cornelius made a noise of agreement and tabbed the page he was working on before closing the book. “I’m just glad that they are going to be fair and impartial trials.” He said turning in his seat to face her.

Beira nodded, a small frown marring her features, “They had better be as unbiased as you hope they are, or there will be repercussions.”

Cornelius made a curious noise and hand motioned for her to continue.

“The only ones who can effect the outcomes are the ancients, the dragons themselves. Anything other than their interference would lend to horrible results for the doers.”

Cornelius nodded and almost wished someone would try, in fact he dared them.

“Look, friends. A human thinks that he is going to the trials.”

Kiel’s voice behind Cornelius made him stop short and turn, Kiel and most of his group was standing behind Cornelius.

It was the morning of the trials and Cornelius had run back to his room to get his weapons that he had received from the dwarves only the day before. Luckily, he had not gotten to them yet and was just beyond the stables, out of the sight of most of the Citadel.

“Stay back, Kiel. I’m allowed into the trials just as you are.” Cornelius

warned.

Kiel looked like he was thinking, “Um, no. I do not believe that to be true, I believe that you should not even be allowed to be here- let alone make a mockery of our most prestigious moment.”

Hands gripped Cornelius’ shoulder and wrenched them back. His arms and shoulders screamed with a burning pain and Cornelius cursed his inability to watch his back at times. He had allowed Kiel and his temper to distract him from those sneaking up behind him. Something was forced to Cornelius’ mouth and despite his best effort to fight, Cornelius ended up swallowing whatever it was.

Now it was more than his back that was screaming. They must have let him go because Cornelius found himself on the ground and he gripped at the dirt in a desperate attempt to stop the pain or find anything to focus on that wasn’t his blood boiling in his veins.

“Now, we can’t outright kill you.”

Kiel’s voice was next to Cornelius’ head and he wished he could do something to take the smugness out of his tone. His voice held such unabashed cruelty that Cornelius closed his eyes.

“You and all of your kind will suffer for their treason against all the other races. You most of all, coming here as though you belong. You walk around like you’re a god. You are nothing.”

Cornelius heard laughing and then he was alone. He wanted to scream but found he couldn’t do anything, the earth swam in front of his face and he wanted to die more than he wanted anything ever. Cornelius closed his eyes and gave up.

He opened his eyes and found himself in his room in the Citadel. The pain was unbearable, however Cornelius found himself staring into the bed level eyes of bright black.

“Hereford.” He rasped out.

“I am sorry, Cornelius. We wanted to go to you, however we had strict orders to not interfere with the Initiates, only the Masters.”

Cornelius could not blame the dwarves; they had stayed hidden for so long, he couldn’t expect them to come out now. “The King cannot come, but he has had us watching over you to keep you safe.” Hereford’s eyes welled up with unshed tears.

“We have failed you.”

Cornelius found himself wanting to comfort the poor little man, however he did not have the strength.

The dark voice was back, coaxing him to sleep. He wanted to give up. He had been poisoned by those who were supposed to be his comrades. He couldn’t reach his magic- any of it. He thought that separating it would work, but it as though there was a wall separating his core from him. He felt something crawl up his arms. It was black like death and soothing like the voice he had been hearing. It was suffocating him and Cornelius chose not to fight, they didn’t need him. No one did.

“Cornelius.”

His eyes snapped open. The black thing was gone. The pain was still there but he was no longer dying. It was Margaret, though he could not see her.

“Come outside Cornelius.”

Cornelius’ hand struck out weakly and caught the edge of the bed.

“Outside.” He told Hereford weakly. “Get me, outside.”

Hereford protested, however when Cornelius refused to say anything but that phrase, almost as though he was possessed and chanting a mantra, did the dwarf do as he was bid.

He levitated the nearly pain driven delirious human out of the bed and down the hall, down the stairs, and continually slow and hidden from all those who would make them stop and question.

Margaret kept contact with Cornelius, feeding him directions until they had finally reached the Temple of Pagonne. The bright light temporarily blinded him and he breathed out.

“Margaret”.

The light cleared and even through the pain Cornelius sucked in his breath. In front of him was the most beautiful and majestic creature he had ever seen.

“I knew it.”

He murmured to himself as he gazed upon the large pearl-scaled dragon who measured sixteen feet from snout to backside and then another ten feet for tail. Her powerful hindquarters rippled with fury at the state of the human before her.

“I am sorry to have fooled you, Cornelius.”

She said regretfully as Hereford lowered him to the floor of the temple gently.

Cornelius tried to answer, however a large surge of pain ran through him like a heated wire, he gasped out. The pain was gone, instantly as though it had never been there. Margaret had breathed upon him and with the magic that she possessed his pain had receded and vanished.

“Malaryte.”

Cornelius didn't know how he knew her real name. He smiled at her, “and you let me call you Margaret all this time.”

She smiled, showing all of her silver teeth.

“The name grew on me, I must admit.”

Cornelius sat up and saw Hereford cowering in the corner.

“Hereford, come meet Malaryte, my dragon partner.”

Hereford bowed. “I am truly honored.” The reverence in his voice startled Cornelius, however it shouldn't have been surprising, dragons are frightening creatures.

Malaryte bowed her head and pressed her much larger skull to Hereford. He jumped at first, but then relaxed as they conversed mind to mind. It wasn't long before this union ended and Hereford scampered off.

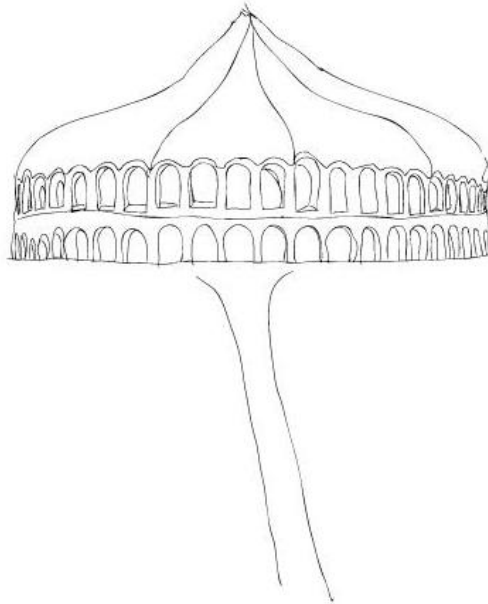
The great majestic beast turned and looked towards her companion. She breathed upon him and he was dressed in his ceremonial clothes. Hereford returned with his armor and weaponry. Though he would not be entering the stadium with these items, he would need them for competition.

“Go.” She said, “Those who did this to you will be punished, if not now, than later. Do not seek retribution we will seek it for you.”

Normally anger would have overwhelmed Cornelius by this point, however he trusted Malaryte like he trusted no other, and even though he was not to bond with her officially for another year, he knew that she had been looking out for him all this time.

Cornelius nodded and bowed to both Malaryte and Hereford before taking off out of the temple, heading towards the stadium that rose in the distance. It looking like a flower, the symbol of life, was no longer something that he could make fun of. Life was precious and, with a shudder, Cornelius remembered how he had almost so willingly given up his. With a deep breath he lengthened his stride as his spirits lifted. He was ready to take on any challenges the Masters or the other Initiates threw at him.

Chapter 19: *The Trials*



Hands grabbed him as he was about to run into the stadium and Cornelius whipped out a hand and shoved at the where the solar plexus would be of an attacker. There was a ‘woosh’ sound and gasp of breath. Cornelius turned and saw that he had just shoved Beira. Torreon held her having caught her fall, and was staring at Cornelius as though he had never seen him before.

“What was that all about?” He asked his voice shaking. but her hands gentle as he set the unsteady girl to her feet.

Cornelius stared at Beira feeling horrible guilt at having attacked her.

“I,” He paused unsure if he truly wanted to speak about the experience. In the end he relented, they should know, “I was attacked this morning.” Torreon looked around carefully and put his hand on Cornelius’ elbow, using the appendage to steer

the youth away from the main part of the waiting tent.

“What?” He asked sharply when it was just the three of them.

Cornelius ducked his head in shame. “They got the best of me, Kiel and them. They gave me something- I don’t know what. It felt as though everything was on fire and I couldn’t call my magic no matter how hard I tried.”

“They bound your magic.” Torreon’s voice sounded like Cornelius had never heard before: it was as though the prince was broken. “That goes against all of our laws, and our ways. It is a punishment meant only for the worst criminals.”

Cornelius clenched and unclenched his fist. “I’m not exactly proud of getting caught off guard.” He said harshly and felt a gentle hand cupping his fist.

“You cannot beat everyone. And if they did something devious you cannot be blamed. All those that are here have had far more extensive training than you have. The only thing you need to do is become stronger and then become triumphant.” Beira’s eyes were firm and gentle. Cornelius’ heart clenched, she didn’t judge him and that was a far cry from him. Cornelius judged himself and his actions everyday.

Cornelius nodded and then questioned. “Did the ceremonies start?”

Torreon shook his head. “No, though I don’t know why.”

“I heard it was because there is a problem between the dragons and the Masters.” Beira piped up and they were silent. That was a foreign idea: your dragon was your partner- your binding force above all else. To have a problem between the two entities was nearly unheard of.

Trumpets sounded in the stadium and Cornelius found a serving man to take his armaments before joining that Initiates in lining up for the procession. They had

all been schooled in exactly what was to come and Cornelius took his place at the back of the line. They were to jog the white-pebbled path up to the grand stage. The grand stage was made up of a black floor, representing their triumph over all evil, and white flags that each Initiate was to stand in front of. He heard the horns blow a specific haunting, but powerful combination of notes and rhythms and the Initiates began to move forward out of the tented waiting area into the huge stadium filled with spectators and judges.

They all pranced up into place like good little ponies and Cornelius was relieved to see Beira stood at the flag next to him, a barrier against all the other Initiates. Something buzzed on the edge of Cornelius' sensors and he turned his head up in time to see an arch of dragons flying low over the stadium before descending in a corkscrew rotation until they landed and the Masters jumped off their companions all in equally graceful form. There was a feeling of power, several magic users were now raising the tent top so that everyone, including the dragons, were safely inside the stadium. Each Master was dressed in their finest and Cornelius couldn't help but feel a small source of admiration at the image that they created.

The Masters ascended up the ceremonial staircase to the Master's box where they could view the entirety of the stadium. Master Ulrich raised his arms grandly as though hugging everyone.

"Today is a day of great celebration." He began his voice strong and sure, Cornelius felt something go sour in his stomach at the sound of the man's voice. "We have before us a most prestigious group of youth who wish to continue the

journey that life has offered them, as Guardians.”

The stadium erupted in cheers, prompting Cornelius to darkly wonder if they knew a human was one of the Initiates. He scoffed quietly, of course they did, all the other Initiates could contact their parents and family through letters, it was only he who was kept in complete isolation. Ulrich turned and stared directly down at his charges.

“Do you swear to uphold all that this institution has taught you as you go forth into the world to continue your training?”

The Initiates answered. “Yes.”

“Do you swear to use your magic, your strength, and your will only for good?”

They answered again in affirmation.

“And do you swear to never ignore a cry for help no matter how small?”

They answered again their vows and Ulrich raised his hands in the air. The hair on Cornelius’ neck stood on air at the crackling power that seemed to filter through and completely surround the stadium. Silence fell as he began to chant in Old Elvish, a language that most of this world had been built on.

A gold dome descended down over the stadium under the tent, encasing it. It would protect all those inside of it from misgivings and evil deeds for the duration of the trials. It would not allow cheating in any form and Cornelius felt relieved at this protection.

The trials began simply at first, each Initiate had to demonstrate their intellect with answering questions pertaining to their academic lessons including math, history, and law. These questions were asked by court magistrates brought in

specially for this competition. Next, those who had been selected for an apprenticeship, including Cornelius, were allowed to demonstrate his or her knowledge. Silence met Cornelius when he stood ready to show what he had learned from Master Jaipur, this was a marketed difference from the standing ovation all the other Initiates had received.

Cornelius demonstrated the theory knowledge behind healing and the basic usage of herbs and other things necessary to help the wounded in a hostile environment or out in the open with no supplies. The judges gave him full marks, and Cornelius watched in delight as Ulrich's face became downcast and angry with Cornelius passing successfully.

They broke for the midday meal and Cornelius found a small area of the tent where he thought he would not be disturbed. Chewing heavily on the delicious bread and leak soup he became acutely aware of someone approaching him. He looked up to see Master Ulrich looking benevolent and angry at the same time, an odd combination of emotions.

“Human, you are done in the trials for today.”

He tossed Cornelius robes and moved to walk away, “You shall spend the rest of the trials working with the servants.”

“No.” Cornelius said simply picking the clothes up and dropped them away from him; they had almost landed in his food.

“What?”

The sheer and utter shock in Master Ulrich's voice made all those in the tent stop.

Cornelius took another bite of bread and chewed thoughtfully before swallowing and answering.

“I am an Initiate, and thus I must compete in the trials.”

“There is no need.”

The iron in Ulrich’s voice was staggering. “The other Masters have informed me that you are unfit to stand the physical trials.”

“Well, the other Masters,” Cornelius said with not with a small amount of condescendence, “are mistaken.”

He finished his bread and took a large gulp from the bowl. He raised his head sharply and produced a small force around him to shield his body with the physical blow Ulrich had attempted to land on him with his fist.

“You will not strike me ever again, Master Ulrich. There are protections here that are far older and greater than you, and they favor me in my hour of need.”

Ulrich’s face took on an unhealthy shade of purple. “Insolent swine! The magic would never protect-“

“Never protect someone in aid against an opponent who sought to challenge the authority of the ancient magic that controls the outcome of this trial?” Cornelius asked lightly, not truly expecting an answer back. “You’ve said it yourself, protecting the weak no matter the cost.”

Luzon hurried over to Ulrich and placed a comforting hand on the man’s shoulder. He pull the old elf back from Cornelius.

“Do not worry about the boy, Ulrich.” He said kindly, casting a look at Cornelius that could melt skin. “He will never pass, and even better he might die in

the process.”

Ulrich looked relieved and patted Luzon’s hand with reverence and kindness that was most likely his normal façade. At least with anyone who wasn’t human.

“Yes, thank you Luzon. I nearly lost my sense of self for a moment. Yes, the boy will die.”

A cold and hard lump settled in the pit of Cornelius’ stomach at the relief in Ulrich’s tone of voice. That was a sick bastard, and everyone loved him.

They left and the room settled back down into some semblance of quiet. Cornelius was standing in line to return his dishes when he felt a shove from behind. stumbling he turned and stared at Kiel.

“I don’t know how you are here, human. However you will have wished yourself dead, or worse.”

Cornelius smiled widely at Kiel; “You have no idea what the universe does to those who knowingly stab others in the back. The lowest and deepest level of hell is saved for you and yours, and I hope to someday bring you there myself.” Cornelius made a face as though deep in thought. “I might even gift wrap you- wouldn’t that be nice.”

Kiel looked like he wanted to take a swing at Cornelius, however he wouldn’t dare after seeing the result with Ulrich, which the youth undoubtedly attributed to the shield and not to Cornelius. He scowled and stood back from Cornelius, hate dripping from his very being.

“That’s right little Kiel. Back away, go lie down in a corner like the dog that you are.” Cornelius’ voice was harsh and held all the power and authority that none

of the others had heard him speak with before.

It looked like turning and walking away took all of Kiel's strength, however he did it, and Cornelius sat back fully satisfied.

“That was dangerous.”

Torreon was by his side, eyes filled with concern.

Cornelius nodded. “Risky and stupid are what I do best, might as well embrace it.”

Normally a comment like that would have made Torreon laugh; however his face didn't waver from the deep and grim line. Servants came through and announced that the trials were going to proceed again and Torreon clasped Cornelius on the shoulder.

“I hope you know what you're doing.”

As Cornelius watched Torreon walk away his smile slipped away into a frown.

“So do I,” He murmured. “So do I.”

Trials began again and when Cornelius stepped out into the stadium in full armor the ruckus stopped suddenly and he was left to walk to his place in the podium in silence. Ulrich made another opening speech, looking for all the world like nothing was wrong and he had not just been shown up by a small human boy of seventeen years.

Servants came up to the podium and faceted stones with runes carved into them into the open places in the embroidery around the neck. This was how the physical trials were considered fair and square. All the Initiates would be covered in a magical shield of sorts, so that they all looked the same- thirteen non-dimorphic

white blobs that would battle for hell and high water against each other in feats of strength and skill.

Archery was first and Cornelius came in seventh out of thirteen, something that he was not surprised in- archery was just something that he could not work easily. In warding he came in even worse, nine out of thirteen. He just had not had enough time to work with his magic to score higher than that. The real triumph was coming in fourth for horsemanship, their horses disguised in much the same way that the initiates had been.

Finally the only two events left were magic and swordsmanship, with magic being the last thing that they would do. As it was Cornelius found himself facing off against a white sexless human looking figure. He held his sword in a 'guard' position and waited for the signal for the fight to begin. The judge read off the rules and rights of proper noble swordsmanship and calls for first blood. With those being out of the way he signaled for the fight to begin and the two figures began to spin.

Though he could not see the person through the magical field he noticed and recognized the sharp and precise movements of Kiel. The asshole was an impeccable swordsman. Cornelius grinned; he was just as good, if not better. The entire time that he had spent at this god forsaken Citadel he had worked on his swordsmanship for hours everyday. Kiel was strong with years behind his technique, however he was lazy and Cornelius never saw him practicing when he didn't need to be. That would be his downfall today and Cornelius would see to it that he would play with his opponent before defeating him.

Chapter 20: A Demonstration of Power



Sweat dripped down his forehead and he was afraid that it would sneak into his eyes when the sweat was suddenly gone, magic. Literally, it must have been the magic protections in the circle that they were fighting in- the judgment here was on skill not whom could get who through luck and trickery.

Cornelius grew bored of Kiel's movements. They were predictive and he was done playing with the lesser swordsman. Parrying an oncoming thrust, Cornelius wrapped his sword down around, and finally back towards himself effectively trapping and locking Kiel's sword arm with his.

"How does it feel," he began, pushing his superior muscular strength on the elemental, "to be beaten by a lowly human, you swine?" Cornelius kicked out swiftly and caught Kiel behind the knee and pulled the boy to the ground.

He pressed the sword to Kiel's throat with more pressure than was necessary.

The boy was obviously stunned by the sudden drop to the ground and didn't stir as the judge called the win for Cornelius.

None of the other fights that day were nearly as satisfying and Cornelius found himself taking a first place after a near defeat by Torreon. The day was nearly over and the Initiates came to the area by the podium and ducked down into a dug out area in the ground that looked much like how a trench must have looked in the world wars. A wall written with many strong runes for protection and sealing separated each Initiate.

They were here to show sheer and utter magical power. Real demonstrations of magical know how had already been done in the first half of the day, and now lit by the twilight of the full moon the Initiates were supposed to light up the stadium with their glow.

This section worried Cornelius: he had never opened all of his channels and forced power out of him. He had no idea how much power he had exactly, just a rough idea and he wasn't sure if that was enough to win.

He planted his feet as he heard the call to get ready and horns sounded. He bent his knees and bent his arms at his elbows and clenched his fists in utmost concentration and force. When the final call was given, Cornelius let his power out slowly at first. It showed a dull brown and then traveled through the color spectrum until it reached the rich purple he knew he could get to. Something was there in his core; he could feel it- like a block or something.

The dark voice was back and Cornelius noticed, not for the first time, that it spoke with a voice that was not his own. This could very well have to do with the

darkness that was coming. The voice was urging him to stop, and to just take his spot in the line up. Darkness encircled him and fed into his eyes, his mouth, his nose, until he couldn't feel, see, or do anything beyond suffering from the darkness.

There was a flash in his mind, the pearly sheen of a dragon scale. Cornelius' eyes snapped open and he used his magic to push the darkness away from him. He would never give up, and never give in. For too long had this dark and evil voice been inside of his head, it was time to bust it out.

He clenched his fists even more desperately, leaving little crescent cuts in his skin from his own fingernails and dove down into his magic. He was pretty sure that he was screaming, though if he cared to recall later, all the Initiates were.

He pushed against the barrier, slammed into it with his will over and over and over again. A crack formed and Cornelius, though exhausted, became elated at this small give. He hit again this time, as hard as he could, and finally the wall shattered.

He knew that he screamed this time; the sheer and utter pain from the power was inconceivable. It blasted by his consciousness and out of his body. Others watching suddenly saw from the last ditch a light brighter and more powerful than all the others put together. There was also terrible screaming, painful and unadulterated. No one could stop the proceedings once they had started and so the servants, though severely disturbed, dropped the potion down into each of the trenches.

The potion that they each poured came from huge cauldrons at the top of each pit. They were meant to fill the trench. The Initiates would soak this in and then the white flags on the podium, as well as their swirling designs, would change colors to

match the elemental power of each youth. Slowly the flags began to change color.

The flag for Mardi, the faerie, turned yellow for air, as was to be expected. The flag for Beira, the magi, turned red, much like her aunt Arlit. The elf, Torreon's, flag caused much disturbance in that it turned a deep green for earth. There hadn't been an elf earth element controller in a long time. The human's flag turned blue, many people were surprised, as they weren't expecting the human to have any powers at all.

The light from the last hole continued to grow until it blinded the whole stadium. Masters raced for the trench with upmost speed as the ceremony ended. They had no idea who of the Initiates could produce so much power. And, unfortunately, there was a good chance that that person was dead. Ulrich waved his hand and the white fabric that had covered each hole lifted and flew away. The concealers had dropped away from all of the Initiates, as they were supposed to and a shocked silence rang out when in that final hole was a barely conscious Cornelius.

Jaipur and Arlit reacted first by jumping down into the hole and grabbed the boy between them. He was panting and unaware of the happenings around him, though his pulse was strong and steady- a good sign. His previously white embroidery now shown a brilliant blue that suited well to his skin. Stairs morphed out of the wall as they were supposed to and the two Masters carried their charge up and out of the hole.

“This is impossible!” Luzon cried looking pale and sick.

The two Masters ignored him and carried Cornelius out onto the soft grass and laid him down. Servants brought the two a waking draught and a pitcher of water

with glasses. Arlit placed Cornelius' head onto her lap and Jaipur uncorked the vial and poured the contents down Cornelius' throat.

The result was instantaneous, he sat up sputtering, nearly hitting Arlit's head, and looked wildly around. Jaipur poured him a glass of water, which the Initiate gladly took and drank it down completely before the glass was refilled. He drank three whole glasses before he slowed down. Another half glass and he was able to stop.

"What happened? Who won? And what the hell did you just give me?" The youth asked in rapid fashion.

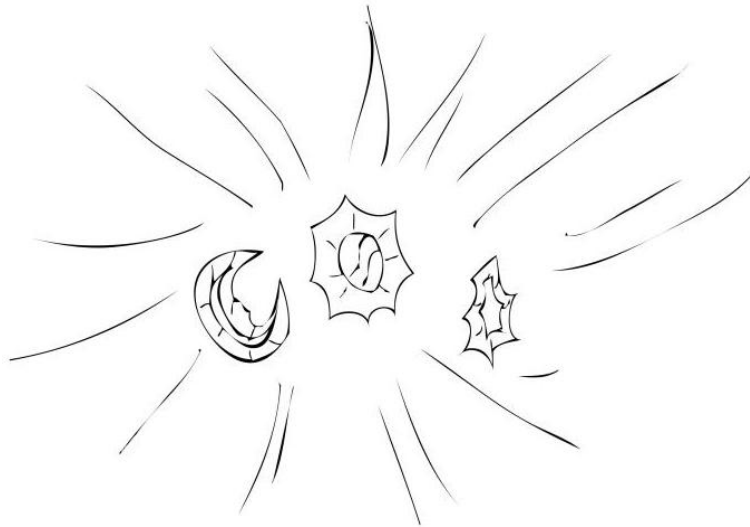
Arlit shushed him and pressed her finger to his lips. "All in good time. Right now, we need to prepare for the closing ceremonies. Tomorrow will be a good day for explanations, after the morning ceremony." Cornelius nodded, still slightly out of it. The two helped him to his feet and they made their way to the podium. Cornelius was the last Initiate to arrive and he looked up to see his flag in a deep blue color. That made him frown; he really didn't care for water.

"Today has marked a step forward for our Initiates," Master Ulrich's speech started from his place in the Masters Seating Area. He spoke of the history of the world, and the Gods and Goddesses and the path that the Guardians chose. Cornelius listened with half-hearted rapture- he didn't want to listen to Ulrich, however his story was hypnotizing. The youths were all sent back to the Initiates wing.

Usually there was no sleep that night, for all of the Initiates too excited or worried for the ceremony in the morning, however Cornelius found that he was unable to stay awake. He slept almost immediately after arriving at his chambers.

The next morning, bright and early, Cornelius and the others found themselves in clean versions of the clothes that they had worn the day before, complete with the now visible elemental color. They sat in the Temple of Pagonee, though this time the Initiates sat in chairs up on the raised platform where the priests stood. They were participating in the ceremony that would change their lives forever.

Chapter 21: Goodbye Citadel



Though Cornelius could not understand what was being said, as the words of the ceremony were spoken in Old Elvish, he understood the meaning and cause behind each statement. A potion that had been brewing for a month was now standing ready on the altar. It was ready for each Initiate to drink from it and discover his or her destiny. That was a surreal idea, drinking from one chalice would change their lives. It was like the mighty and all-powerful Dwarven Mead.

They sat in order of rank. The rank was decided by the results of each trial totaled together. Torreon first, that was no surprise, Cornelius second, and Gomel, a descent magi fellow that Beira had introduced to him, was third. The others followed in this order: Kiel, Beira, Ankara, Daloa, Wien, Vaduz, Mardi, Arak, Zinder, and finally Kiffa.

There was not a lack of cheering due to Torreon being the first in the class for the first year of Initiates. The Prince was well loved and well hailed by the public

that came to watch the proceedings. The temple had grown to the size of a large European cathedral due to the sheer amount of people there- thousands from all the races- all except the human race. Cornelius was sure, however, that Barnaby was there though he could not see him. There were even more outside watching on magically produced images. The hillside was covered with the bright red tents of the dedicated, those who had come from miles away to witness and pay tribute to the Initiates as they went through this rite.

The main priest of this ceremony continued to speak and held up the chalice containing the potion. He rubbed along the rim with an undyed pure cotton cloth first two times clockwise, then three times counter clockwise. He raised it up as high as he could before setting it back on the table and kneeling so that he had resting against the edge of the stone. He then stood and brought the chalice over to Torreon.

He spoke words to Torreon and made the sign against evil before allowing Torreon to drink. The priest then wiped the rim of the chalice, the same two times clockwise and three against before going through the same process with Cornelius and then everyone else. Cornelius' stomach was in nervous knots- it was time for him to find out his stone. There was almost no chance of him getting the Szun stone now that he knew his element was water, but he could still hold onto hope.

Torreon was brought over to a fire that was contained in a golden vessel that looked much like a half moon. His hand was held high over it, the priest holding Torreon's left hand in one hand, and a ceremonial dagger in the other. He spoke many words and then cut Torreon's finger over the fire. As the blood dripped in an image formed in the large fire bank at the back of the raised platform. In it was a

stone in the shape of a crescent moon, both beautiful and deadly sharp looking.

Torreon had been blessed to receive the Zyrya stone, the first one to receive it since the last dark times.

Cornelius' turn was next and he fought the urge to not let the priest cut him. It was his least favorite part of some ceremonies. Steeling his nerve, he let the priest cut him and was shocked and utterly blessed to see the Szun stone appearing in the fire. The crowd behind him stilled and went silent. The Szun stone was the leader of the group; it was the oldest, the first, and the most powerful of all the Guardian stones. It was created from pure wild magic and only someone with tremendous will and goodness could wield it.

The ceremony went on with each of the Initiates receiving stones, though none as shocking as the first two. They were sent back to their rooms to pack and be ready to leave for their new homes. Nobody, not even the Masters, knew who was going where until after the Initiates got there. As Cornelius did not have much to pack he instead sat on his bed and turned the Szun stone over and over again in his hands.

It was small, smaller than he expected. The stone was a little larger than palm size and was the color of ripe wheat. It was cut to look like a sun with a star burst cut in the center. It was smooth and delicate- he ran his finger over the surprisingly warm surface. He had no idea how to work it, yet, but he would learn and he would lead everyone.

A knock sounded at his door and Cornelius looked up to see Sassandra there. He was surprised; they hadn't spoken since their fight two months earlier.

“May I come in?” She asked hesitantly.

Cornelius nodded, not knowing if his voice could answer.

She sat next to him on the bed. This was the first time that they had ever been so close. “Cornelius,” she started, and then stopped for a long moment before starting again. “I’m sorry.” She said at last.

Cornelius just stared at her- she was still as beautiful as ever. Yet, there was something tugging at the back of his mind saying that he could not do this, and Cornelius followed that instinct.

“I understand.” He said not informally.

“So, that is where this is?” She asked sounding so mournful Cornelius felt his heart creak. “This ends here?”

Cornelius put down the stone and took up her hands in his.

“There was never a ‘this’, Sassandra. And I am sorry if you thought that there was. I need to concentrate on being an Initiate, and unfortunately that means that I can’t concentrate on being with you.”

She took in a shuddering breath and took her hands away from his and stood.

“I understand.”

His voice quivered and then she took flight from the room, and didn’t watch her leave, he let her. Had he gone after her he would have given her false hope that there was a chance when there wasn’t- and he wasn’t about to hurt her like that. In the end, it was better for her to feel the hurt and anger she was going through now, than feel the utter agony it would be later if he were to lead her on.

Hands clasped his shoulders and Cornelius looked up and into Barnaby’s eyes.

“You behaved in a very honorable way just now.”

Cornelius wanted to shrug him off, but he felt drained from the experiences of the past few days. Instead Cornelius explained to Barnaby the happenings of his life. The attack, meeting Malaryte, the trials and finally the emotional and mental relief at receiving the Szun Stone.

Barnaby stayed quiet throughout the explanation, and for that Cornelius was thankful. When it all ended the young man found himself drawn into a hug and held. This was something different, something that his parents had never given to him. Silent and unadulterated support. This was something that no one could take away from him, he felt it. Something inside of him healed, something that had been broken and making him so very angry for so very long, healed. He cried.

Cornelius stood in front of a swirling gate with his small series of luggage bags and meager possessions. He stared at the gate with trepidation and then around at the crowd who was seeing him off. Torreon would be staying around for a few more days to see to his family and other princely duties, Beira had already left and Sassandra had not come to see him off- unsurprisingly.

He looked at Jaipur and they shared an unspoken agreement. He would look after Sassandra in her time of need, now more than ever. Cornelius hugged Torreon and gave Arlit a nod. This was it and there was no turning back. Stepping up to the portal he went through.

Cornelius found himself standing in a tropical island fishing village and surrounded by odd-looking humans with pointed ears and too long arms. They were cheering for him and looked welcoming. He stepped down off the wooden platform he had appeared on and was immediately greeted warmly with pats of the back and hugs from these odd looking creatures.

His heart clenched and released- the first year of his training was over. He had a year to live in peace, it seemed, with these creatures. He was going to train and was going grow strong enough to beat Torreon and take leadership of the group. The elf smiled when Cornelius had told him of his plans to unseat him from the leadership position of the Initiates. The elf had told him to 'bring it'- a phrase he had undoubtably picked up from Cornelius.

He was not sad that the year had finished, far from it, in fact. He was quite happy to be done with the trickery and the deceit. He was even happier to be rid of Kiel and his gang of mangy mongrels for another year. He had the Szun stone, he had Malaryte, and he was ready to learn what it would take to master water- something that he was not exactly fond of.

Time would test him and hopefully see him fit. All he had to do was continue to maintain the balance and do what he could to see that all things remained equal, deserving, and existent. The universe was counting on him to learn his trades and learn them well, and Cornelius had every intention of heading into the storm head on. He had survived the worst the world could throw at him and was ready to take on more. He was ready to begin another year of training as an Initiate on his quest to become a Guardian of Alytaus.

AUTHOR'S BIOGRAPHY:

Kelsey Kristine Flynn was born in South Weymouth, Massachusetts on March 15th, 1990. She was raised in Mansfield, Massachusetts and attended Mansfield High School. She graduated from Mansfield High School on June 8th, 2008. Majoring in Secondary Education with a concentration in Social Studies and a Focus in History, Kelsey also has a minor in English. She is a member of Phi Sigma Pi: National Honor Fraternity where she serves as Vice-President and Initiate Advisor as well as the National Delegate for two years. She has received the Presidential Award for Academics as well as nominations for awards due to her work in Student Affairs. Kelsey is very active on campus and also is an elected officer of Wilde Stein the Alliance for Sexual Diversity, the nation's oldest collegiate GSA.

Upon graduating Kelsey plans on attending Northeastern University in the fall for a Masters Degree in Higher Education Administration. She also has started her own art and design business. She hopes that this thesis will become a published novel.